

INTRODUCTION

LEVI'S UNCUT

**MEMORIES OF SOME OF THE LEVI'S WORKERS
WHITBURN PLANT, 1969-1999**

In 1849 Levi Strauss, a Jewish garment-making family from Bavaria, was attracted to California where, in 1853, they invented their special hard wearing trousers for the pioneers of the Gold Rush. From these small beginnings, the famous jeans manufacturers spread all over the world, opening their Whitburn plant in 1969. In this area they became a major employer, with 600 mainly female workers at the factory at the time of their sudden closure in December 1999.



In this reminiscence project a group of women who were employed by the firm at various times generously shared their memories of different aspects of life at Levi's: they spoke of their first impressions; the work processes; Health and Safety; the social life and charitable fund raising; the importance of the union and lastly, the impact of the unexpected closure on their lives and the whole community in West Lothian. We are grateful to the nurse, Kathleen McGuigan, who was unable to attend the regular meetings, but wrote an account of her personal memories which is added at the end. I interviewed the other participants in Whitburn Library from November 2006 to April 2007. They are Margaret Burns, Jean Douglas, Rae Fergusson (nee Brown), Agnes Johnstone, Elsie Jordan, Eileen Reid, Nan Redpath, Nan Ross, Maureen Somerville and Jessie Willison. Their vivid memories testify to the tremendous hard work they put into Levi's, the enlightened work practices at the plant which offered the chance to earn good money through incentives and bonuses and the strong sense of community that existed among the women who made those famous jeans.

The WEA would like to thank Elizabeth Henderson and the staff at Whitburn Library for their participation in the project. I would like to express my very special appreciation for the dedicated support and enthusiasm of Margaret Burns who did so much to attract people along to the project. Without her this book would not be nearly as comprehensive. Thank you, Mags!

Liz Hare
Workers' Educational Association, May 2007



Levi's Memories (left to right)
Elizabeth Henderson (Curator, West Lothian Council Museums)
Jessie Willison, Maureen Somerville, Margaret Burns
and Liz Hare (WEA)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF LEVI'S

JEAN: I wasn't even fifteen - I did a wee aptitude test in the wee room putting pegs into holes. It was to show how nimble your fingers were. There was an older woman and she never got the job – she could've started tomorrow. It was in April and I couldn't start till June but they wanted to keep the job for me. I had to wait 'til I could leave school.

I remember the first night before I was due to start. I was only fifteen when I left school. It was on the Friday and I started Levi's on the Tuesday. Mum and Dad had booked to go away, it was the Edinburgh Trades. So I was put down to my Gran's at Shotts. The London Palladium was on and Gran went, "This time tomorrow you'll be getting ready to go to your work." I cried, "I'm no goin!" Gran said, "You have to!" On Tuesday I got up. My Uncle Robert had been working night shift. He walked me up to the bus stop to make sure I got on.

My first impression was it was really massive. The warehouse was the training school. I really enjoyed training with Margaret Graham. I worked on back pockets – sewing back pockets onto bits of material, and how well you done was how they graded you. I went onto waist bands and I totally loved it. I went to my Papa's at Fauldhouse – he had a phone and phoned my Mum. "I love it! I cannae wait till the morn!"



Margaret Graham
(second from right)
enjoying an American
themed 4th July party in the
canteen, 1984. Also
pictured are Kathleen
McGuigan, Jenny Darroch
and Pearl Tennant.

You were two weeks training on the machine you were going to work on. In August 1977 when I went back after my son, I said I wanted waist bands. Definitely. It was the hardest job in the factory. Your size had to be right. It could be the cutter's fault but you had to put it right.

You were Grade Four for years and years. The managers changed the thread – it kept burning. They tried to put silicone on it, to keep it moist. It was burning! The machinists couldn't fix it. We were up in arms. Ready to walk out. They couldn't get other lassies to do it. They didn't realise what we done in a Grade 4 job. It could be £10 more than Grade 3. They put us up a grade and the money went up. That was in the 80s – Jack MacKenna was manager



Margaret Burns, Maureen Somerville and Jessie Willison pictured outside Whitburn Library, (2007).

