

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Steinberg's (Alexon), Pontypridd (for 6-8 weeks in c. 1953); Masteradio, Treforest Estate (again in c. 1953 – c. 1955/6); Standard Telephone and Cables (a couple of weeks in 1967); AB Metals, Abercynon (8 months c. 1967)

Interviewee: VSE033 Beryl Anna Roberts

DOB: April 22, 1936

Date: 3/3/14

Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Her background: She was born in Collier Row, Bedlinog; her father's name was James Henry Thomas, her mother's name was Phyllis Irene Sellwood (then Thomas after). She had an older sister Barbara and a brother, David. Her father was a labourer in the pit, and **'my mother of course helped in the home when she was young, ... until she got married, and she was a housewife after, always at home, marvellous cook, brought us up on next to nothing, really, because the wages weren't very good for a labourer in the pit then. But we had a good childhood.'** He worked in the Taff Merthyr pit when he was married. But he'd left school at 14 and he worked in various pits – down in Abercynon. He was born in Pendarren and he lost his father in Bedlinog pit, when he was eight and his mother had died already of consumption – or it could have been anything. So he was an orphan at eight. Although he had older sisters they weren't old enough to look after him so he went into Llwyncoed Orphanage. So he was very, very lax with them as children - a good father. He used to threaten them a lot but didn't do anything after. A happy childhood and she was always in the water – in the river (at ? road)– they used to dam it up and she learnt to swim there. She was swimming at 3 years old.

They caught the bus everywhere, even to baths and open air baths, lidos, and it was always freezing – lovely time, **'but I couldn't wait to leave school.'**

4.19

She went to Bedlinog Infant School down the bottom on Bedlinog Farm Road, then she moved up to primary school and seniors would all be in the same school. It was a girl's school, when she started, but during her last year it changed to a secondary modern. It was called Bedlinog Girls' School, and then Bedlinog Secondary Modern School. There was a Boys' School at the bottom. Also another Infants' School at the top – two altogether. They started school at three. They moved to the primary school when they were eight. There was the 11 + then, **'but I wouldn't try my 11+. I wasn't very academic. I mean I knew everything. The headmistress wrote a letter to my father to try and persuade me, but I wouldn't. I wanted to leave school and I wanted to go dancing and ... But then Barbara went and I went away to work.'** She was **'coming up to fifteen'** when she left. Barbara left at fourteen. Barbara had been to other places before she went to Malvern, and then Beryl joined her in Malvern.

6.30

In Malvern she was doing general housework. It was a house for the college - Malvern College for Girls. There were only 21 girls, and a matron and a house-mistress. They were lovely and they treated them like one of the students – very nice it was. A different type of life to the valleys. We used to go dancing on Saturday nights – they had a late pass, because they had to be in by 10 o'clock. – they were in charge of them. The matron would be waiting for them to be in by 10. She danced to all the big bands, - proper ballroom dancing. She had a good time really. And then Barbara finished and came home, but she had another friend working with her and they stayed for eighteen ? after wards. Then Mary was called home because her mother was going in for an operation on varicose veins, and she went home to look after the house. So she was on her own, but in the meantime Matron and Miss Walker, the house mistress, were changing their jobs and going up to Westmorland. She was offered to go with them, but she said No

But she had an interview with the Ministry of Works, she'd be driving the cars – lovely uniform, and because she was left on her own she chickened out. **'Good opportunity and I let it pass.'** So she came home.

After coming home Barbara and her went to Porthcawl to an Old People's Home – private at the beginning and in the meantime the council separated them- Barbara stayed in the private part and she had to walk a mile and a half down to Porthcawl to the council home for people who couldn't afford to pay. She didn't like the Matron in charge here – she was a real stickler. She was quick doing her work because that was the work she'd always done, - in the past when they had finished their work they had their free time. She intended going back to the private home when she had finished her work. But the Matron made her scrub a 100+ steps on a fire escape because she was right down the boiler room. **'And I thought “**

I'm not doing that. I'm not a slave and I finished.' The Matron in the private home tried to coax her to stay there but she decided she was going home.

10.30

Then she went to work in the docks in Poole's and then she went into the factory in 1954. She would be going on 17 years old. She went into the factory with her cousin who was taking a year out from college – she was teaching. She went to Barry College and because she was taking a year out they decided to go into the factory.

