**Sylvie’s Story...**

**Summary:** Sylvie once worked at Peak Freens with her Mum at Norman’s box and bag factory with 2 sister-in-laws and a brother. Sylvie reflects on the closure of the docks, and her time working for Southwark Council.

**Sylvie:** Well the first factory I worked in was Peek Freens (pause) I was eighteen when I went there and we used to work ‘arf past seven till ‘arf past five and if there was overtime we worked till ‘arf past six. Long hours and there was some ‘eavy lot of it was ‘eavy work but I quite enjoyed it. I first of all started in, new building as called MB1, just ordinary making up packets of biscuits sealing them at each end and putting on ‘m what they was and they used to go down a belt and someone at the other end would parcel them up.

Then I got promoted to MB2, export, that was everything up on that floor went export. But it was ‘ard ‘ard arder ‘work, there was er tins where you had to put all the assorted biscuits in and put corrugated paper all round ‘m you used to use all your hand nails every finger was done up with a bit of tape but you dun it. Went round nine girls on a table and the table went round and you all put your own sections of biscuits in, then from there I went on to export packing, I went on a machine called the LFA machine that is where the girls up that end were sitting making the packets of biscuits up, come down a belt and I was on the machine wrapping them. And there was another girl further down the end and she was packing them, and that’s where I stopped. ‘till I got married on that floor.

But I went on several other floors, like if they had no work you used to have to go up on the puddin’ floor, oh, Christmas puddin’ floor, you had it all over you ‘cause you had to scoop the tops to make ‘m flat in the basis and it’d be all over ‘ya. I didn’t like that, then I went down once, down in the bakehouse on vita-wheat, I didn’t like that it got all in ‘ya shoes, eugh, it made your feet sore (pause) but other than that I had a good time there really.

**So when you say you got promoted, did you have to have different skills for different blocks?**

**Sylvie:** They always tried you out on packets, and then if they thought you as alright on that and if another job came along that was y’know they wanted someone, a lot of it was to do with ‘ow long you’d bin there.

**Sylvie:** Well I finished up I was there, erm, eighteen, twenty-six (long pause) eight years. I didn’t go back. But then years ago they didn’t allow married women to go back (pause)

**So once you got married you had to finish?**

**Sylvie:** That was years ago. Yeah when my mum worked there.

**And what was it like to work with the machines, what affect did the machines have on your work?**

**Sylvie:** Had to be fast, you had to collect all what was comin’ down the belt and you’d have three teams, three teams of eight (pause) they’d all be packin’ ‘m, the packets, and they’d come down the belt and your job was to take everyone of ‘m, you couldn’t leave any and you couldn’t move from the machine because the biscuits would go in the machine and crush up, all crush up.

**What about toilet breaks?**

**Sylvie:** Oh you turned the machine off then, tea breaks and toilet breaks you turned the machine off and you tell the girls and then you get two what they used to call ‘m, odd, odd women used to come over with big boxes and whatever was on the belt comin’ down, they’d scoop off put ‘m in boxes and then when I come back if I went to the toilet I’d have to do all that lot and what was comin’ down the belt. Gradually they’d put ‘m on gradually and I had to

**Sylvie:** ‘Cause it was piece work everything on, in Peek Freans was near enough piece work.

**Oh, and piece work was when you got paid by how much you did?**

**Sylvie:** Yeah

**So did you have a regular wage if you had piece work or did it vary?**

**Sylvie:** It varied ‘cause sometimes we’d do overtime see? I mean it wasn’t bad money really, we earned good money ‘cause we done the hours as we used to go in Saturday morning (pause)

**What did you spend your wages on?**

**Sylvie:** Clothes

**Sylvie:** Oh and holidays.

**Clothes and holidays. Where did you buy your clothes from?**

**Sylvie:** I had ‘m made. Hilda Fitzgerald, oh she’s not there now, she’d be about hundred and odd. She used to ‘ave a ‘lil shop in Jamaica Road. Well she lived in the flat above but it was a shop underneath and I used to go there.