MARGARET: I'd worked in Glasgow for six years before in the C&A Factory. Then I went to Wendy Dresses of London. I had to do every part of the garment. Then I stopped to have my daughter. I took sewing into the house. I did leather flying jackets for a mail order company for three or four years. Then I took in wee bits and bobs, dresses for gala days. When Tommy was five years, in 1978/9 I started at Levi's with Jessie. When I went in that door - the noise – just so overwhelming! They gave you a wee practice thing. Trained you up about two weeks but it could take up to 16 weeks depending on the job.

JESSIE: I started the same day as Mags – it would be September 1978 – and I started on the Turning Stack which was after the Outseam. Outseam paired them up together and sewed them down. We had to turn them round the right way for Inseam and we stacked them up in bundles and the Inseam just rolled them off. The front and backs were joined together at the Outseam. They joined them and we turned them the right way and flicked them over. Then the Inseam done them and they went right onto Waistbands and things. It was dead easy – someone showed you what to do.

It wasn't my first job. I wanted a new three-piece suite so I went to work there! When I left school I worked for S. and P. Harrises in Glasgow – I stayed in Glasgow then. I left that when I was twenty. Then I got married and come out here to stay. I worked in Burton's Biscuit factory then I got the job with Levi's. I quite enjoyed going to my work every morning. The first day was a bit scary but I knew quite a few people that was there.

MAUREEN: Before I was married, I lived in a wee place called The Brigest (Bridge House). My Mother always said, "It's no Westfield, It's Brigest". My first job was a machinist at Manclark's in Edinburgh. They made the soldiers' uniforms. My Mum took me for the interview, I was only sixteen years.

Mum said, "Who's going for this interview, you or me?" I was that quiet. I got the job. I had to leave home at ten past six in the morning. I was always running late for the bus. I enjoyed it but I wasn't home till 6.30. My next job was the hosiery in Bathgate, behind the market. I liked it, then I went to Plessey till I got married. When I got married, I came to stay in Whitburn. I only nipped across the field to Levi's. I had two wee ones and never worked for ten years. I waited till my children were at school. I'd heard about Levi's. I was told they'd a waiting list of two years. I went down for an interview, roughly about Christmas. I got a phone call – thought it was a friend kidding me on! It was Personnel – would I come for an interview? I got the job cos of my previous experience. I started March 1978.

First thing they asked you to sew a straight line on a piece of paper. There were no guides on the machines then. I liked sewing. My first job was Trim and Inspect. I done inspection in the hosiery. I had a wee pair of clippers to cut the loose threads and I checked for missing stitches. I turned them half way outside in.

My first impressions – it was scary, right enough. I hadn't worked for ten years so it was quite frightening. You felt everybody's looking at you. I stayed at Gateside Road, ten minutes walk. It was a big place. I never went in the smoke room. Everyone made you quite welcome. They wanted to help you. I would still've been there if I hadn't fallen ill. I never got my twenty year award – I was three months short of twenty years!

NAN ROSS: I just stayed up the road. It was easier for me to go after the boys went to school, an that. It wasn't my first job. I was in the hosiery, through in Glasgow. When I went into Levi's, I went in as a machinist. A few year after, I was made up to Monitor then it was Supervisor. By that time I was in the Social Club. But before that, I was selling stamps, saving stamps. The girls came over with money for saving stamps – I'd buy them in the weekend and take them, same as the football coupons. A wee savings club.

My first impressions of Levi's – it was larger that I'd ever been in. The noise didn't bother me. I didn't need to go into the wee training room because I'd already been a machinist. In my opinion, it was definitely a good firm to work for. I was quite happy. They were good to us, presentswise. What we got out o' there. My son would love to take my clock off the wall – got one for my 21st! One of those china clocks. I like my clock, it's been great.

