

AN ORAL HISTORY OF BREWING IN 3 LONDON BREWERIES

INTERVIEWEE: Denise Annon
DATE OF BIRTH 1957, Manchester
PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS Stepfathers: two worked at Young's
Mother: Young's (bottling hall)
INTERVIEW LOCATION Young's Brewery, Wandsworth
DATE OF INTERVIEW 26 March 2019
INTERVIEWER: Matthew Rosenberg SUMMARISER: Celia Holman

Denise worked as a bottling operative for 20 years, and was also a shop steward (union representative) for 14 years. She took voluntary redundancy in 1997. She describes both the work and the atmosphere in bottling hall, and gives insight into worker-employer relations.

Her stepfather was a foreman at the brewery, and Denise was initially reluctant to go for an interview at Young's. Her first impression was that the workspace was "grotty" and wet and noisy, and "everyone wore wellies."

Denise worked on a production line, and all operatives regularly moved round, doing different jobs (which she describes). She very quickly learnt to lip read (they had to wear headphones because of the noise), especially swear words. She can still lip read from as far away as she can see.

Initially, it was a very hand-operated line, with workers moving bottles around by hand on the various stages of the production line. A hairline crack in a bottle would cause it to explode, and you needed to have good eyesight in order to spot cracks in bottles. Later on, special lights would assist in identifying cracks. Young's regularly gave its staff hearing and eyesight tests.

It was so wet that workers got paid "wet money" on top of their regular wages. One time, they found themselves "up to their knees" in Guinness (Young's had a contract to bottle for other breweries).

The majority of workers were women. There were some men, but everybody did the same work, including heavy lifting. Denise put a successful case together for how men and women in the bottling hall should be paid the same wage. Young's "might have been a bit slow" but once they were prompted they did the right thing. Young's were "so good" that there almost didn't need a union to represent the workers.

Staff level: around 15-20 women. Denise was always the youngest as her fellow workers stayed in the job. The job was "monotonous", but the workers were well looked after and well paid. The women were "tough and very mouthy" and would "tease the life out of" any new young male employee. She acknowledges that nowadays such behaviour would land workers in "serious trouble" but at the time it was "just fun".

The working day started promptly at 7.30am, when all workers had to be dressed in their work gear and ready to start on the production line. She describes all the different stages

of the production line. They would finish around 4.30pm, and then the cleaning team would start.

She describes various upgrades/modernisations to the bottling hall, one of which involved closing the production line for 6 weeks (they did lots of overtime to build up stock ahead of this closure). During the closure, they visited other breweries and opening of pubs. It was like "being on holiday".

Young's did have an "alcohol policy" that would involve paid assistance to address any issues. If you didn't admit to a problem, you could have been sacked, so it was better to be up front.

There was a "mess hall with telly." The Cunningham family ran the canteen providing "fantastic subsidised home-cooked meals". The woman in charge was like a "matriarch".

She describes various perks and bonuses (pension scheme, shares, BUPA membership). Several occurred around Christmas. She mentions all staff being given large frozen turkeys, some of which ended up being left by inebriated workers in pubs in and around the area.

Health and safety: as time passed, more 'shields' were put around sections of the line. The brewery "never slacked" on health and safety, and she doesn't recall any major incidents on the line.

She describes some of her work as a union rep (Transport and General Workers), negotiating pay and conditions. Young's was a "closed shop" i.e. you had to join the union in order to work at Young's.

She describes the "family" atmosphere at work, and some of her fellow workers who could be "thick as thieves" at times, and other times arguing with each other. She describes co-workers from diverse cultural backgrounds: there were "people from all over the place." There was "no racism whatsoever".

Presence of the Young's family: "well to do" and "very friendly". When she bought her first property, Young's offered her use of the firm's solicitor and surveyor gratis. She was also gifted carpeting for her house: "If you were in need, they would just help you."

Women in the workforce: in bottling hall, sales, offices and canteen predominantly.

She describes some of the animals on site - the peacock who used to chase people around the yard, and how she would visit the horses during her breaks.

A year after she started, Denise's mother started working in the bottling hall, as a 'charge hand' who would clean all the machines after the day's bottling. Her daughter also worked at the brewery, in the souvenir shop in the Ram pub.

Workers' housing: there was row of cottages nearby for which they paid a 'token rent'. Most workers lived locally.

Employees worked hard and “Young’s were there to support you.” When she was made redundant, the generous package allowed her to go back into education (she had left school at 15), and she is grateful to Young’s for this opportunity.