

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

### Hotpoint, Llandudno (1948-55 and 1970-91)

Interviewee: VN023 Kathleen Smith

Date: 29: 04: 2014

Interviewer: Kate Sullivan on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Kathy confirmed her name, address and date of birth, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1929

Her mother came from Blaenau Ffestiniog, her father was a master butcher from Lancashire, and they married against his family's wishes, because her mother was a 'working girl.' They met in Lancashire when her mother went to live with her married sister there but they returned to Blaenau, where her father began a fish and poultry business. He'd had been gassed in the first world war. Kathy's job as a child was to pluck the feathers off the chickens. She'd been born in Fleetwood, Lancs, and had two brothers and a sister. She went to school in Llandudno Junction and then the Catholic school in Colwyn Bay, where she had to learn English. The family moved to Llandudno Junction from Blaenau when Kathy was four. She enjoyed school and felt she had a good education. though she regrets going to school in a different town to where she lived, as she didn't know any other children from Llandudno.

She left school at fourteen; her father's gassing in the war was having an effect on his health so her parents needed her to work. **She had an exemption to leave school because of this. She became a secretary to a major in an army office where where soldiers from Dunkirk were being rehabilitated and local men were being trained to serve in the Home Guard.** Kathy was there for about a year and a half. After the war finished, they disbanded this hospital and office so Kathy was dismissed. One of the Home Guard men managed a brewery and he asked Kathy to become his secretary, so she finished in the army office on the Friday and began at the brewery on the Monday. **She'd done shorthand and typing at school. She would have liked to go a grammar school but because of the county system she couldn't take the examination. She didn't want to leave school but had to because of the condition of her father's health. In the army office, she received a pound a week; she gave her mother 18 shillings, paid a shilling of National Insurance (?) and had a shilling for herself. Out of this she had to save to buy her own shoes and clothes. After 3 months, her father went to see them and asked if she could have a wage rise after this three month period, as they'd promised. So they put her wages up to one pound ten shillings. Kathy had two shillings to herself then and her mother had the rest.**

13.00 In the brewery, at aged fifteen and a half, she earned two pound fifty. She was secretary to the manager, typing the letters he'd dictated. **She used to correct him as she was very good at English.** She stayed at the brewery until she was 18, when she went to the factory. It wasn't Hotpoint at that time but had been built in 1940 by the MoD to make aeroplane parts. It closed after the war, put under camouflage, and it reopened in 1947 under the management of a firm from London called the International Refrigerator Company, who brought key workers with them, who were given houses by the local council. The new company made commercial and domestic refrigerators, changing its name later to British Domestic Appliances, making washing machines, vacuum cleaners and fewer refrigerators. The name of the firm was Coldrater (?) and then it became Hotpoint, part of General Electric Co. They continued to make washing machines, vacuum cleaners and later on dishwashers.

Kathy started there in 1947/8, when the factory was still quite empty. She went down to ask for a job and spoke to the general manager himself, who asked her 'Do you know how to run a personnel department?' Kathy said 'yes' even though she'd only been a secretary and he asked her when she could start. She had to give a week's notice at the brewery; she used to cycle to the brewery but the factory was just on her doorstep, across a field at the back. **She didn't have an interview 'They just let me loose, to start bringing people in.'** Over time they brought in a personnel officer, as she was classed as a personnel 'assistant' but for years it was she who had to employ the workers, interviewing them, getting them started on the factory floor, but not the office staff as they didn't need them. There was only her and the general manager, Richard Bratson, with whom she shared a stores office in the beginning. When she started there was nobody working on the factory floor yet, as they were just getting the machinery in; there were about 50 people at first, who she describes as very loyal workers.

**She also used to help out in the surgery as she was trained in First Aid.**

**All the people who came for an interview were 'green labour' in that they couldn't say they were an assembler or had experience in factory work. Kathy had to recruit them from the labour exchange or from local word of mouth.** The owners of the factory during the war - which was called Ratcliffe Ltd - had built the factory but it had been known as the MoD factory. So all the labour after the war was new to the type of work it began doing. They became very efficient, and could progress to new skills, so there was an incentive to improve. If they needed a foreman, Kathy used to put a notice on the board asking for someone from the factory floor, so there was no qualifications, more the knowledge that the workers had gained on the job. People didn't just come from the locality - they used to come from Blaenau for the permanent night shift, over the Crimea in the snow, from Rhyl, and Bangor, in hired buses laid on by the company, and the workers used to meet in a certain place where they'd be picked up and dropped off again. Everyone came willingly, says Kathy, the company expanded right out to all the outlying towns. One man who worked there was also a farmer and he used to bring in meat and eggs in his van and sell them to the workers at lunchtime.

