**(ANONYMOUS: 2009/008) interviewed by Duncan Grimes on 22 June 2009 for**

**Britain at Work 1945-1995 Oral History Project**

ANON: (Reading) *How long did you work at each workplace?* I worked at Gillette's from 1965 to 1970. I got made redundant in 1970, and I in fact went back in 1985 to 2003 when I was made redundant again. *Was it in the public or private sector?* It was private sector. *How did you come to be working there?* Well, in 1965 I had just finished my apprenticeship at Evesham Vignells in Chiswick.

*DG: What are they?*

ANON: They make electrical test equipment. Megger Insulation testers, things like that. In those days, it was encouraged by the firms that you actually left at the end of your apprenticeship. You weren't guaranteed a job to go back to, but ... You would stand a good chance. It was a case that they wanted to see that their training was good enough to put you out in the workplace.

ANON: But I left them at the end of the apprenticeship and I went to Gillette's in their Research and Development as what was called a Prototype Wireman, which the engineers basically used to dream up these ideas, and they would get it working on the bench, and then you were given this bird's nest of wire and components and you had to turn it into a unit that people could handle, etc., and have it all wired up.

*DG: More of something that people could actually use?*

ANON: Yes, I mean to say that they were quite lethal pieces of equipment when they'd finish working with them. So that's how I came to be working there. I was made redundant in 1970 because Gillette, being an American company, they used to have a habit that they got business consultants in and the business consultants would say you need to centralise. So they'd bring all the departments to one site. And five years later they'd come in and collect several hundreds of thousands of pounds more and they'd come out and say your problem is that you've got to de-centralise, so people would be moved off to the other factory at Reading. And they did this on like a five-yearly rota.

*DG: They did it in the first place to save costs though, I guess?*

ANON: Yes. And then it doesn't work because people were having to go down to Reading to use specialised equipment. So at the end of 1970 they decided they didn't want our department, or most of our department, so I was made redundant. Which was quite handy because I'd actually got another job. That was that. I went back in 1985 because a colleague of mine from the early days ... I asked him for a reference for another job and he said "What you going to do?" And I told him and he said "We're crying out for people, we've been all over the country looking for people. You could walk in tomorrow."

*DG: Back to the same kind of job?*

ANON: Slightly different. Slightly. But it was as an electronic technician which meant instruments and that, more so than actually making things.

*DG: Did you do that similar type of job when you weren't at Gillette? When you were working for other companies?*

ANON: No. In between I worked for a firm of laundrettes, repairing machinery and plant. And I finished up ... The last three years I ran a dry cleaning factory for them and it nearly put me in a very early grave, so that's the reason I got out of it.

*DG: OK.*

ANON: So I went back there in 1985 as a technician and basically did the same job although I moved departments and went on to shift work for the last five years, but that was my choice because if I had been made redundant, my pension would be based on my last three years. So if I could do shift work for three years I'd bump my pension up quite considerably. And that's how it works out. So that's how I came to be working there. I've explained what sort of job I did.

*DG: Yeah.*

ANON: The hours were ... When I was on what they call "day work", it was sort of eight thirty to half past four. That's about forty hours or something like that? Holiday-wise, we used to get about five weeks holiday. Two of which were statutory holidays. You had to have them at a certain time because the factory closed down.

*DG: Did you get benefits? Health care and that sort of thing?*

ANON: Yes. Gillette's, they looked after their people. There was a medical centre there. There was a medical centre there. There was a dentist on site so you didn't have to take time off of work to go to dentists, etc. And generally, they looked after people. But as I went back the second time, the medical centre had got far, far more high-tech, but some of the services, they didn't carry so many.

*DG: Right.*

ANON: But then they were going into different area's, because we used to have regular once a year hearing tests because we were working in a factory environment. We had a medical at one stage and I was diagnosed as having high cholesterol and they put me on a programme there where I used to have to go every three months for something like four years and they did a blood test for cholesterol. It was all charted for how things were going. I had a heart abnormality whilst I was in their employment and I was restricted in what I could do and what I was allowed to do. So I would have said that they were caring in that respect.

*DG: Did you think that they were sort of competitive --*

ANON: Oh, yes.

*DG: --against other companies?*

ANON: Yes. It was written in your contract that you would receive a yearly rise. You used to get two weeks' salary as a Christmas bonus.