**Oh wow. Did many people, did many of the girls get their clothes made? Or did they mainly go shopping?**

**Sylvie:** Mainly go shopping. I only liked to have mine made ‘cause to be different.

**Yeah, and what did it smell like on the different floors?**

**Sylvie:** ‘Oh you could always smell shortcake biscuits, like a sickly smell (pause) well they used to call the girls out of Peek Freans little white mice ‘cause if they come out in their overalls.

**Sylvie:** Oh yeah, my dad swears he could smell it ‘cause me and my mum both worked there. No matter how much you washed your hands you could still smell it. He used to say ‘oh that smell’ but he worked there and all when was eighteen, that’s how he met my mum.

**What did he do?**

**Sylvie:** He was downstairs, he was one of the men that pushed the trolleys about and brought the biscuits up.

**What was the atmosphere like in Peek Freans?**

**Sylvie:** Well, I was there when; you remember when they all come over to be bus drivers, the coloureds and all that. When they all come in. and I met some really nice ones. Beryl, Jennifer, they was really good, we had a laugh with ‘m. I mean they couldn’t talk much English, properly, but (pause) yeah! I liked it there. I had some good mates up there. I had some lovely presents when I left to get married and I had lovely presents when I left to have my Susan. All bought me presents.

**I’ve been hearing about the Peek Frean’s dances, did you go to any of the dances?**

**Sylvie:** Yeah, down the Grounds. Yeah, went to a couple of them (pause) and race day they used to race and play the cricket (pause) mm

**So where did you move after you left Peek Freans and got married?**

**Sylvie:** Lucy Road, where Lucy Way’s built now. I lived in rooms. ‘is Mum give us three rooms in the middle. It was a big ‘ouse, airy, one of them ‘ouses. Beautiful ‘ouse really it was, you know, you could’ve really done it how you wanted to (pause) but then how long we was there? Five years and they wanted to pull ‘m down, do we had to get out, and we went to Lynton Road. I lived there, er, my Susan was five when we moved (pause) and how old was she when we left (long pause) well my Eddie died there in Lynton Road.

So she was sixteen.

**And did you go back to work during that time?**

**Sylvie:** ‘done anything. Went on the Council for a ‘lil while.

**What did you do at the Council?**

**Sylvie:** Only sweepin’ upstairs, sweepin’ downstairs

 **On the estates?**

**Sylvie:** Yep

**What was that like?**

**Sylvie:** Eurghh, I tell you that was deadly, ‘cause there was, they used to er have needles, syringes and oh everything, wee on the stairs, I didn’t like that job, and then I went from there to Normans (pause) I liked Normans.

**What was Normans?**

**Sylvie:** You made hat boxes, they made ‘at boxes or they made all carrier bags but for some right good shops, Jaegar and y’know all them shops, it was an old fashioned firm but that was nice I liked it.

**And how did you make the bags? What machines did you have? Did you have machines?**

**Sylvie:** Mm, there was an ‘andle, the actual carrier bags was made by ‘and, they was flat like that and you’d have a pot of glue and cardboard like that, what goes in the bottom you’d open the bag, place the cardboard in it and push that end over, bit of glue, push that end over, bit of glue, push the sides in. Then it’d, they’d rest, they’d have a block put on ‘m.
And then they’d go to the machine (pause) now I had a go on that. You had to be pretty quick on that, its massive machine but you had to get the carrier bags dead centre like that, and pull it in ‘ard, the thing would come down and you’d have an ‘andle.

**Sylvie:** It was really good (pause) how long was I there? (long pause) ‘till my Susan was about ten (pause) ten or eleven, yeah, yeah, then what else did I do? I done a what do you call it, when you put letters in envelopes? Co..

**Oh, envelope stuffing!**

**Sylvie:** Yeah

**Did you do that at home?**

**Sylvie:** No

**Oh, where did you?**

**Sylvie:** Done that over at Peek Freans, y’know one of them units

**Sylvie:** I done that for two years. Done some things in my time. Then my Susan was workin’ in a club over Wapping, of a Friday night ‘cause she had two kids (pause) and they said, well they needed someone else so I went over there and I helped her out. I mostly just got the glasses in and put ‘m in the thingy machine. But from that he asked her to do a bit of caterin’, we used to do weddings, he’d get all the food and that but we had to do all the arranging (pause) y’know on the tables and all that.