Kathy doesn't know how she learned her job in the personnel department and says it just came to her. **She was known as 'the mother of the factory' because she understood the work that the employees did. She did a little experiment and went onto the factory floor for a short period to find out why people didn't seem to get fed up. She couldn't understand how they did such a monotonous job and admired them very much 'because it was so dull and repetitious.'** The line was a moving line of washing machines and they had to do five hundred a day. While she was on the factory floor, she had to put the washers on the screws and she used to do a batch at a time and found she got an adrenalin rush when she tried to see how many she could do. **Once, she was working with a young man doing a repetitious job and they played a game, thinking of a word and seeing how many other words they could get out of it. The young man**

said he'd enjoyed that and he'd try it all the time, as a trick to make the job less monotonous. **Kathy said she was the only member of staff who went onto the factory floor to try and see the workers' side of things.**

30.00 The factory developed into a big enterprise, with a lovely canteen, and nobody wanted to leave. **Kathy would employ the apprentices, who worked from sixteen to twenty-one. It was Kathy's job to see they got an increase on their birthday, when she'd go round and say 'happy birthday' and tell them they'd be getting more money now.** There were six apprentices every year and she used to help them with their forms and their indentures when they were fully qualified, so Kathy had to see them through the whole process, from the ages of 16 to 21, start to finish. She enjoyed that very much. **There was a scheme also where the factory took boys and girls of 16 who hadn't done very well in school. The assembly work was classed as semi-skilled and they used to take these youngsters and do the same as they did with the apprentices, doing the same hands-on work. Their wages went up every year too and a lot of local young people learned this way but when the government brought the age of full pay down to 18, the factory couldn't do this any more because the pay was 'one rate' so the youngsters who had learned the job had to be 'discarded' (?) which she says was a sad day for her.** Previously these young workers had worked to earn a wage increase every year. Kathy said most of these workers stayed on until they retired however. Later, the factory formed a 'training school' where ten or twelve interviewees were put for a week and they were trained to see if they could use both hands, whether they had medical deficiencies, and if they saw anyone who wouldn't make a factory worker, they'd give them two weeks wages and interview some more and the same thing would happen all over again.

**When a new worker was employed, Kathy would meet them on the Monday they started, where they used to clock in, at 7.30 and she would personally take them to the department, introduce them to the foreman.** There was no training in the early days, they learnt on the job, and Kathy said these people turned out to be brilliant.

When Kathy left, the workforce numbered hundreds. The head office was in Peterborough, and staff were sent down from there, office staff, not factory workers.

**Kathy did night training in psychology, which she paid for herself, because she wanted to learn about the mentality of the workers, and she also did night courses in languages. She also used to visit workers if they were off sick, in hospital, which was part of the process of making the workers feel they belonged and that the factory had a good welfare system. The company also had a profit share scheme. When people were off for any length of time, their names remained in a 'holding pool' and profits shares were sent to them, regardless that they'd been off sick for perhaps months at a time.** Sick workers got sick pay from the company for a while then went onto the government sickness benefit. Profit shares were paid at Easter and Christmas (?) and Kathy also sent parcels out at Christmas to workers who were off sick.

She says it was a 'tremendous' place to work, although she admits she didn't have the monotony of the assembly line. **In her job, there was something different every day and it was exciting. She never knew what she would be faced with next as people used to come to her with all sorts of problems.** If a worker was going into hospital, she had an agreement with the local hospitals whereby she would be told the sort of things the next of kin/family members only were told. "And I used to go to the man on the shop floor and say 'Now your wife's had the operation and she's in recovery, it's been a success.' And they'd go 'Oh, okay' and get on with the job, you see." If anybody died, somebody would ring the factory and ask if the concerned family member could come home and Kathy used to go to them and ask them to come to the surgery for a minute and

she'd tell them that it was bad news and ask them to ring home. If they asked why, she would have to tell them the bad news herself. She'd leave them alone while they phoned and make them a cup of tea if they were upset. When asked if she found that upsetting she said "No, no, well we were family, you see." **If a worker died, she felt like she was losing family and she became a 'professional mourner' as she knew everyone in the factory, and used to go to the funerals.** At one stage, "half the church would be full of Hotpoint people. The others would be family and a few neighbours. You could guarantee that everybody from Hotpoint would be there and over the years it's gradually gone down and down. And we'd be saying there'd be nobody left for us when we die."