ANON: But they were very generous in that respect. *What was the job like?* It was a ... The factory ... I mean, if you compared the factory to Ford's at Dagenham, it was small. But it would be running, I suppose in area ... probably about three football pitches. Something like that.

*DG: How many people worked there?*

ANON: They would have roughly working, about a hundred, a hundred and twenty a shift, I would have said. Somewhere in that region. That was the main factory. They had a separate building over the back that was a state of the art plastic moulding shop, which was, again, pretty big, but the machines were all automated, so they would run on about ... twenty fellows used to run that. But to say the workplace was about that in size, three stroke four football pitches. But you add in all that ancillary departments off from there, so it was big enough to walk around.

I did shift work. I mentioned about bonuses. You got paid for overtime.

*DG: Were you in a trade union?* No, I wasn't in a trade union because Gillette was sort of almost, well almost, it was a non-union firm. There were people that came from other industries in there that would maintain their union membership, but they weren't necessarily recognised within the company. And there was a structure within the company where each of about twelve, fourteen areas or departments elected a representative to sit on the Works Committee. And that comprised of those representatives, it would be the factory manager and probably about an equal number of departmental managers. And the minutes of that were always available ... were always displayed so you could see what went on. And if you had a problem or anything, then they would take it up. And when redundancies came about, they would be involved in the early negotiations about what the terms were, and in general, the terms were very good. If they ... like when I was made redundant, they were looking to get rid of ... I believe the figure was thirty. And the areas they were mainly after was fitters, on the machines.

*DG: Was that in 1970?*

ANON: No. This was 2002. They were looking for fitters on the production machines. Well, of course, a lot of those fellows were quite young and the money was good, and they didn't particularly want to go. It was organised so that ... They always used to ask who wants to go. Right, we haven't got enough. Then the next stage, it was put out to people who wanted to take voluntary redundancy, and the terms of that were all your names and job descriptions went up on the board, and people whose jobs were under threat of redundancy could apply for your job. And so, there was a guy who was a machine fitter, who decided he rather fancied what I did, and applied for the job and he was accepted and I trained him over a period of I think about nine months. So I went in his place, so to speak. It was always a very fair system. But unfortunately, shortly after I went they announced the company was closing down.

*DG: So the Works Committee would represent you like a union: pay and conditions --*

ANON: Yes. I mean, they couldn't negotiate over money, and they would explain the reasons for it, and it was always pretty well linked to inflation. When inflation was rampant, they got twenty-five percent increase one year. We had ways of finding out because they

always told the pensioners a month before the factory heard. The pensions were always paid one percent on what the factory got, so we always knew and the notice went up how much we were going to get anyway. But you know, when you come from an outside company, and you weren't brought up and always worked in Gillette, you got ... just be thankful for what you're getting. It's a different world out there.

*DG: Right.*

*DG: What was that? Working hours?*

ANON: No. There was a lot of Asian women there and they used to forever be talking in their native tongue and there was a lot of high speed machinery there and when you went to work on the machine and you had a job to do ... It's assembling razors, so there's sharp things as well. They'd be gabbling away, and you were trying to get them to do a certain thing, and eventually they made it that only English was allowed to be spoken on the shop floor. When they went to tea break, they could talk in whatever language they liked.

*DG: Yeah.*

ANON: But on the shop floor, for purely health and safety reasons, it had to be English.

*DG: Right.*

*DG: Yeah. I suppose that's just a change in working attitudes and culture.*

ANON: Yes. Exactly. And you see ... We have managers that come in and the sole criteria for a job, was they needed a degree. It could have been a degree in flower arranging, it didn't matter. As long as they had a degree. And these managers came in, and they just sort of started doing things where people with years of experience ... Where they used to promote from the apprentice upwards, they used to promote through the section. They stopped all that and brought these people in and they literally ... I mean, they didn't have a clue. They were probably very clever people. A bit too proud to ask, but they would sort of really dig their selves a deep hole.

And that was a particularly bad era there, you know. And I think a lot of that caused the actual closure in the end of the factory, because costs, unit costs ... I think we finished up unit costs on making a disposable razor was something like 75p and they moved the factory to Poland and they're making them for 7p. So you don't have to be a genius to see there was a lot of money being wasted.

