



Harris & Pearson Oral History Project

Marie Allport Interview

When did you work at Harris & Pearson?

From 1947 to 1961, and then I left to have my family, but I went back on an offer for a few years until it finally closed down in 1971 – off and on whenever anybody left. Until they got someone, they would come and ask me to help out. Price Pearson Cricket Field Works took everything over from Harris & Pearson. I think I was the last one to work in the office.

Was Harris & Pearson's a good place to work?

I suppose it was really, I wouldn't have stayed there so long if it hadn't have been a happy place, but when I did leave and start to work at other places, I thought I wished I'd have left years ago – the money was always better, and the job too. It was very hard work.

What was your job there?

I started off as an Office Junior, and then when Mary Clarke – the Wages Clerk – left, I took over from her, and did the wages until I left. The wages were complicated – some of the men worked in gangs. There was Setting Gang and a Drawing Gang, and there were 5 in each gang. Those were for the round kilns, and for what they called the 28 chamber kilns; there were also gangs of five. If there were somebody away you'd have to divide the money up between four, or three. [The men knew what they were due]. They were there on a Wednesday morning when the payslips were prepared to say that this isn't right, or that. They worked 7 days a week, but I worked 5½, to lunchtime on a Saturday, but the men also worked Sunday mornings. Men involved in maintenance used to work all day though. You weren't allowed to use a Ready Reckoner – because all the prices were all in decimals, the old decimals, in decimal points. The Wages Clerk was the highest paid person in the Office. When I started I was paid £1 5s, but when I finished it was £7 or £8 a week. [I also used

to operate the weighbridge] You'd be in the middle of doing someone's wages and a lorry would drive in, and you'd have to get up and leave it and weigh the lorry. They'd [the drivers] tell us the tare, and we'd work out the weight [of clay]. For outsiders we used to weigh the lorry full on the way in and empty on the way out. The local clay came from Plant's Hollow pits in Withymoor. The haulier was O J Priest.

Whereabouts did you work in the offices?

I was up the corner, with the safe in the opposite corner. I used to have a key [to the safe]. We used to keep the wages book in there until it was full. [In the centre was] Mr Pearson's favourite dining table – there wasn't a drawer in it – this big old fashioned polished table, with 4 gate legs, and he used to admire this table. [Sitting round it was] Miss Colley – her father was the blacksmith, and he did a lot of the light engineering work at the works – there was also the Works' Foreman, Charles Richards, and his assistant, and Mr Salt – the Works' Manager. Charles Richards succeeded Stan Clarke, who Mary married; he was the Wages Clerk before her, because it was always a man's job – but we didn't get the man's wages of course! When Mr Richards was taken ill, John Jones took his place. On the other side of the archway was the Specials Department – silicate it was called. They made the radiant elements of gas fires. It was run by a Dr Waterton, when I first went there, then a Dr Heeley, who moved to E J & J Pearson, then an Arthur Timmins – he was manager when I left. That was called the Casting Department when I first went there, then they called it the Silver End Works afterwards.

How much contact did you have with people in the brickworks?

Quite a lot really – they were always bobbing in and out – they'd come up for all sorts. We used to have to do the First Aid – they were always dropping bricks on their fingers. I was friendly with a lot of the workpeople. Of course there was the boats, they used to deliver by boat, as well as the GWR, their trucks ... came into the works, not far from the Offices, and then it used to go out onto the sidings. [But] there were boats, and if you told a customer we can deliver by boat, they couldn't believe what you were saying – by boat, you know! It was embarrassing really – but these old things, they die-hard don't they.

Can you describe what the office building was like inside?

[You went in through the double doors. Our office was on the left. The little room to the right was] washbasin, toilet – gents – that was. Then you'd go up the stairs and there was a room on the left, which was the Waiting Room. If there were visitors who wanted to see Mr Pearson or anybody, they were [put in there]. The wages books were enormous – beautiful books, just like something out of Dickens – and they were stored in there. I've often wondered what happened to them? I would have loved to have kept one just to show people. The first door on the right on the landing was Mr Pearson's office, and then the next door that you went to would be the Sales Office I suppose, where Mr Tonks used to work, and his assistant. Then leading from that office there was the Sales Office, and then Mr Pearson's Secretary and another lady who used to do all the loading reports [worked in there]. There were [also] the old gas points there – the gas mantles – because I didn't know any different when I started.

What was the Silver End Works like?

There was a kitchen, with a big old-fashioned black grate, and the ladies toilet there, [otherwise] just the front office.

Do you remember seeing or using the speaking tube device?

[Yes, but it wasn't used when I worked there]

Do you remember the Centenary Celebrations?

Yes – they kept it at The Horseshoe at Brierley Hill, and we all had a pen, with Harris & Pearson [on it], but I don't know what happened to mine. I went to the dinner.

Can you recall any unusual incidents that happened during your time at Harris & Pearson?

Harold Thompson – the tramp – he used to sleep in the kilns when they were warm, and we used to be worried that they'd set him in. He used to play the violin. There was an old lady brick maker – Nell Coleman – and she was well into her 70s and she was still making bricks. She'd got her husband, who'd gone a bit senile, and he used to keep wandering off, so she asked Mr Salt if she could bring him to work with her. He used to sit on a plank on some bricks and he used to watch her work – she could keep her eye on him then. When Price Pearson's took over, they didn't think it was anything to be proud of, to have a woman that age, working, let alone bringing her husband to watch. To start the fire in that office, in that old grate, there used to be a labourer – Joe Bradley – instead of lighting it with stick and coal, he used to bring a shovel – it used to be this wide – bring it out of the kilns [and] walk all up to the office – we had to have all the doors open – you couldn't see one another for smoke, and he used to put it on the fire, and your clothes were hanging up in the office – it was hilarious now when you think about it.

Can you recall any amusing incidents that happened during your time at Harris & Pearson?

Mr Salt was sitting on the end one day and somebody came in for some embrocation, and there was a [big] bottle of it in the cupboard, and I pulled it out and I started to shake it, and the cork came out, and you couldn't see Mr Salt for embrocation!

Is there anything else you can remember about your time at Harris & Pearson you would like to tell me about?

It was very hard work, and the offices were always very filthy. You got through no end of clothes, and the wages weren't there to replace them. During the war, to save clothes, the girls in the offices all wore overalls. It was a very dirty office. There used to be a cleaner come every night, but they couldn't keep it down. Because they were those tongue-and-groove floors, we hadn't even got lino until about the last few years. Bare floor boards, well, you couldn't keep anything like that clean, and the workpeople walking through with the clay shoes – was, you can imagine – awful [and the hot ashes]. Oh, honestly, I can see him now, a little old man with his cap on and this great shovel – the smoke. [That was] every day, we hadn't got electric fires. [The fire would go out] and would want making again. We used to have to keep making it up with the coal. We did eventually have an electric fire. I used to keep it under my table.



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