NAN REDPATH: I was thirty seven when I started. I came back from Canada. I was pregnant. I waited till Fiona was five. Before she started school, I started in Levi's - for the money, that was the reason. I was happy in our section. I don't think any of us wanted to be moved elsewhere in Levi's. We had a group. I was Band End, then I got onto Inspection. When you walked in, it was quite different from anything I'd ever done. I think I was quite scared, to be honest. Really. It was noisy and big. It took years really to make it a place. I tell you, when you started at first, everyone was an individual, everyone was for themselves. So it took quite a while to get to know people and get used to them. Quite a strange atmosphere at first. They were building up the place, of course. I think it had only opened about a year (1970). I think it was a few years before it was built up. No one knew anything at that time. Everyone was in the same boat.

If we worked overtime in the weekend, we got £1 handed to us when we walked out the door. Because most of the girls had families to think about, £1 for Saturday and Sunday was a lot of money to us. Those were the kind of things that kind of stuck in your mind at that time. If you were going out in the weekend, you got £1. We worked longer hours then. I think we started at eight and finished at five to five. It's a long time ago, it's hard to remember. But we did have an hour longer later on.

To learn things at first, it was quite demanding. We didn't have a training school then. It was just the Supervisor showed you how to do them. You sort of wandered about. It was quite a long day at the start cos it wasn't organised – it was quite poor at the start, to my opinion. So many came and started and didn't last. Every week some just walked in the door and left, didn't expect it to be like that. It was constant work. I'd never worked in a sewing factory. I was scared. I thought, "What am I doing here?!" Stuck it for twenty eight years – a big part of your life.

ELSIE: My first impressions of Levi's weren't too hot, actually. Three weeks after I started I was made redundant. They had a surplus of people, a wee lull. Then on the Friday I got a letter to start back on Monday.

EILEEN: I was only nineteen when I started (1973). I started six weeks before Elsie. You only really heard good things about Levi's – all the different schemes, the money was good. It was handy, only five minutes down the road. First I worked for Lee Cooper's when I was sixteen. I made really good money. When Lee Cooper's were threatened with closing, that was when I moved to Levi's. They had a twilight shift for a wee while. It only lasted a couple of months – six weeks from five to nine pm then I got into full time 'cos my Mam was going to watch the wean for me. They thought it'd be quick to train people up but a lot of the jobs were quite hard to learn. The lassies who worked full time didn't want to work a lot of overtime to show the new starts at night how to do the job. They found out the problem was the people during the day resented the way bundles and machines were left. It caused a bit of resentment.



Local MP, Tam Dalyell shows an interest in the LEVIs workers in the early days.

WORKING FOR LEVI'S

There were many families who all worked for Levi's. Sisters Elsie Jordan and Eileen Reid both worked on the Inseam. They were members of a family where nine relatives were all employed by the firm at various times – including their sisters Barbara, Pearl, Isobel, Phyllis and Edna, nephews and nieces James and Teresa Dolan, Brian Gavin and Lee Anne Reid, and their sister, "wee May Broom".

ELSIE: She was known as a nippy sweetie. They used to say she was strict but fair. May was the first manageress in Levi's. She seemed to expect more of her sisters, we had to go that wee bit further. One day I just got fed up and said, "I'm off". May stayed with me and we shared the house but once you left Levi's that was that.

EILEEN: I was a Training Instructress for a while. I liked it, got satisfaction from it. Then I got into Supervision. I didn't like the supervising job. I wasn't cut out for Supervision. I felt there was a lot of resentment. You were on the machines at one time and now you were telling folk what to do. It wasn't for me so I just went back onto the machines again. It wasn't really a cut in wages.



Three sisters on the Levi's trip to Ayr. Right to Left: Phyllis, Elsie and Isobel.