*DG: Do you suggest that the new sort of managers didn't have as much ...*

ANON: They didn't have the background. They didn't know how to run things. An example would be ... They brought in a company that did data-logging on the machines: how many bits went in, how many bits went out. And they produced very nice charts showing efficiency and all this that and the other. And I got particularly annoyed because I was told on five minutes' notice, that I was due to go on a course that morning. Having not managed to get the work that I should have got done, done, I was whisked off on this course. And this fellow had the managing director of this company there, and he was telling us all about this equipment, and I just turned around and said "This is a load of rubbish. What are you talking about?" Well, you can't say that, and I said "Well, I am saying that because it is rubbish

what you're talking." So he said "No, no, these figures are ninety-nine point nine percent accurate" and I said rubbish. I said "Tell me how many razor blades grinding machine number four has made." He said "Getting on for nearly two million." Wrong. He said "Why?" I said that machine hasn't made one razor blade today because they're running the heads in. And I said all that does is run all the machine, no steel goes through it. But I said you people fitted a sensor for that on the run-out head. And I said it's counting every run whether there's anything going through there or not.

*DG: So it's just counting as if there was something in there.*

ANON: Yes. I said, now it doesn't stop there. In a month's time, when they get all the figures up about how many they produced this month, and then when they go and do the stock take, in the room where they kept the stock blades, someone's going to be running around like a headless chicken because we lost two million blades. I said, now that's not down to us, that's down to you and your system. And a manager, what I call a manager, who managed you from ... you wouldn't go into him and start talking like that because you knew he knew more about the job or had forgotten more about it than you knew. And you didn't have respect for people. And they didn't very often try to earn your respect, you know?

*DG: Yeah. There was no consultation.*

ANON: No. Their idea was right, and as long as they could get a nice graph on their machine, they were happy. *What was Health and Safety like?* Basically, Health and Safety was very good and almost I think over the top.

*DG: Yeah.*

ANON: But that isn't necessarily a bad thing. We were provided with ... depending on the area we worked in, we were provided with shoes, with steel-toe caps or suitable protective footwear. You were allowed up to a certain value for what shoes you bought. We went to Greenham's and you picked out what shoes you wanted. And you were allowed a certain amount. And I mean, I bought a pair of shoes and I was five pound under what they allowed us, so they were generous. We had regular checks for safety glasses. And if you wore prescription lenses, you were given paperwork so that you had a set of prescription safety glasses made. You were duty-bound to wear earplugs in the factory. And generally, Health and Safety, it was good. You had sufficient breaks and all that sort of thing, so I wouldn't knock them down for it.

*DG: I guess it's potentially a dangerous place to work.*

ANON: Oh, it could be, yes.

*DG: So careful.*

ANON: *What changes occurred there? New technology, redundancy ...* Well. Redundancy was part and parcel of the company. It sounds a little silly to say, but most people, that's all they were planning for. To get out with the big bucks.

*DG: Right. OK.*

ANON: And that included myself. By going on to shift work, I got a thirty-five percent shift premium. So providing I could keep that job for three years, I'd effectively bump my pension up by thirty-five percent. So you know, shall we say, that was your primary.

*DG: Because redundancy was quite common?*

ANON: It was quite common --

*DG: The best position --*

ANON: -- they used to have ... sort of employ people and then suddenly, they've got a lot of people here and they've got to cut costs, so ... I would have said there were certainly redundancies about every two years. The number of redundancies was very, very variable. But as the machinery got more sophisticated, they did ... they were able to cut down on ... It went from one woman running a machine, to she could comfortably run two machines. And then that had material handling systems, so you didn't have people running in with cardboard boxes and pallet trucks every five minutes. It wasn't uncommon to hear about redundancies.

*DG: There was never any grievances about it? Or strikes?*

ANON: No. People just sort of thought can I get on this one or no, I'll wait to the next one. I know it sounds silly, but that's how it was. *New technology ...* Yes, the company certainly looked at new technology and implemented it to a very high degree in the production side of things. I mean, when I left, they were doing a lot of the very technical inspections. They were doing them with video systems. There were some very clever things about. Very clever things. So they did embrace new technology quite a lot. In fact, they probably over-did it in some cases. *Were there any family links to the workplace?* Do you mean in my sort of family?

*DG: Yeah.*

ANON: Then no. I had a distant cousin that worked there, but it was a one-off.