Right done that for about three years (pause) er had enough of that ‘cause that was ‘ard work, you’d be workin’ ‘till two or three o’clock in the morning (pause) and what did I do next? Oh I went er in peoples ‘ouses, two, two people I knew for years asked me to do ironing and ‘ouse work so I used to go in Brenda’s on a Monday and Debbie’s on a Friday, and do ironing and bit of ‘ousework, and that was it. (claps) that’s the lot I’ve done.

**So as well as your own housework you did other peoples?**

**Sylvie:** Well I’d do it in between

**Sylvie:** But the first job I ever had wasn’t in the factories, it was in Dulcer’s, in Oxford Street, the shoe shop. But I loved that, but I was there three years, yeah three years, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and the shop ‘ad to be revonated, so we could go anywhere else we wanted to go but I didn’t ‘wanna go anywhere else. So that was that, that was the finish of that. That was when I went to Peek Freans from there.

**So if we go back to Normans, what was the smell like? With the glue and that.**

**Sylvie:** (Long pause) I couldn’t say I could smell anythin’ in there, you never got a lot of glue just you had your own particular, y’know pallet of, but there was anuva machine there that used to do stringin’ on the little carrier bags, the string ‘andles that was good. You used to put it under, pull the thing down and when it come out it had two string ‘andles (pause) it was interesting.

**Yeah, and how many bags did the machine do a day?**

**Sylvie:** Ohh, on the ‘andles they had about twenty girls makin’ ‘m but they had to lay for so long, oh I suppose on that machine you could put about two or three thousand through the ‘andle machine (pause) ‘cause it was clangin’ down all the time and you had to have a bag in each time. That was bonus, that wasn’t piece work
You had to do so, the way they worked, you done so many to earn a bonus, so what the girls used to do, find out what it was to earn their bonus and if they done any over they used to put it on the next day.

**Sylvie:** Oh they was girls, yeah, it was good there though but we had a ‘lil staff room there where we could all sit.

**Did you have breaks at the same time or could you go at different times?**

**Sylvie:** No, I think it was ten o’clock our first break then it was, I, I, never had a break ‘cause I didn’t use to get there ‘till ten, time I got from Southwark Park School, round to Normans which is down by where Shuttleworths was they’d had their break and I used to work from ten ‘till two, but I got a dinner break.

**Yeah, where did you go for your dinner?**

**Sylvie:** Used to go home down Lynton Road, I only lived a ‘lil way down by the road. Or if I didn’t want to go home id go round the Blue, get a sandwich or summink.

**Mm, so what was it like working with the girls, what were they like?**

**Sylvie:** Oh they was nice girls, well I used to still get a Christmas card from one of the girls at Peek Freans, Rhoda, I mean they was all when I went there I was the youngest at eighteen, they was all women. And they used to like, I think mother me. They used to think they did. And she still writes me a card but she must be getting oh well old now, but they was nice girls at Peek Freans and all. Stand up for their own rights, they wouldn’t have no (pause) no nasty business, like if they though they was getting cheated or someone wasn’t pulling their weight they’d let you know. Oh yeah, you’re not pulling your weight mm, ‘cause, I mean your earning their piece work and all.

So you’re not pulling your weight they’re not getting their money (long pause) the same is at Normans. I mean if them girls kept sitting chatting and that and not sealing the bottoms of the bags we wasn’t getting them on the machine, then the packets wasn’t getting in. So don’t only hold yourself up you hold the others up and all ‘cause it a job that has to go out.

**So it sounds like you had to rely on each other to…**

**Sylvie:** (Cuts in) oh you did, yeah, well if she earned her bonus makin’ the bags, I earned my bonus on the machine, and what was her name now (pause) Ada I think it was, was it Ada? She’d earn her money on the parcels and the girls would earn their money on the putting them on the firebrights the boxes and theyd go straight out on the van.