AGNES: I worked on the inseam – what a laugh we had! There were plenty of strikes and walkouts. Only the “staff” – the managers – got pensions. Sam announced the closure on the tannoy but we all knew already. We heard from America. There was a half price sale every two months. I was a Monitor. I wore a yellow coat and had a set wage. You had to do 100% in all jobs. I was in at the opening, at the first pair of jeans. They made shorts. The weans had all colour of cords.

JEAN: I became a Mobile – I was put in when folk were off or late. If I was working on Saturday, I brought the weans in. My son fetched bundles for me. Then there was a crèche, behind the fire station, with three meals and a nurse, subsidised by Levi's.

MARGARET: That's a flat machine, just like a machine I'd have in the house. The flat machines were the only machines that didn't have extra bits. There were different types of machine – hem legs, automatic hem legs, serge machines were overlockers, there was button and button hole, rivets and leather patches and band ends. There were four different sections and different machines in every row.



Margaret Burns pictured with a flat sewing machine from Levi's factory. The machine is now part of the West Lothian Council Museums' collection and was the inspiration for this project to record and present the story of the Levi's workers.

JEAN: There was a lot of flat machines like that. There was machines for putting on pockets but it was an automatic that done that. It would be hard to say how many different machines there were for the different jobs. When the factory started there was probably just basic machines, with none of these boards on. They would add these to help the operators.

MARGARET: That was to make the job easier. Neil Redmond, he sometimes come over to see if there was anything they could do to help you. We gave them feedback - what we think they could do to help us.

JEAN: When I first went in – it was 1970 and the factory was opened for a year – it was just basic machinery and I mean basic. But through the years you could see bits getting added. My job didn't change but maybe they made the waistband a bit broader.

MARGARET: For the waistbands, we had a four-needle machine, four threads. It done a lock stitch, a chain stitch. (Photo NB 21) There's twenty waistband machines in one line, in one section.

MARGARET: Waist bands was one of the hardest jobs in the factory. Other people on easier jobs were getting more money. We were slogging our guts out. All Grade 4s were folder jobs. You had to shape the waist band 4 inches wide – put it into the folder to get 2 seams. You had to be accurate around it. We had so many problems. We were made up to grade 5 so we got more money.



Back pockets whizzing through the hemming machine one after another.



Liz Mitchell, on her waistband machine, wearing the blue T-shirt all the operatives received on the “Working for the Millennium Day”, 20th June 1996.

MARGARET: I feel lots of men hated it because the wives were bringing in more money. If they'd seen how we worked! I'd been a machinist for forty years and could do all the jobs in the section. So I was made a repair hand fixing the problems that occurred within the waistband line such as narrow bands, flawed bands, missing bands and other problems with the pants. I got my average for the job which I'd build up to £8.50 an hour. You didn't discuss wages as everyone's average varied on how hard you had worked to build it up.

You didn't get up to speed for a long time, took sixteen weeks to get to 100% on waistbands. Then some did 150% - depended on the speed you worked at. It was hard going. You were dependent on getting the work – had to keep the bundles coming. The lassies tried to help. You did 100% for a week and 110% for two weeks and 130% for three. After six months you got the President's Award. The lassies tried to help you keep up.

MARGARET: Some things we done for a laugh – when someone left their machine to go for a break, we'd take five pair of jeans off our bundle and put them on the unsuspecting machinist's bundle. After she had sewn the bands on, we took them off her bundle and said, thanks very much. They usually said some choice words but saw the joke and we all laughed. It was like a big family and made you want to go to your work – happy times. But there was sad times and crying too. The day my dog, Jason, died I couldn't see my machine for the tears so for Health and Safety reasons, Jack McKenna sent me home. "I know it's like one of the family". No money was deducted from my pay. Another sad time I recall was when we found Janette McComb (Supervisor) had a brain haemorrhage. The whole factory waited for news each morning for about a week but she didn't make it. It's one of the saddest days I remember in Levi's. There was not a dry eye in the factory. She was such a lovely person.