*DG: Around here, compared to other companies, it wasn't that big of an employer?*

ANON: What, nowadays?

*DG: In your time.*

ANON: In its heyday, it would have had six, seven hundred people there. Probably, when I went, you were down to three hundred and fifty in the production area. I wouldn't know how many there were in the offices. No idea. But when you hold it up against people like Firestone, United Biscuits, you probably ... they were a bit below them. Because you had Trico, Sperry's, all sorts. *Did legislation affect the workplace?* What do you mean by that?

*DG: I guess they might be talking about ... increased Health and Safety in the training, discrimination. That would be what I think of as legislation.*

ANON: Yes. Sort of, if you like, government rules that come out?

*DG: Yeah.*

ANON: There were. They were always implemented. Again, sometimes they used to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. But they were up with the times. It didn't always suit everybody, but they were up with the times and you had to ... I think the older generation always have trouble trying to change, because some young manager's trying to tell them to suck eggs, basically. But when you look at it logically, they're doing something to help.

I mean, fortunately, there weren't bad accidents. There were accidents. But when you consider the environment that they were in, there could have been some quite catastrophic accidents. But it was a generally safe place to work. If you had an accident, you would have tried to over-ride something. Machinery was very, very well guarded. You wouldn't necessarily know how a razor blade is made, but it's a thin strip of steel, that's being whipped through a machine with grinding wheels there. And that's going at probably ... well, certainly twelve hundred if not more, blades a minute. So it's doing a hell of a speed. Obviously, if you were to touch it on top, it would really make a mess of you. But the machinery was guarded and I always said that the best guard that you've ever got is common sense. If you see a fly-wheel going 'round, you know if you put your fingers in there it's going to hurt. So you shouldn't need to guard that. You need to guard it in case someone falls. Passes out or falls. But to stop people from putting their hands in, you've got to have common sense. You don't try and injure yourself.

*DG: No. But I suppose the company has to think that they --*

ANON: Oh, yes.

*DG: They'd be liable, wouldn't they?*

ANON: Well, exactly. Years ago, they used to do a lot of hand-assembly of razors there. And they brought this little press in from America. Because America, that's where we got the stuff from. And their concept is different. Their concept is: we will train you how to use this machine, and that is how you will use it. OK? So they brought this machine in, and all the girl had to do was to hit two switches and a compressed air press would come down and rivet all the things together. And that's how it came from America. Now, straightaway, someone got hurt and they'd put an elastic band around this one and found they could work it quicker by putting in and just by going 'round like that. And they got hurt. So therefore, you couldn't have micro-switches. So we got called in at that stage and we used some electronic-sensing devices that had to have metal in. So we made this cover comes down, once the two pieces of metal went in the two switches, it fired. They found out that if they got a knife from the canteen, and put it in that one, they could go back to doing this. So that got changed and then they finished up with a frame around it with photocells on it. So if anything broke the beam, it wouldn't fire. It had to go in, come out, fire. They found ways around that. And it went on and on. To me, that is just ... I had a certain affinity with the Americans. If you've been trained how to use it, that's how you use it. Don't try and be smart.

*DG: Were they just trying to save time?*

ANON: They were probably on piece-work, I suspect, in those days. But it's how much you put a price on a finger. Mine would be rather high. Plus all the pain and aggravation. I will say on another thing with that. People, everywhere, you always get someone that's got a bad back or this, that and the other, the medical were very good with that. They brought in

physiotherapists and if you had a genuine, if you could prove you had a genuine illness or a long-term injury, then they used to do their level best to get you right. They also used to know who the malingerers were. If you were off for three days self-certificated, wasn't it I think, you didn't have to have a doctor's certificate --

*DG: Yeah, for a certain amount of time.*

ANON: Well, after a week, you used to have to have a doctor's certificate. And when you returned to work, you had to go to the medical. And you had to explain what had gone on. There was still people that could work the system, but then I'm sure that's the same the world over. I don't know if it's of any interest to you at all, I believe it's still there, there's a wonderful picture in Tesco's at Osterley and it shows Syon Lane Station, at the change of a shift, because the site of which ... Tesco's is on, is the old United Biscuits' site. And there's this picture of Syon Lane Station and it's absolutely heaving with people. It's a sight that you'll never see in that area again, ever. When you think of all the big factories down there ... No one went by car, they went by bike or walked. It must have been quite a sight at the change of a shift, to see thousands of people.

