

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR / LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI
METTOY FACTORY, FFOREST FACH, SWANSEA

Interviewee: VSW048 Mrs Eira John,
Date: 11: 10: 2012
Interviewer: Catrin Stevens on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Mrs John confirmed her address and her date of birth: 17 : 3: 1922.

They lived as children in Manselton where her father was a coal merchant. Her mother never went to work '**Well, in those days ... mothers didn't, did they?**'. She went to Manselton School, then to Cwmbwrla school for the scholarship and then to De La Beche grammar school for girls, Alexandra Road, Swansea until the war broke out – she passed the scholarship. She was on the point of going to university but her father had an office in Alexandra Road in those days; he didn't drive the works' lorry himself, but the men who were driving the lorries for him were called up for the war, so she and her sister (who was two years younger than her) had to go to work for him. That was '**the end of our schooling**'. She ended up in the forces – for 4 years. She was in the WAAFs – the experience was '**very drastic in the beginning, ... we hadn't been away from home before**'. But her father had promised her driving lessons on her 21st birthday so she went into the WAAFs to be a driver and '**I had lessons without having to pay for them**', (though paid for them in a very hard way in the beginning). But in the end when she got to know people – they were friends for many years afterwards. Her sister Mary stayed at home to help her father because she was the youngest. She didn't mind and a lot of her friends weren't called up either. Her father's business was affected by the bombing but she didn't know much about it because she wasn't there. She was stationed mostly in Scotland but you were moved around quite often – not in Swansea at all. She notes that Margaret's mother (reference to Margaret Williams, Pontybrenin Farm, Kingsbridge who suggested Mrs John as a speaker) was in the ATS (big friends). '**All our age group were called up**'.

3.40 Came out of the war after she had her papers (Couldn't remember exactly when) - she came home to her mother and father. She had a few jobs then – bits and pieces. No further training – '**it had gone**'. She met her husband during this time, got married and had two children: Lyn and Ann.

After the war her sister worked in Hodges – in the factory and so did lots of her friends. The factory was down on the estate in Fforest Fach and another factory in town behind Wind Street. When the children were small Mrs John stayed at home.

Reason for going to work in Mettoys? Because Lyn was going away with the school on a trip. They had an old three storey house on Carmarthen Road which her uncle had left her and it needed a lot of alterations – bathroom and kitchen and heating. And it cost £45 for her daughter to go on the trip with the school – the only way she was going to do it was for her to go out to work. In those days getting into a job was no problem. She knew one of the workers (in the photographs) – she was whitecoated – and she knew her from childhood and she asked her if there was a job and she replied that they were taking on staff at the time. She went there originally only for a limited period and Lyn went on the trip. This was c. 1960 (Lyn was born in 1949/50 and on her last year in primary when she went on the trip from Gendros primary school).

9.00 First day in the factory – as with any job it was a bit complicated. Fortunately she knew lots of the women working in the warehouse so she didn't feel anything really. **You only had to ask.** She was packing in the warehouse. The orders came to you and the trolley was there – perhaps, if they were small orders you packed two, put them in the boxes, sealed them up and put them on the line and they would go down and somebody down the bottom then would see to them and put them for whatever area they were going to. They produced Corgi and Fisher Price toys, but she had nothing to do with Fisher Price – they were on their own. Three factories – she worked in a large warehouse too. She dealt with Corgi cars – already put in boxes in the factory. Then they came in to them in large crates – all models numbered differently – those workers 'putting up' just went to the crates packed six number three toys etc. and put them on the trolleys. She can't remember labelling them – uncertain – thought somebody else did that. Preparing one order at a time.

She doesn't remember having an interview for the job – **'I don't think you needed an interview to get into any of the factories there in those days in any case ... there were such a lot there then.'** Tremendous amount of work for women at the time.

12.30 They could wear what they liked but they all wore overalls – their own; nylon overalls which were quite nice. Didn't have to cover her hair, no gloves. It wasn't dangerous at all and not heavy – you didn't have to carry any boxes, just lift them on the belt which was going down the side. About 50+ women working together in the warehouse. But they took extra staff on when it was busy – **'Christmas time was absolutely terrific ... we had the toy sale you see, so that was loads of overtime'**. She had quite a few nephews (her sister had two boys) – the toys were a Christmas present for the boys. Today on Flog it – cars in boxes, but nobody kept the boxes then – they played with the cars. The toy sale was in the factory but she could take orders in for her neighbours as well.