**So Normans and Peek Freans they were factories in the community and it seemed like a lot of people in this community worked for them. What was it like, being, living in the community with these factories where everyone worked?**

**Sylvie:** (Long pause) well you got used to it, I, I mean it was like when the Docks shut we used to miss the, I don’t know the place seemed to go dead. Not that we see the men a lot but it just seemed to go dead. Peek Freans the only time you had a bit of a scuffle there was ‘alf past five when their comin’ out. They’d go their own ways and that’d be it. Normans was a little firm (pause) I mean they’d all go their own ways (pause) I mean I had two sister in laws (pause) who else was there? (pause) I had two sisters in law work at Normans and a brother in law (long pause)

My mum worked at Peek Freans when I worked there, she worked there a long time after I packed up, but she went from the factory to the office my mum, on the sliding rule, the sliding rule thing tellin’ ‘m how much ingredients to put in the biscuits, yeah she mastered that my mum, she had about eight years in the office. But she had years on Vita-wheat down in the bake house I don’t know how she stood it, I only went down there once, oh I said *please* don’t put me down there no more, but my mum never took no notice (pause) as it come off the belt wouldn’t be lined up or anythin’ itd come in at the thing like that and there’d be under, filled up, they’d have to get it up, chuck it up, I think ten high they used to go.

**Wow, so if you didn’t like working on there could you say, who did you say you don’t want to work there anymore?**

**Sylvie:** You couldn’t. If you got picked that day to go there, like, got picked to go up, up on the Christmas puddin’ floor, got picked out to go on the cheese straws (pause) that was anotha’ rotton job, that stunk of cheese, rotton cheese (pause) and out on the Solders, they used to Solder tins, if they was going abroad they’d solder the lid on top and the girls ‘ad a solderin’ iron yeah, I never done that I just used to watch her (pause) but its just if your job wasn’t runnin’ that day or like they had no orders. Not only me, they’d all, everyone would have to go, you’d all have to go in different directions.

**So you would work with different girls?**

**Sylvie:** Oh yeah (pause) but you knew most of nearly all of ‘m.

**So when you came out of work would you see the girls around, like in the Blue or…**

**Sylvie:** (Cuts in) Oh yeah, see ‘m in the ‘airdressers, used to go to Bierman’s the ‘airdressers Friday night they used to be on Jamaica Road, you’d be in there all night, my mum used to come and rattle on the door ‘’ow much longer you gonna be?’ oh they was murder the Bierman sisters, done a lovely hair though.

**So would a lot of the girls from Peek Freans go there?**

**Sylvie:** Oh yeah (pause) and of a lot of ‘m would go in the tailor shop ‘cause after, before I started ‘avin my clothes made with Hilda I used to go, there used to be a, a café down the Blue called The Montana.

**Sylvie:** And next door to it was Sidney Lawrence, he was a Gentlemen’s tailor, well at that time the Teddy Boy lot and all that was out so we all finished up goin’ in there ‘cause he’d take so much a week (pause) he’d take a £10 deposit and then your first fitting he’d drag it out you known your second fitting and by the time you got your suit or whatever it was you’d nearly paid for it, but he was a good tailor, yeah all the boys went there and all. Oh we used to go in the Montana, used to see Tommy Steel in there (Long pause) and when I think of him, he used to stand round Burney’s record stall down the Blue and no one ever knew ‘im (pause) ‘till one day he sung that ‘Rock round the caveman’ song and we’re all lookin’ at him like that and yet he only lived over there in Freed street (pause) oh

**What was it like working for the Council?**

**Sylvie:** (Long pause) Council wasn’t bad but it wasn’t the council it was the people (pause) y’know what I mean, they was the ones that was untidy or slovenly or all that, chuck anythin’ down the stairs, no I had a good guvner, I had Tommy Phillips and Andy Ansdale, they was, they used to come round, you used to say to ‘m, not satisfied with this or that and they’d come round and erm get it sorted. Council wasn’t bad, not really

**What time did you start and finish?**

**Sylvie:** Eight o’clock, only part time on there, eight ‘till one, and I used to clean the rent office out on Linton Road (pause) they asked me to do that. Lynton Road estate and Fordham Square, that was my part time job yeah.