This was Master Radio. After leaving Porthcawl she went down to Steinbergs' factory in Hawthorn, Pontypridd – a sewing factory. It was called Alexon House - they made beautiful clothes - all types of clothes. **'A lot of the girls from the village lived there.'** If they'd gone up to Merthyr they would have gone to the lingerie factory – Kaiser Bondor. **'But of course I didn't like it, again'**. They did have an interview for the job, with the Personnel Officer - if they thought you were alright you'd have the job. **'Jobs were easy to have then.'**

They were trained, **'but I didn't take to the machines at all. Barbara took to it alright but she didn't like factory work – we were used to doing our work and you know, free time and different things like that, but it was rigid in the factory. I mean you had to stay for a certain time at your line and your bench. It was so much to the toilet, and so much, you know lunch, ... and didn't like the routine of it.'**

They caught the bus – public transport at half past seven in the morning to be there by eight. Clock in, of course. They both finished at the same time because she didn't like it. They were coming home round the six mark – finishing at 4.30 or 5 o'clock then. Half an hour for lunch, and toilet breaks – not too many of those. **'The girls who smoked liked to go out to have a whiff!'** She never smoked until she was much older.

15.15

What she didn't like about the job? **'I didn't like the Charge hand to start, she was an older lady and she'd march up and down – really strict she were. I wasn't used to that because I worked under nice people. But no, I was a bit of a baby.'**

She can't remember the wages. It wasn't as much as when she did the part-time work after she was married. Her wages when she worked away was only 29shillings and all found. In the factory it was a basic wage **'but of course , if you were good enough, I wasn't in Alexon House long enough to get on to a line that was earning bonuses ... so it was only the wage. I think it was about £3 or £4?'**

There was a union in the factory. **'In some factories you had to be a member once you started. It was taken out of your wages.'** She wasn't in Steinbergs long enough, but she supposes it would have been taken out of her wages.

She was making camel hair coats. She was on the cuffs, on the basic machines. 'They were beautiful coats.' The factory has only recently closed – Alexon House is still there – still a factory shop but they don't produce anything anymore.

Her first day at work? **'When you're young, it's frightening to start but you get used to it and you know, going to the canteen with the girls, and getting friendly – having friends.'**

It was frightening because it was strange. Before that she had been in a family atmosphere. The noise and bustle of the factory.

There were lots working there – she's not sure how many. Mainly women but also men as charge hands and seeing to the machines. The cutters were men – cutting out the patterns. She stayed there for **'a matter of about six weeks ... two months'**.

19.50

Then she came back and went to the Pooles with two cousins. **'I found that frightening down to the docks, going through the two arcades ... because, I mean, I never went anywhere really, not on my own.'** (still not fussy about going places on her own though she lives on her own).

Then they went down to Master Radio – that was light engineering. They were putting – doing the board of transistors and soldering on to a board to put into television sets. **'I often wondered whether the ones I made – whether they worked or not! That was piecework. You could earn a bit of money if you was on a good line.'** This was again when she was about 17 and she stayed there until she got married. In Master Radio there were redundancies, and because she'd got married **'Last in, first out. But they kept me as long as they could. They even put me in the stores counting screws and things – fair play they were good, good employers.'**

Again she had an interview for Master Radio with the personnel officer, Jimmy - **he was very nice and he did look after the girls because Shirley (her cousin) was academic I stayed on the line and she went into the offices.'** There were other girls from Bedlinog working there too and she started before them and stayed after them. The first day wasn't frightening here – **it was friendlier there** than in Steinberg's. It wasn't a smaller factory because there were men employed as well as women. There were quite a lot of men – **'chargehands and they were higher up than the women.'**

23.35

Master Radio was down in the Treforest estate near Hawthorne – they'd come off the bus and cross the bridge into the estate. She had to be trained, but it was quite alright to start with. **'Once you could do the job, they'd put you n the line then.'** Training for some days – a week.. **'because soldering – it was only so much solder you could use on the joints. If you blogged it, it would have to go in for repairs. So you had to learn to dab gently touch with a soldering iron and cutters and the wires, and of course, the tweezers. Well, we had three things anyway, soldering iron, the cutters and the pliers. And in the winter they were very, very cold, we used to wrap insulation tape around them, not for them to be so cold.'** She does remember that it used to be cold in the winter. She thinks this is responsible for the arthritis in her fingers. Sometimes the cold was an issue. There was a tannoy, - they would talk over the tannoy and they had music. **'So yes, it was quite pleasant. You got used to it like in it. I had to, I mean, that was the only type of work you could have'**.

