

## VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Fisher Price Toy Factory, Fforest Fach c. 1970-3 and Mettoys' Toy Factory, Fforest Fach Swansea 1973-83

**Interviewee:** VSW060 Joan Gibbon

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**Interviewer:** Catrin Stevens on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Mrs Gibbon confirmed that her full name is Joan Amelia Gibbon; her date of birth: 30 March 1934. Her maiden name was Shortly.

She was born in Brynamlwg, Gorseinon, her mother worked in the tinworks, as did her father. Her mother worked in the Mardy Works (Gorseinon) – opening tins. She has two brothers and two sisters. Her sister went into the ATS – this was during the war – she was older than Mrs Gibbon; her older brother worked in the steel works as well; she thinks her younger brother went into the colliery but he didn't stay there long. It was very much a working class background. Her mother worked when she was small, **'it was very hard work, she was always coming home with cuts on her hands and she had steel in her eye one day'** – it was dangerous work.

Joan attended Gorseinon school and she didn't go on to a secondary school. She stayed on there – and left when she was fourteen. She didn't sit the scholarship, **'We couldn't afford it those days ... no we couldn't go to Gowerton then 'cos our parents couldn't afford it. So we had to leave school then.'**

*'Would you have liked to have carried on?'*

**Oh yes, I would have liked to have carried on. Yes.'**

When she left school at fourteen she went to the laundry and then the dry cleaners – both in Gorseinon. It was a big laundry – on the site where the market is now – on Brighton Road.

**3.30**

There were men and women working in the laundry. It was quite tough work – you were on the go the whole time. When she first started there she was ironing handkerchiefs. Then she went on the rollers for the blankets and sheets; then she moved on to the dry cleaners where she was on the steamers. It was a kind of factory, but she can't remember how much she was paid. **'I know it wasn't a lot!'**

She left the dry cleaners to get married in 1955 and she had the family after that. She had five children. When the little ones started to go to school she went to look for a job again. That was when she and two friends went part-time to work – while the kids were in school – they went to Fisher Price first for a while. By then she was living in Loughor in the house next door to where her husband had been born. His mother and father were living in that house. Before they had the council house they lived with her husband's mother and father. She didn't want to leave the children on their own when she went to work, her youngest son would have been about 8 or 9 years old when she went to work again. Her youngest son was born in 1966 – so she began work in about 1974 (no - 1970) – she claims they were made redundant in 1973 (correct from Fisher Price).

### 6.30

Her first factory job was in Fisher Price, which was next door to Mettoys in Fforest-fach. She travelled to work by service bus (not a works' bus) though sometimes they might get a lift. Three of them went together to start working in the factory but one left immediately because she didn't like it. **'She only stayed one day'**. Her other friend stayed for a while, but Joan doesn't think she went on to work in Mettoys. All three of them had an interview, but they only worked part-time – half past nine 'til three. Then they could be home for the children coming home from school. But when she went over to Mettoys she had to go full time. It was a problem but now her oldest girl could watch the children coming home from school. Her son helped too – this allowed her to carry on working. There were lots of other part-time workers in Fisher Price.

### 8.30

Fisher Price produced wooden toys (they're still selling them now) – they were good toys. She was on a line and one job she did was to make the pull-along wooden dogs – everyone was doing a different part of the dog – she thinks she was putting the wheels on. At the end of the line there would be a supervisor to check there were no rejects. She didn't receive any training for the work - **'just told what to do – carry on!'** On her first day she was a bit nervous, because the foreman there (Can't remember his name) **'we were all afraid of 'im, because if the machine happened to break we didn't like to tell him 'cos he didn't like the machines to be broken, so we were calling the boys then to come and mend it for us. ... He was alright to work with, but don't get the machines broken, he didn't like that at all!'** That was probably because of keeping the production line going.

Fisher Price wasn't a big factory – not like Mettoys. There were about ten working on the line with her. They didn't have to wear anything special to work. You could wear your own overall. They made the complete toys (e.g. the dog) in the factory. They had to assemble the parts together. At the end then there was the packing department and they went there after the supervisor said they were in good order. They had to be of a certain standard. Any rejects were put away in a box.

She can't remember how much she was earning – but **'it was very small'**. She isn't sure why she decided to go to work in a factory rather than in a shop – perhaps she wouldn't have been any good at that! – but there were loads of factories. They enjoyed themselves there and had a lot of fun as well **'fair does'**.

### 13.30

Her wages were extra but her husband wasn't working then, so the money went towards the children and food as well. **'It wasn't much but it was something. Otherwise if he was working and had good wages I wouldn't have bothered to go to work.'** Her husband's job? **'Before he went bad, he was an ash man for the council, - driving the ash lorries, ... and then he went to the steelworks in Pontardulais – Morgan and Rees, for a while'** She went to work when he was ill – it was important because she had five children to bring up.

She did join the Union – you had to in the factories and the union fee was taken out of the wages as were the stamps. She only paid half a stamp because she was part-time. She could have paid in full but she wasn't earning that much. She clocked in and clocked out. You had to finish the target before you clocked out – you were given a target. Otherwise you wouldn't have the bonus. The target was so much a day and you had to get that out. She can't remember the targets. The bonus came on top of the wage to build it up a bit. Paid in cash on the Friday **'Oh I prefer it in cash!'** They brought the wages in packets around the factory. She can't remember having a wage rise at all – it worked on bonuses. Unsure how many years she worked in Fisher Price before moving to Mettoys **'say three years'**.