**Oh and did you work with anyone else?**

**Sylvie:** No you worked alone that was what, that was what made me pack it up in the finish, I didn’t like it ‘cause I was, you’re a little bit looking over your shoulder all the time, a bit scared ‘cause it was a bad time really it was when they was all doing drugs, well they’re doin’ ‘m now but I mean it was, you had, you got a little yellow box like that (pause) and if you found any, er, any needles you ‘ad to pick ‘m up and put ‘m in this yellow concealed box. Oh I didn’t like it I gave that the elbow. (Long pause)

but everything seemed to, seemed to change at one time, I mean once the docks shut up (pause) I don’t know everythin’ round here seemed to change, the hospital shut up, St Olives, loved that little hospital (long pause) I think so many people they eitha moved out or, ‘cause you don’t see so many of ‘m now, I mean I used to see a lot of old dockers who my dad knew but I don’t see ‘m now and he’s just died that other one int the, the one who writ the book

**Tom Ash.**

**Sylvie:** Yeah, well he knew my dad, used to go up to my dad and ask him things about the docks (pause) yeah ive seen him up my mum’s flat

**So what different technologies did you work with, did any of the technologies change in your working life? Did you have to use computers?**

**Sylvie:** No (long pause)

**How did you get paid at Peek Freans?**

**Sylvie:** Girl would come round with a big box and you’d, well she knew your name, but as you clocked in you had a round disk like that with four, my number was forty-sixty eight, you take it off the board and put it in the box and once she knew your number was in the box, when she come round, pay out girl, like that, shed come round with all the envelopes (pause) and she’d say like your number and she’d give you your wage packet.

**And when you was at Southern Council how did they pay you?**

**Sylvie:** You ‘ad to go for it. One day in the week, what day was it, was it a Thursday we used to go? Used to have to go to the Old, the Town Hall, the proper Town ‘all and queue up for your money there, ‘cause you writ a timesheet out but you didn’t writ a timesheet out at Peek Freans.

**So you never had your money go straight into your account like most people do today?**

**Sylvie:** No, ‘s’all different (long pause) see we used to pay for a magazine aswell, they had their own magazine Peek Freans, you’d pay, I think you’d pay about 3p for that, that was the only place I’ve ever been that had their own magazine.

**In any of the places that you worked, did any of the machines change, did they get upgraded or did they use the same machines?**

**Sylvie:** Well I think the machine in Normans had been in there ‘bout hundred years

**Sylvie:** But they’d speeded them up, if that’s possible that’s what they’d done but Peek Freans was always doin’ new things. I mean that machine I was on was brand spankin’ new when it come in and they had a different thing on the tins of biscuits that go up the carousel they altered that.

**And did it affect the way you worked, did you have to speed up, did you have to do different actions?**

**Syvlie:** On the carousel I think we did we had to speed up but I cant remember now what it was (pause) how, how many you had to get out on the hour (pause) ‘cause one girl lids ‘m, then they come off as a she lidded it and they go to a girl over there with a machine with all cellophane paper like that, squares of it, she puts the tin in the middle and pulls the ‘andle down and when it comes up its cellophane, that was a good machine (pause) what else did they alter (pause) oh the ground floors over in the building that’s up this end now, right up this end, that was cheeseslets and twiglets, that was all brand knew, that was all new machines, that was the last new thing they’d done before they packed it all in.

**And what happened when a new machine came in?**

**Sylvie:** Well they’d clear the floor, all them girls would ‘ave to go somewhere else and they’d bring the machine in and get their engineers to set ‘m all up and someone would have to go on a trial on there and see how it worked, if they wasn’t satisfied they’d alter it

**And did the girls need to be trained when they came back?**

**Sylvie:** No ‘cause it was cartons, it was cartons, standing in a ‘lil cut out thing and all they ‘ad to do, well not *all* they ‘ad to do, but they ‘ad to keep up with filling ‘m and the girls at the end weighed ‘m as she skimmed ‘m off. I don’t know how much is in ‘m and then she’d lid ‘m and the same thing went on with the cellophanin’

**How did you not break biscuits if you were so fast?**

**Syvlie:** Oh! You broke biscuits!