She can't remember the wages – but they were about £5. **'It was good money, really, to what I'd been earning before. ... I had my wages but beyond ... ? at home, my mother, because she said it would teach us how to handle our money. And of course we saved for whatever clothes we wanted, I always like to be well dressed.'** She thinks her mother only took about £1.50 (£1 10 shillings) from them. **'We didn't give up all our wages to her'**, if they wanted to go anywhere we would have had money to go.

27.56

A working day – They caught the bus at half seven, got out at the Hawthorne and walked across the bridge, to where all the factories were. They clocked in, at eight sure to be, they settled down at their benches and she thinks there was a break at elevenses, dinner time at one, and then back to their work benches until they clocked off.

The soldering started at the top of the line **'and perhaps I was third in, they would do their part and then they passed the chassis to the next girl and she'd do her part, and it went on and on and on like that. If you weren't very good at your job you'd have a line behind you. So perhaps they'd send someone ? to clear up. And, of course, any repairs, - I went on repairs at one time, you had to take all the solder off, that was too much and, you know, repair them and send them back down the line.'** They were all soldering on the line. **'They could smoke in the factory ... they could have a cigarette, because of the soldering iron, see, was hot, and nothing to burn – so most of the married women, they were smoking. And they used to say 'Oh, do you want a cigarette?'. I said "No, I don't smoke."**

When she was in Steinberg's, she was on a basic tacking machine - the little sewing machines used to go too fast – this machine was slower, and it used to do big white stitches, for them to have a tidy line to use on the sewing machines. She thinks she was happier at Master Radio because they were friendlier – it wasn't just the work it was the atmosphere.

31.26

She thinks there was a hundred working there **'because the money was coming in because people could afford to have televisions then, couldn't they?... We didn't have a television at home 'til I got married.'**

She started going out with one of the village boys, and his mother had a television, because his father was up in the pit – he was the traffic underground – with the drams and things like that. And her boyfriend was working, and his mother had a lodger, and his uncle was living there with them – so they had money going in, so they had a television. Not many people in the village had televisions then. She also had a friend in the street who had one – she was a factory worker but her husband was a boss in the pit – an over-man. She used to go up with her mother to her house to see television.

She thinks they finished working at about 4.45. and home by about 6 o'clock with the bus. This was public transport but the morning bus was a workers' bus (still now she thinks). They'd pay the same fare but have a weekly ticket, which was a little bit cheaper. She thinks

it was about £2. 50 – but unsure. Public transport was marvellous then, **‘we had the red and white, and the other council buses, going from Bargoed.’** The village has changed district from Gelli gaer area to the Merthyr area – but really they are a separate valley from Merthyr, ... they’re really more with Bargoed. And the trains – up from Nelson to Dowlais, but from Nelson it branched out everywhere. They’d have a train on a Saturday.

She did the same job all the time she was at Master Radio, but she did go on to repairs, which was different from on the line.

36.26

There were a lot of married women on the line. **‘I was young compared to them, like ... but they were good types, you know, cos going in strange and young, they were quite nice women.’** Women with children did work but they had people to look after their children until they got home. No childcare facilities. **‘They always had their grandmothers or their mothers looking after the children.’** The wages did go up and the union used to try getting more money for them. The union fees were taken out of the wages. **‘On your docket / payslip – it was taken off.’** She can’t remember which union it was – to do with Light Engineering? There weren’t any strikes when she was there – the only issue was the cold in the winter. They’d try to do something about the heating or **‘let us go and have a hot drink or something like that.’** She never went home because it was too cold. It was quite warm in the summer. But they did have plenty of air in the factory. The lighting was fine.

‘We took our own overalls.’ It wasn’t really dangerous work. **‘If you was careful. You’d have a little burn with the soldering iron or something like that, but I wouldn’t call it dangerous’.** They were aware of health and safety – **to keep alert like and not put things on the factory floor.**

There were good toilets there and a canteen. **‘I took my own lunch, I never – why pay for food when you can have, you know, tidy sandwiches and things from the house? ... I bought - I wasn’t a tea drinker anyway – just a cold drink. ... I’d go out into the canteen, and sit down with our lunch.’** In summer perhaps we’d go outside and eat it. She never bought any food in the canteen. But it looked pretty good cooked dinners.