JEAN: We were a happy family. You'd never get that now. It was a happy place to work. You can't say anything bad about it. It did change through the years - got more fun – no as strict. They didn't pester you to do over your 100%.

MARGARET: Jack MacKenna (Manager) had a big order to get out, he'd ask you to do two extra bundles a day and we really worked hard to help him out. He was well liked by most of the employees and knew every one by their first name which was quite an achievement with hundreds of workers in the factory.

Sam Whitfield (Manager) was going to America to meet up with the big brass of Levi's and asked me to dress a doll (Pepe) in denim jacket and jeans, a small miniature of Levi's which he presented to the boss of Levi's. He said he was over the moon and gave me a large bouquet of flowers "with thanks".

JEAN: They cried Margaret and me "Haud it and Daud it"! – we were aye together.

MAUREEN: At Levi's, I went from one job to another. I started in March and only got my diploma for 100% in July 1978. I was too particular! You got a pen. You got a certain time to make up your 100%. There were sixty pairs of trousers in a bundle. I checked every one – they went from me to the Audits. If they picked three repairs, you got the whole bundle to go through again. You possibly got three bundles back in a day. If you got three of the same repair – say you got a slip stitch (if the back didn't catch the front) – you had to go back and recheck. If the machinists hadn't picked up the slip stitch or there was raw edge, you had to recheck. Or you could be lucky and get none. There were about twenty lassies on my job.

The way you got your 100% - they put someone with a stopwatch to see how many you could do in a certain time. Three or four others were timed on the same job. They got the average. When I started 100% had been decided. They timed you when a new job began. If you didn't do 100%, they came up and hassled you. The training instructress came up and helped you if you had problems.

The different stages of the work were:

- Cutting Floor
- Prep
- Serge Front Panels – I done that after hang pockets.
- Hang Front Pockets – you got the pocket lining for one leg of the trousers. The next job sewed it.
- Closed Pockets
- Turned Pockets – you turned them round and done the fly – I done repairs on that.

The factory was split in two – the fronts were down one side and the backs on the other. Then they were joined up. The scallops were done by hand – I was fascinated by that. Then they became automatic. The pockets did, too.

The new machines came in. You didn't make the same money with the automatic. At first there were more repairs – curly seams. You got Time and Study to time each bundle – to say someone can do that in quarter of an hour. Everyone was up in arms at that cos with the automatic you couldn't go any faster. When you weren't automatic, you could set your own time.

NAN REDPATH: It was stressful in a lot of ways. You had your family, too and you didn't have allowances, then. It was your choice to go out to work and we accepted that. You couldn't say, "Oh, my child's ill and I'm not going to work" because that was a poor excuse. I was lucky, my Mother stayed along the road from me.

The money kept us on. No one can say we went there cos we loved it! Later on, when we knew what we were doing, we had good times, let's be honest. Great times. Because of the company. I like to listen to the young ones. I still see them. Angela still comes to see I'm alright, takes me out at Christmas to do my shopping, things like that. I got on great with Sam (a Manager). Met him once in Hamilton, that Delucianna place. We met Sam a couple of times there and he says to me, "What are you doing here!" "What the - are you doing here, if it comes to that!" Said I was going back on Saturday. He got us a taxi to bring us there and back. These were the kind of things that he done. People didn't realise. You never said nothing about it.

Levi's helped my children get to University cos I had the money to let them do things I couldn't have done. I didn't go all the breaks when I worked the machine. Most people worked very hard. You played hard and you worked hard for what you got. We took each other's worries. These were the things that made Levi's, not the work. There were some you could talk to. That time...

MARGARET: I went out on Thursdays till late. Came into work on Friday. I never missed a day.

NAN REDPATH: I brought you a roll. You had your worries but it didn't stop you laughing.

MARGARET: The banter was good.