43.20 The factory became very modernised over the years and her job changed accordingly, she said. She had so much work to do but says she can't say what she did because it couldn't be put into words. She told a story about how a man came into the office one afternoon and told her he was going to Conwy Bridge to kill himself. She told him to hang on a second and go into a little room while she made tea and they'd have a cup of tea together first. When she returned with the tea, he was laughing because he'd told her he was going to kill himself and she'd gone to make them a cup of tea and because of that he didn't want to kill himself any longer. Many years later, this man said to Kathy 'thank you for my life' and those are the sort of things that happened in personnel she says. Another man came to factory saying he was looking for his long lost brother, who Kathy knew worked there, but she couldn't tell him his name as she didn't know what the relationship was. But she told him to come back in the evening and got the two together outside of work, telling the man who worked in Hotpoint that he had to come with her, and she took him to a café where his brother was waiting. "And they just fell into each other's arms and they sobbed. And this boy didn't know he had a brother." Kathy took them to her niece's house and left them there to get reacquainted till it was time for this man to start his shift.

**Hotpoint also had a social club, and this had a hundred honorary members. All the activities were held in the social club, which is now the community club.** The original social club was built out of disused workmen's huts by Conwy Bridge and later they built a proper one. They used to have bands, dances, singers, and would also invite groups like the elderly from Llandudno and entertain and cook for them. The committee that did this was called 'The Good Companions.' Kathy used to collect logs in the winter and take them around to old people, made from pallets from the factory or from trees that were coming down. The management knew about this and were glad to get rid of the pallets, which were dangerous when they were broken - "We never did anything without permission." The Good Companions were 'anonymous' she says. They'd also do food parcels which they delivered, not to people who worked in the factory, but anyone they found out was in need.

Kathy had some relations working in the factory, like her niece and her brother, Jim, who was in the maintenance department. Other workers had a lot of family members working there. The relationship between the staff and the workers was good, she said. All of them clubbed together if someone died for example and would pitch in even if they didn't know who they were or what line they worked on. One time, Kathy took some children to Lourdes and the factory gave towards the air fare. Because there were so many calls on people's wages at times like this, the management started a fund for these types of things, although people still gave of their own accord. They all paid a shilling a week out of their wages to pay into this fund, and there were two thousand workers at the time, and they all signed a document to have their shilling taken out.

Kathy started on three pound fifteen a week at Hotpoint. She was still giving money to her parents but later she emigrated to New Zealand. She wanted to travel and work her way around the world. When she went to New Zealand, at the age of 26, she earned £12 a week and she still sent money home to her parents. At Hotpoint, her hours were 8.30am to 4.15pm, though she sometimes stayed till 6pm to 'catch up' on her work; when she stayed late, she was the only one leaving the factory,

apart from the security. She was always the last one to leave the office, she says. The factory floor workers started at 7.30 am. She took the same holidays as the factory floor workers, i.e., the factory shut down weeks at Easter and last week of July/first week of August, a week in October and Christmas. The factory would shut down at these times but they used to have workers who were new and didn't have holiday pay, they would take these workers in during the holidays to clean, sort the stores, repair machines, stock take and so on. Kathy never had to go in during the holiday. One time, however, she did as she had to train some girls on work experience. Her mother was ill during this period and her father had died in 1958. She had one girl of 16 who helped out during one holiday because she loved the place and Kathy said she used to do 30 or 40 letters a day for her. She only had these girls for three months but they didn't want to leave her. These were YTS girls, and they had a book of progress in which Kathy had to write. This same girl queried with Kathy when the manager of another department was showing the other girls this book and Kathy helped her sort it out. And this helped the girl become more confident.

*1.03* She didn't look after the trainees for all departments; the trainees went to all the departments in turn - e.g. engineering, purchasing, accounts. Kathy said after a couple of years, they'd be qualified for lots of things. She liked working with the young people and she made the job a happy one for the trainees. The people in her department were alright, she said, and made up of lots of different offices - security, training, telephone exchange, all in different offices off hers, and Kathy was in the middle and could see them all. These were men and women, but only one woman in personnel with three men (not sure where Kathy was in that equation.) She says her office was in an annex on the lawn later on. She didn't have to go through the factory floor to get to her office but came in through the main gate and around the factory into another building. It was a prefabricated office and very hot in the summer. The staff didn't have to clock in.

She said the factory floor workers had to clock in as they were on a bonus scheme - the more they did, they got a bonus, on top of the normal basic wage.

**The staff were on the basic set rate and didn't get a bonus. Kathy doesn't think she earned more than the people on the factory floor because of this bonus scheme, but they had to work harder.** When she left to go to New Zealand in 1955, her wages were £5 a week and the factory floor workers could earn more than that. The profit scheme money was shared equally between the factory floor workers and the staff. The staff ate with the factory workers in the same canteen. Kathy knew everyone and she sat wherever there was room; the rest of the staff tended to sit apart as they had to be smartly dressed whereas the factory men, in particular, had dirty oily clothes. But there was no snobbery, just a practical thing. The factory workers wore overalls and protective clothing. The girls had a slip on apron over their everyday clothes, with the Hotpoint name on it. The office workers were never issued with anything like that but they were expected to dress well as they were meeting the public a lot of the time.