Pay? Uncertain whether it was £7 or £9 in the beginning. She didn't see her wage as the main family wage – her husband was the main wage earner - '**to me that was extra**'. She used it for the holiday for her daughter and then to help pay for things for the house.

13.00 Her husband also worked in Mettoy – she does have a photograph of him having his gold watch after 25 years and with Mt Katz the manager. But can't find it (with her daughter in Dinas Powys?). He was in the factory long before her. He had been to university and came out when the war started – he lived in Caerau, Maesteg, but all his friends were joining the air force and he packed everything up to join the air force too. So when he came back he worked himself on in Mettoy – years before she came there. In university he was studying to be a supervisor down the mine – (he would have been the youngest) – followed courses at Swansea University. In the Post (Evening Post) lately there was a photograph of him with a group of men outside Swansea University – she didn't contact the man who sent it in.

No idea how many people worked at the factory in her time – thousands! '**Oh! Loads**' Mostly women. Didn't know much about the rest of the factory – she went straight to the warehouse. Started at 7 a.m.. Walked to work. Finished 4.30 – 5ish. She went straight to the warehouse to clock in. No recollection of being late clocking in because she practically lived on the doorstep. But others – from Glais or Pontardulais - dependent on the buses and they could be late. Can't remember any fuss about being late. During the morning had a little break for a cup of tea and a biscuits – had to go and get it for themselves – we didn't stop at the same time. For dinner they went to the canteen – could bring your own or have what was at the canteen. One canteen for whole factory serving hot meals but she never bothered. There were quite a lot of people working in the canteen. She had two children so she didn't see any point in eating there. She would go home and make food for them. No break in the afternoon.

20.00 Rules – not especially. A lot of the workers smoked then. But then you didn't notice it in those days – her husband and her father smoked. Toilet – could go whenever you wanted. Dinner time everyone stopped at the same time because of the canteen – probably each part of the factory had the same dinner hour to cope with the amount of cooking required. Shift work – there was a night shift in the warehouse but she wouldn't have gone on the night shift especially since she wanted to get the children up for school. She wouldn't have gone on the night shift.

Men worked in the warehouse too – driving the lorries, bringing the crates into the warehouse and lifting them with cranes. **(Work) 'women couldn't do'**. And also there were men bosses in the warehouse office.

We called everyone by their first names. She wouldn't have a clue what the surnames of some of them were. She made very many friends there.

She didn't belong to any union at all – '**I can't remember going on strike at all**'.

Holidays – you could take them when you wanted them. She depended on the school in the beginning. You could take what you liked for holidays – you didn't get paid so it was up to you, **'which was I suppose, good in a way; you didn't take too many'**. **'It was not a part of my life I would say I wouldn't go through that again'**.

Can't remember whether women were also rewarded with a gold watch after 25 years' service but supposed so because many of them had been there for a long time.

24.00 Bosses also around - Mr Katz had one of the very good flats down Blackpill way on Mumbles Road. He always came round the factory (funnily enough). There was also a boss in charge of the warehouse and again he would come around and be very sociable.

No social clubs part of the factory. But they would go places together – a crowd would go to Blackpool for the weekend, or on someone's birthday to Caswell Bay – a night out in their long dresses. These were not official Mettoy social activities. She thought maybe there were some in the rest of the factory, but not in the warehouse.

She stayed in the same work during her time there – she can't remember anyone leaving so that someone else could have the job.

Increase in pay? It was just given, didn't ask. £7/£9 at the beginning **'and that was good'**. Couldn't compare it with pay in other factories, but this was good money in those days anyway. You could do a week's shopping for £5 then.