She thinks she may have arthritis in her finger because the tools were cold but she’s never sought compensation. Now she’s got arthritis all through (her family ailments). She used to be very athletic – running for charity, played football for charity. She wasn’t aware of a football team in the factory – **‘I wasn’t interested then.’** She joined different charities when the children were growing up – cystic fibrosis , British Legion (for years) –poppy organiser and Chairman for a number of years.

She got married when she was in Master Radio - in October 1955. Her husband was alright about her working in a factory because he was in the pits. She was still working into 1956 – **‘my husband was a miner, but he always wanted to go into the navy, and his parents ... wouldn’t sign apparently, but of course, after he got married he was his own man, and he said to me ... a lot of accidents in the district that he’s working in – a lot of young**

boys got killed, so he thought he'd get out of the pit, and he said "Would you mind if I went into the Merchant Navy?" "No" I said " I won't stand in your light if you want to go."

Then she got pregnant with their first child, **'he was born in 1957. So he went off to the navy.'** The baby was born, and as the little one was growing he finished in the navy. He went into the local level to get work and then went up to London to train to be a representative for different firms – dog food, farm animals – he visited all of Wales. But he was a womaniser – they were married for 27 years and then got divorced.

47.40

She left Master Radio and stayed at home then. She was made redundant from there. When she was expecting her second son she went down to Trelewis to live. She lived down there for five years. Then they bought a house down the bottom of the village – 7 Oakland Street, - when the children were little she was at home seeing to the children. **'I was more or less in the house all of the time because he was away. ... I fetched them up more or less on my own.'**

Then **'they started these twilight shifts, evening shifts, or when the children were still in school – couple of hours. . in the factories.'** She went in from about 9 o'clock until half past three. **Standard Telephones and Cables Limited. – this is where she started. They produced parts to go into telephone exchanges 'it was all coloured wires and we had to knot and tie all these coloured wires, for all these wires to be put into the exchange. '** She had an interview for this job. At the interview (she's got poor eyesight and she doesn't wear her glasses if she hasn't got to) – **'I'd gone to this interview without her glasses. So you had to have good eyesight, so you had an eye test and my right eye was marvellous, so she told me to do the left eye. I couldn't see, could I with my left eye much, it was only half of everything I could see with my left eye, so 'Oh' she said, 'you must be nervous', she said. ... In the meantime someone come in for tablets, she had a headache, and I done it quick with my right eye!'** She memorised it and did it right! **'So I had the job!'**

51.30

Her friend had already passed the test. They were more or less looking at their eyes for the colours. She did the job well. **She said 'If you can drive you'll definitely be able to do it. And if you can knit, you could definitely do it.'** I couldn't drive and wasn't much of a knitter! **But I got into it quicker than my friend and there again she didn't like it. I got into it lovely, had the wires all tangled up, well, not tangled up, worked them all, and we had to tie knots with cord, string, and every knot had to be perfect ... for it to go into the exchanges, and she didn't like it. So she said 'We'll finish.'**

'But we'd heard now that A B Metals was taking on girls for this shift. She was here for a couple of weeks – she'd done her training and was getting on with the job alright. And there were Bedlinog girls who had been in Master Radio there but because Phyllis didn't like it they tried A B Metals. She felt she had to finish with Phyllis because of the company.

They went for an interview at A B Metals, - **‘that was the easiest factory job I had and the most money for the hours we were working. What I was having for a full day in Master Radio I was having for hours in A B Metals.’** **‘That was hot – we burned things in wax. That was quite a hot job. But the other job was on a circular thing, the women ? used to rotate. It was really easy. The components they’d had in wasn’t quite right and that’s all I had was a knife and this little black component and I had to scrape a little thing off, to make it work. All day long. It was boring but it was easy work, didn’t tax me at all, and I could even do it without my glasses. ... I could feel that little thing and take it off, and it was right. .. And I enjoyed that – that was quite friendly. Our chargehand was a young man – younger than us and we used to tease him a lot. ... we locked him in the wax room at one time, but he was a nice young man. ... He was quite lenient with us.**

They had a minibus from the village to take them there. They had to pay. A local man who had started up a minibus service. It wasn’t a lot to Abercynon anyway. She worked part-time – she put the children in school at nine , started out at 9.30, and worked from 10 until 2 or 2.30. They had elevenses and dinner break.