NAN REDPATH: Band End - it was a sitting job at first. It was a machine with a knife. When you pulled it, it cut the material. When they done the two machines, they done away with the knife. It could sometimes tear. It changed to a double machine. When it went onto standing, I was put on Inspection. Sometimes I came in and helped on Band End on Saturday if they were desperate. I could do the repairs. Your work was important but the most important part was your company.

It took its wear and tear on you. I got a hip replacement. I stuck it out. Agnes had to help me off the bus. It was up to yourself, as long as you done your 100% - no need to do any more. But you weren't going to stop. You made your pressure - felt you had to do more than 100%. Later on, the younger people were content to only do their 100%. They had a much more relaxed attitude to it.

MARGARET: But they weren't keeping a house and a family. It was only spending money.

JESSIE: Everybody had their ups and downs but everybody was quite nice, they were very helpful. There were some bitchy folk too but you just ignored them. Somebody would report you for doing more bundles. Another job I had was Pair up. That's when the backs and fronts came to go to Outseam. Well, I had to pair them up and make sure the back was the same as the front. Sometimes a bundle got mispaired - it was two wrong sizes. So I had to go through all the bundles, see who had the other mispaired bundle, rip it out. They were supposed to check it. That was when I was a Mobile. You got £3 a day for being Supervisor, big deal, wasn't it? And I done Serge panels.

Sometimes there was no work, there was nothing pairing up, so they clocked out and went on their average. They'd maybe come back and start to do their work but they hadn't clocked in and were still getting paid their average, so somebody would report them for it. You were getting paid twice. I got the blame one time. I didn't report them but I knew who did report them. She found out eventually it wasn't me and she bought me a caramel wafer! When you got reported, the Supervisor would come and discipline them. You could get your books, depends how serious it was. There was aye somebody watching. Getting paid for your tea breaks, was cheating, too.

MARGARET: Going in early in the morning before eight o'clock and working was cheating. Sorting out the bundles. You got waistbands 28 inches and 42 inches and you got paid the same! The difference between 28 and 42 was 14 inches. There was 60 pairs of jeans in a bundle so you were sewing an extra 70 yards per 60 pairs of jeans.

JESSIE: I refused to sew one Monday. Because I was on one colour of thread. I kept getting 38 inch legs. They just said, "Give them to Jessie." So I just went and sat in the smoke room. There was nothing they could do about it 'cos I had clocked out. I wasn't getting paid. My supervisor seen my point of view. That was all sorted out. Mary Wallace done some. There were a lot of arguments about leg lengths and waist sizes. Like in belt loops, you got paid extra for the bigger sizes and in inseam and outseam and waistbands, you got the same whatever.

MARGARET: There was six different colours – green, stone, black. The threads changed for the different jeans.

JESSIE: I done the serging before the automatics.

MARGARET: We serged the tops of the pockets after they were outseamed. The different jobs were: fly button and button hole; stay notch; pair up; outseam; top stitch; turn and stack; inseam; waist band; band end; button and button hole; hem legs; rivets; leather patch; belt loops; trim and inspect; audit; pallets.



We had a blue and white checked overall. You can see (in the photo) we were absolutely black. We got supplied overalls. You washed them yourself. You waited at the top of the road and the bus picked you up. It was only £1.20 a week cos we stayed in Whitburn. It was a subsidized bus. I dropped my weans off at half seven and the bus picked you up at quarter to eight. You started at five to eight.

MAUREEN: Everybody who worked for Levi's, their sons and daughters went about with school bags made up out of denim. They made them out of denim waist bands. They lasted forever. Folk said "They work for Levis!"

For your 130% , if you kept it up for six months, they took you out for dinner. And you got a watch as well. I got my 130% on Trim and Inspect, Hang Pockets and Serge Panels. That's 20 odd years ago. We went to the Whitdale. They gave you a night out – there could be ten or more, up to 60. At the end they picked out the names to get a holiday. I never got a holiday. Just as well, I didn't have a passport!

MARGARET: You got a wee pay packet. You checked it without opening it. The corner was missing so you could count your paper money and a perforated front so you could count the coins. Everyone had to open a bank account when they changed the system of payment.