After New Zealand, Kathy went into the Merchant Navy; fifteen years later she had to return home because of family circumstances. So she went to ask for work at the factory again, on the factory floor, as she felt she couldn't ask for her old job back. She asked one of the foremen if she could work part time and he put her name forward for a job on the assembly line. She doesn't know if this was vindictive but a girl she was working with said she needed the pliers, or some tool they had to use, and that Kathy wasn't any good. But while she was on the assembly line, a director (Sid Davies?) walked past and said 'Kath, what are you doing there?' She said 'I'm working.' And he replied 'No, you're certainly not working there.' Kathy thought he was going to sack her and told him she had to have a job as she was looking after her mother. He insisted she come back and work on the staff, that she belonged in personnel, so he marched her from the section, and she hadn't been there long. Kathy had worked at Hotpoint for eight years before New Zealand and she was there another twenty eight years the second time in her old job "as if I'd never left it, I just walked straight

back in and everybody was whooping and 'joying 'Kath's back!'”

She also had to arrange the retirement parties, invite the wives in, give them a bouquet of flowers, and a present for the man retiring. A director would come up and say goodbye to them. The men used to say 'Oh this is our mother' to their wives. Even today, people will come over and greet her on the street, or the young apprentices will come up and speak to her, men now, and she'll say to their wives “Oh this is one of my boys.”

**She could have retired at 60 but she left at the age of 62. She left because a girl came into the office, crying and saying that she'd just bought a house and the factory were making her redundant as they had to cut down on staff. So Kathy said she'd go instead and they could find this girl a job in the office.** The factory agreed and Kathy made an announcement over the telephone exchange to tell the whole factory that she would be leaving on the Thursday before Easter. “I won't be able to get round to you all, to say goodbye to you all, so I'm doing it like this. Oh, they came from everywhere down to the office, it was marvellous, wishing me well, and they came down with presents before I left. They had to have the works van to bring me home cos I had so much stuff.”

They also gave her an official retirement party a few weeks later in the Hotpoint social club, a big buffet with champagne and dancing. Bryn Chamberlain, an entertainer who also worked in the factory, danced with her and sang 'Lady in Red.' This was in 1991. As it was redundancy she got redundancy money and as soon as she could she 'took off around the world' to Hong Kong, New Zealand, America, Hawaii. Her mother had died so she was able to do the travelling she'd always wanted to. Her mother was partially sighted towards the end of her life and relied on Kathy a lot.

When in New Zealand the first time, she was engaged to be married and she was prepared to live out there, but then her mother became ill and Kathy came back to look after her temporarily she thought but she never went back. Her sister too had long term cancer around this time and she was hospitalized and she asked Kathy to look after her children. This was in 1959. Her father had just died and she was thinking of taking her mother back to New Zealand with her but when her sister, on her death bed in 1964, asked her to look after her eight children, she gave up her job as a civil servant and her relationship. When she joined the merchant navy, it was partly to be able to see this man, but it didn't work out and he met someone else and got married. When Kathy was bringing up the children, she was at home and not working. She had some child allowance for the youngest ones. The father of the children took some of this money so Kathy was using up her savings but then the authorities found out what the father was doing and they wanted to make him responsible for the children. But he wanted to put them in a home, and for a while the youngest ones were put into a home.

Once the children were over 16, Kathy returned to the merchant navy. When the last ship of a New Zealand company was sold, a friend told her of a job in Liverpool. She'd done eight years in New Zealand shipping and after this she had a job in a children's hospice in Liverpool. One day she had a phone call from Cunard, who said somebody had recommended her and they offered her job. After five months on the Queen Elizabeth, she was introduced to the Queen Mother. She was a stewardess in First Class - starting on touring and cabin classes “I couldn't put a foot wrong in Cunard.” She was very good at looking after difficult passengers. She never knew who it was who recommended her.

**As regards the factory, she started in 1947, left in 1955, returned in 1970 and was made redundant in 1991.**

She left the Queen Elizabeth and returned to the factory when that ship was sold. It was hell going

back as she was on the shop floor and she didn't like it a bit, but her mother had had a stroke and her sister's children were grown up and didn't want to look after their grandmother. She was glad to be 'back where she belonged' however when she got back into the personnel department.

Duration : 1 hour, 30 minutes