### 7.10

She doesn't remember having holidays – could this be because she worked part-time? She thinks they worked in school holidays too because the older children could look after the small ones now. She enjoyed working in Fisher Price – there was a good crowd there. They went out for a meal and a drink Christmas time and **'we all enjoyed'**. These were women mainly and it was also women mainly in the factory. They were supervised by a woman too. She wouldn't have liked to be a supervisor – **'too much responsibility.'** The supervisors weren't nasty or anything like that and if you made a mistake they told you where you had gone wrong.

It was a little noisy because of the machines. They were allowed to talk, as long as they did the work. Mrs Gibbon likes singing but they didn't sing at work at all. There was music playing. **'But it was very cold ... in the winter there'. They brought out gas machines**

**‘but it was very sickly – it was awful, horrible ... and then of course in the summer then they did bring us drinks, around for us, because it was so warm there. ‘cos we had nice summers then. We were having free drinks then to cool us down - squash.’** This was because of the glass roof.

20.00

She can’t remember coming out on strike because of this or at any other time. The work could be dangerous because of some of the machines – you had to watch where your fingers went. She was never hurt like this though, ‘touch wood’. There was a nurse in the factory – if someone cut themselves she’d bandage them up. If anyone was taken ill they would be sent home. This was a full-time nurse.

During the working day –start at 9.30, break for dinner – in the canteen **‘but I was taking my own food I was though, because I didn’t care much for canteen food’**. In the summer, because it was so warm there, they had a ten minute break in the morning and afternoon (this was when she was over in Mettoys working full time not in Fisher Price). They didn’t smoke in the factory itself only outside or in the canteen then. She didn’t smoke herself. There were nice toilets there.

The men in the factory worked taking the toys on the trolleys, and in Mettoys they worked with paints to paint these toys. She thinks some of the women painted too in the paint shop. When some of the men came into the assembly lines they were teased and they teased the women back. **‘They were nice men – very nice.’** She can’t remember an example of the teasing. No experience of playing tricks on new girls and she didn’t have to suffer any. **‘If we were new they were showing us what to do.’**

24.00

Moving on to Mettoys – there was a lot of difference especially in the toys. Here they were making more cars – in Fisher Price making more a variety of toys **‘I fancy they were easier to make than Mettoys, myself.’** With the cars there were a lot of little pieces. She was on the line again making some cars, but also spinning tops of metal. Also making roundabouts with swings. These were smaller parts and very tricky sometimes. She felt that Fisher Price was the best as regards to toys.

Fisher Price closed though she doesn’t know why, because the toys are still available. The factory closed down. The two factories were next door to one another. She doesn’t think they had redundancy pay when Fisher Price closed down only from Mettoys when that closed. They were told that FP was closing and they were given the chance to go over to Mettoys. They were allowed to work there for some time part-time and then they said they had to go full-time or leave. A few left then because of their children. Her friend left but she stayed on. Uncertain of dates – redundant (from FP) in 1973. She was in Mettoys for 9-10 years. No training in Mettoys just shown what to do. No uniform here either. No more dangerous, healthy and safety was not such a factor then. Factory work has not affected her health.

29.20

In FP she worked Mondays to Fridays and if they were asked to come in on a Saturday they had extra pay. They had afternoon and evening shifts; there was a night shift at Mettoys. They did have bank holidays and Christmas off. She never worked on Sundays. There weren't any buses on Sunday anyhow.

*As a job would you have said that it was boring or ..?*

**No, no it wasn't boring at all! (laughs) you haven't got time to be boring ... it keeps you going ... especially if you've got to do your targets, you've got to go quick.**

She had to leave Mettoys too because the factory was closing. **'Yes, I did feel a bit sad because I did enjoy myself there and the money was handy as well.'** She hasn't kept in touch with the other girls - **'most of them are gone now.'** She didn't have a retirement gift, **'they didn't give us anything!'**

There wasn't a social club or football club etc in Mettoys. They never saw the bosses. They'd see the foreman sometimes, if there were any problems with the machines. Young boys and men mended the machines.

32.45

When she was in FP some girls came from as far as Port Talbot to work there. They had a bus to carry them. **'They were from all over the shop really'**. The Port Talbot girls stuck together on the line. The majority were from Swansea. She didn't hear any Welsh being spoken there, though there were probably Welsh-speakers there. The Swansea girls were alright (laughs!) **'they can be nasty, mind, but they're good to work with, mind. They're good to work with, but don't cross them.'** There wasn't any crude language there.

Her main memory of this period was when she started in FP making the toys and the women as well, and the going out. On one occasion they took them to another factory to do something there – they had to go by bus, but they didn't do anything and they had fun on the bus. She thinks they were meant to show other workers how to do the work, they did get there but they didn't do anything. They sat outside and it was a lovely day! They never went into the factory. For some reason they couldn't go in so they bought ice creams instead.

The factories didn't organise trips out or Christmas parties for workers' children.

You could buy the toys and there could have been some pilfering (laughs!). Some of them were taking some of the cars, but these would have been rejects or seconds **'only thrown away they'd be'**. You could go to the shop to buy some and they were cheaper for the workforce. You could buy some for your friends too.