

Celebrating the women on the factory floor

13/07/2015



Lleisiau o Lawr y Ffatri

Led by Women's Archives Wales, Voices from the Factory Floor includes oral interviews, full transcripts of the recordings, and photographs documenting the history of women who worked in factories across Wales during a 30-year period between 1945 and 1975.

From Cath Parry's tales of having to sew 70 pyjamas every half hour in Bala to Moira Morris's stories of making men's watches at Tick Tock in Ystradgynlais and Yvonne Stevens' toy making memories at Bacon Toy Factory, Llanrwst, where she later met her husband - over 200 such stories have now been documented in the project, reflecting an important period in Welsh manufacturing which underlines the vital role women played.

The HLF grant now means that these almost hidden histories and memories are being brought back to life for modern day Welsh workers to see how factory girls were at the heart of Wales's thriving industrial scene and economy - in more ways than one.

Catrin Stevens, the project's co-ordinator, explains why she feels projects such as Voices from the Factory Floor play a fundamental role in capturing bygone women's history. She said: "Women's history has, on the whole, been ignored and neglected through the centuries and the Women's Archive of Wales's aim is to raise awareness of women's history and to rescue and safeguard the sources of this history. This specific project is extremely important as it recognises the important

role Welsh women played in the resurgence of manufacturing, following the war.

“Their stories reflect a challenging work environment, while at the same time, show there was a strong sense of camaraderie and plenty of fun to be had at the work seaside trips to places like Tywyn and Blackpool. While the archive is fascinating for us now, in years to come it will be an invaluable source for those wishing to learn about Welsh life in this period.”

Head of HLF Wales, Richard Bellamy, believes that using National Lottery money for projects like this is vitally important in keeping the country’s unwritten history alive. He said: “Our heritage takes many different forms, and it is important we recognise this when considering how HLF money is distributed. Voices from the Factory Floor tells an important story and reflects on a key period in Welsh life, a period of change in our culture and in our ways of working.

“Without support from the National Lottery it would be very difficult for projects such as these to see the light of day, meaning that Cath’s voice and thousands of other Welsh working women’s voices would be lost.

“I would encourage everyone to log on and get lost in these factory tales – I guarantee you will discover an enchanting - and perhaps unexpected - women’s working world, helping us to discover who they and indeed we are, and where we’ve all come from, given the majority of these factories have now closed.”

One of the project’s contributors, Cath Parry, worked at Ackroyd & Sons in Bala for 34 years hemming pyjamas, and she described how everything was dictated by the time: She explained: “From the minute eight o’clock came, you were sewing the whole time until break time. Everything went by the clock. You had to do 70 pairs of pyjamas in half an hour, with about six of us working in a row. One started off and if her machine broke down, we were all waiting. But you had to do your seventy every half hour by the end of the day, or he [the boss] wanted to know why.”

Another contributor, Yvonne Smith who worked at Polikoff’s factory at Ynyswen recalls the time there was a pox outbreak in the Rhondda in 1961. She said: “Polikoff organised for everyone who wanted an immunisation against the small pox to come and have it done within the factory and I was involved in doing the small pox injections. But I can also remember some of the girls saying that they couldn’t have an injection like that in their arm I’ll have to have it in my leg and people fainting. You can imagine all this excitement as everyone had to leave their jobs and come and queue and get these injections. Records had to be kept to make sure they didn’t give it to someone twice. Because some would have had it twice if they could. Anything for free.”

A new film to promote the project is to be launched today (13 July) at the Senedd and all materials will soon be transferred to the National Screen and Sound Archive at the National Library in Aberystwyth.

Further information

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