26.30 Unskilled work. Not offered any training. She left because there was talk of Mettoys closing and a gang of them decided to go to the DVLA – all her friends. They got in to the DVLA by the police station in town. Lots stayed on at Mettoy and she would have stayed on if she had realised that the factory wasn't closing, but she went to the DVLA with her friends. By then her girls were grown up and off her hands. She worked on the driving licences at the DVLA. She finished there when they said they were going on computers. **'There again it was a mistake – I didn't realise computers were going to be what they are today'**. She worked at the DVLA for eight years mostly in town but then the computers came in they went up to Morrision. **'Alright, but not the same comradeship as Mettoys'**.

In Mettoy there were lots of other mothers working there too. **'We saw them growing up – amazing!'** She can't remember whether Mettoy organised Christmas parties for the children.

Wage packet used for helping with the house – didn't keep it for herself, There were unions in the factory but she wasn't a member **'as far as I know'**.

29.30 No accidents or strikes in the factory. It wouldn't have been possible to have had music while they worked in the warehouse. It was noisy between everybody talking and ... You could take your own music – stick it in your ears (?). They were allowed to talk. Toilets clean – people cleaned them. Health and Safety rules – no mention of them; not taught how to lift things – couldn't remember. Didn't develop any pains because of the work.

Nurse always in work – not sure how many. Could go and see a nurse any time – they had their own quarters if you needed anything.

Bank holidays – Christmas Day. Closed for this day. It would be closed for a couple of days – a week even. The toy sale was held before Christmas – in the days when the children loved the cars (no Poundshop then). Rejects – believed they weren't sold and sent back on the line.

Could have a day off for personal reasons. E.g. her grandson was born small and she took a lot of time off to help her daughter. The company was very good with this. They were very good to her. **'Other people might have different opinions, mind.'**

People travelled from Glais, Pontardulais, Waunarlwydd, Gowerton, no end of places - as long as they could get on a bus they would get there – factory bus if many came from one place. Lots of people came there from Penlan and they walked there and back. **'Nobody thought anything of it. It's amazing, isn't it?'** She didn't find it a tiring job particularly. They were always having some kind of a dance as a group – not the whole of factory. Spent a lot of time down Caswell Bay – **'lovely in those days'**. She can't recollect a Christmas dinner in the canteen.

She describes the job as 'alright' – only interesting sometimes if they were discussing some of the cars. But because she didn't have sons so she wasn't very interested in the cars. She just dealt with the Corgi toys. During the Queen's (Jubilee?) she had one of the boxed coaches – they had to pay for these themselves. She bought one and gave it to her grandson for his 18th birthday advising his mother not to let him handle it and by now he's got a son of his own and it is in her daughter's glass cabinet – never been out of its box. The queen did not visit the factory but Princess Anne's husband did – can't remember his name **'a small little chap he was'** – very very pleasant, Can't remember why he came but he spoke to them all.

If the workers wanted toys from the factory they could not buy them for a cheaper price. She bought a couple of James Bond cars for her nephews but they never kept the boxes. No shop in the factory – but could buy toys there.

They kept up with one another as friends from Mettoys – they used to meet once a month and go to the Dolphin. Last year Irene from Glais and Mrs John were going to go to the Isle of Wight – everything planned but she died on the Saturday night before. That was the end of their meetings – **'quite sad really'**.

'Quite happy' she went to work there – she had friends until 2011.

Asking about photographs – warehouse - - she shows boxes – in front of picture probably packed. On the right woman with three tier crates – men brought them in. The crates dropped into place. All models numbered – they didn't use the names of the cars. All wearing overalls. Warehouse light and not too hot for summer.

Photographs of groups together – all in work just outside warehouse probably in their dinner hour.

Points clarified on the phone 17:10:2012

1. She didn't know what her husband did in Mettoys because they didn't work anywhere near one another. But since he had been in university he joined in a supervisory role and continued in this way during his career.
2. Childcare was not a problem because her daughters (at 11 years old and older) could look after themselves to walk to school with other children in the mornings and to come back in the evenings. She returned at 4.30. There were plenty of other children around at this time.
3. She can't remember how much her pay increased during her 14 years at the factory.
4. They used to go to Bournemouth or north Wales on holiday to guesthouses when the children were small. When Lyn was 17 (c. 1967) they went on their first holiday to Spain.
5. Men were not opposed to women working in the factory. Her husband was supportive. There was quite a lot of work for men then anyway.