*DG: Did Dave ask you if you had any memorabilia or pictures or anything?*

ANON: No, he didn't.

ANON: I wish I would have thought of that because there was a CD or DVD sent out about Gillette's because it went there in 1930 and it had a lot of pictures of the old place. I wouldn't even know where I would start to look.

*DG: Yeah, if you come across it.*

*DG: If there's anything else you want to say about it ... Are you in touch with a lot of people you used to work with still?*

ANON: I'm in touch with a couple, but I was probably in a slightly unique position in that I was in a department of one per shift, so I effectively worked on my own. I used to go out in the factory and I'd work there.

*DG: Was there a big social side ?*

ANON: There used to be. The company spent a lot of money and made a social centre within the factory, but personally, it was a big mistake. Because if you thought of going to a function, it was like going to work. Whereas if it had been in a building away from it, it would have been better. And it gradually got used less and less. It had four full-sized snooker tables in there, so it was quite big.

*DG: Was that to use on your break?*

ANON: Yes. You could use it on your break. There was a theatre in there. The area could be used more economically for other things, so that was all finished and all converted over to offices in the end.

*DG: So what sort of years did they have the centre there then?*

ANON: Up to, I would have said ... probably from ... probably sort of, the 60s to about '95, something like that. So it was quite a big chunk, but of course it was such an enormous area that eventually it had to be used in a more profitable way.

*DG: So not a bad place?*

ANON: Oh, no! My brother-in-law lives out in Australia, and he's worked for an insurance company all his life and he got up to quite a senior position, and we happened to be out there when there was noises going on about redundancy, and I took all my pension details out to him and I said would you have a look through, and see what you think? And he looked through it, and said "I don't know how they do it," he said, "this is a better pension than our directors get."

*DG: Really?*

ANON: Yes. To be fair, it wasn't very long after that, that that scheme was closed, and a new scheme for new employees was opened up. Because when I first went there, we used to have to contribute one percent I think it was, of our salary and they matched it with two. But when I went back the second time, very shortly after I started back, they made it non-contributing because I had so much money in there. And we never paid into it, all that time. And what caused the change, was people were coming in, taking work at the age of fifty, a non-contributing pension scheme, and because they'd been taken on a bit later, they said all right, we've got to make you redundant. They made them redundant and then they got ... redundancy was full pension payment from when you were made redundant. So they were getting people who'd only been with the company four or five years, were going out with packages of many thousands of pounds. And someone said we can't do this.

*DG: No, no.*

ANON: So that's what happened. They changed it to another scheme which obviously isn't quite as good.

*DG: I guess that's why they offer good packages. So people will stay there.*

ANON: I would say there was very, very few people who left. Very few people left. It was. I was very fortunate. I went over at their expense to Boston, to the parent company. I went over twice ... three times all together. I went to Germany, all at their expense. You were put up in first-class hotels, and business flights, and to be honest, the financial package that you had was always more than generous. If you didn't go silly. I went out to Boston at one stage for two weeks and I asked my manager if my wife could come out the middle weekend on my expense, and he said yeah, fine. The hotel room you've got has a queen bed, so there's no problem with her stopping there. Take her out for a meal ... So you know, I can't knock them. I did all right with them.

*DG: That's good.*

ANON: I've never been ... I suppose it's one of the things that suits me about them. I've never had to be in a trade union. I'm not against trade unions, but some of the things that go on, from what we are shown by the television, I don't always feel that there's justification, but that only tells you what they want you to know. It doesn't tell you the facts. And I suppose that's one of the things that I was all right ... I wasn't getting ... Because I'd been out in other

companies, I think that always helped me, because you thought to yourself, blimey, what would I have had outside?

*DG: You didn't think of joining a union when you were at other companies?*

ANON: No, it was only a little family firm. There was only about ten people that worked there. It wasn't necessary, so to speak. It got touchy once or twice when they gave you a wage cheque that bounced, that sort of thing. You didn't take too kindly to, but there you go. They got it sorted out in the end, but there you go. Margaret Thomas, she's a member of the bowls club that I belong to, and her husband Terry was a life-long trade unionist, and she said to me they're trying to do a history of the Road and the industries down there. She said did you work down there? And I said yes, that's how I come to be involved.