57.20

The facilities were good. **‘And they weren’t so rigid with toilet time.’** Again the canteen was the same – she might buy a sausage roll or something like that. There was a union there too but she doesn’t remember any disputes. They were good employers. (Wants to add that it was because she didn’t get into Steinberg that she didn’t like it – it wasn’t their fault). The other factories were fair employers.

The social life:

In Master Radio – **‘It was too far for us to go down to anything down there. ... you had your own things to do in the village.’** She can’t remember Christmas parties – perhaps she wasn’t there long enough. She knows other factories had parties for children (quotes one example – where her friend took her two youngest children to a Christmas party – was it Aero Zip? because she was single.) but she doesn’t remember any. In fact they had floods from the Taff and the factory was flooded at Christmas time.

She didn’t socialise with the other women. The camaraderie in the factory was lovely (MR) – the married women were marvellous because she was young – they helped her as much as they could **‘took me under their wing’**. Sometimes they sang with the music, sing along.

The social life in the village – the dances in the British Legion, to raise funds for the poppies. Dances for funds for Cystic Fibrosis and coffee mornings.

Though the work was boring at A B Metals **‘they were good, and I mean, I needed the money. I mean you stuck it. I could have fallen off to sleep many a time’**, she didn’t find the soldering boring – some of the wires were tiny – it was interesting really. She also felt the cables job was interesting.

1.03.30

Did you have any sense of being at the kind of cutting edge of technology when you worked there – when you were making TVs ... ?

I never thought of it then. When you're young, you don't. Not really. But I mean I knew that people were earning enough to have televisions then, and I thought that was great, that I was helping, .. but I always wondered whether the parts that I did whether the televisions worked or not ...

When she first got married she was living with her mother and between them both they got a television between them.

She worked in A B Metals for **'that wasn't long again.'** She was there for about eight months. This was in the 1960s. Terry was her last son and he was about three years old. She had Vivian in 1957, Kim in 1961, and three and a half years before she had Terry – 1964 . So she worked there in c. 1967 (though she says it was in the 1970s)

She never worked in any other factory after that. She is not in contact with any of her workmates. Though when she was in Master Radio she did get very friendly with a girl from the Rhondda – a small blond girl but she can't remember her name. She had a big motorbike. And they used to go down to Cowbridge to a roadhouse and meet up with other bikers. 'I think her name was Maisey.' They wore ordinary clothes. She enjoyed that. When she was courting her husband – he had an old Enfield motorbike after the war. **'We did a lot of courting on that.'** And then he had a Vespa. They used to go down to Porthcawl and up to Brecon – the reservoirs up there.

Looking back the time in the factories **'It seems alright now. But when I started of course I didn't like it at all, factory work. ... But I had to have a job somewhere and of course, industry was the best, - the best paid then, so that's how I went into it then. I made myself get used to it.**

1.09.00

She's done a lot of other jobs after that – as a home help to keep her home going, (her husband was away a lot). He'd go away and then she'd take him back; she cleaned the local Legion club. He had moods – he'd threaten that she wouldn't have any money, **'that was terrible for me .. I think I'd go off my head if I had debt.'** But on the whole when they lived together it was alright. He was good at every job he had but there wasn't enough drink. She stuck it for the children – 27 years. They had only just moved when he said he was off again and she said she'd had enough. She tried for a council house and they were going to put her on the Gurnos estate – but she couldn't drive, so she came home to her mother and had small jobs. But they kept her going and the child benefit. Then her health failed, and she had to have invasive surgery. And the arthritis. Otherwise it was alright and she kept working and she was classed unfit for work when she was 40. So she worked for charities instead. This provided a social life with concerts, etc and the girls her age who were in the charity used to go out. She did have a little drink on the Saturday or Sunday and they used to do buses to the .. and have dinner s in hotels and in conferences with the British Legion.

She doesn't think the factories were doing social things then.

DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD/ END OF INTERVIEW

73:51