MAUREEN: There was no bank in Longridge so you had to come to Whitburn.

MARGARET: Holiday pay was worked out on the average for 13 weeks before so you really worked to bump up your average.



Elsie Jordan, Treasurer of the Community Involvement Team, with Tommy Burns, Head Coach for Celtic FC, after presentation of cheque to Livingston Boys' Club.

GMB - THE UNION

The Levi's workers were represented by the General and Municipal Boilermakers' Union. Elsie Jordan, who was Shop Steward and Convenor, describes the changes in labour relations when she was working for Levi's.

JESSIE: You didn't have to join but most folk did. You got ten minutes to a quarter of an hour once a month. Mind you'd a wee corner and everybody met in your section. A wee talk – ye could put your point of view.

NANROSS: My redundancy got taxed. The union never did a lot. I met Sam down the road – “Leave it to me” – in two days everything got sorted.

ELSIE: I went into the union – the General Municipal and Boilermen's Union. I was Shop Steward and then a Convenor. When I went into the union at first, it was confrontation all the time, to tell the truth. I was thirty eight last time I went in (to work for Levi's) in the 70s.

In the 70s, management were there to manage, end of story, and weren't really prepared to listen to anybody. But after a couple of years it changed. I was lucky enough to get a manager called Ian Murray. He was into Open Door policy and he made it quite plain that as far as he was concerned, the biggest asset was the people. Whereas before it was Them and Us. But he introduced the first name. It was educating the Staff who were “up there” and we were “down here”.

EILEEN: It was aye the Staff and the Workers but they didn't look down on you. They were in there to earn a good day's work, just like we were. They weren't any better.

ELSIE: Before that, Staff could more or less do what they wanted. If you hadn't spoken to them in the manner that was proper, you were into Personnel and it was one-sided. They asked you what happened but you may as well sit there with your mouth shut – whatever you said was going to be ignored. That's my opinion. That's why I admired Ian Murray so much 'cos he took the two of you in – plus the union rep – and you could sit and discuss it. It made a big difference 'cos you started to respect people, I mean mutual respect. It actually opened my way of thinking cos before that it was “them” and “us”.

I got off to go on different courses if any new legislation came out. Plus Levi's themselves used to have meetings in Brussels twice a year and I had to attend. They paid for it. They used to get all the factories together – from Dundee, over in France. We all came together in Brussels. I'd a good manager in Sam Whitefield. He was happy to cover my expenses as long as you got receipts. You could never tell the others what you got.

EILEEN: Some of the lassies got took up to the Dundee plant if they were struggling with difficult operations. But you hadn't to talk about your wages or conditions. I wouldn't want anybody to know my wages. Some of the jobs were good paying and some weren't. However hard the lassies worked, they couldn't make any money.

ELSIE: They started bringing in machines that were doing it automatically. But they'd a problem when seams were four deep. I don't think there was an operation that went smoothly. At first they kept it an option, whether to go automatic. When it came to my niece Lee Anne, they decided to change the rules and I decided they weren't! They did go back to the original agreement.

EILEEN: Everything we had, we had to fight for – and we appreciated it. But the young ones walking in were abusing it. We'd already fought for it.

ELSIE: The old time sheets – you took a ticket and stuck it on a gummed sheet. When you went for a smoke, you got five minutes. Took you two minutes to get there. But you got fly! As times went on, you negotiated. It was quite intense, If someone spoke to you, you got agitated – the garment came out the folder. Sometimes you used to talk a wee bit French!

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Working in a large factory will never be free from risks to the health and safety of the employees and Levi's was no exception. At the end of this booklet, Levi's nurse, Kathleen McGuigan adds her unique perspective.



Nan Redpath's retiral, showing Anne Waddell in the background with blue plasters on her fingers.

MARGARET: Health and Safety played a big part at Levi's. They subsidised your glasses – they were quite good that way. Obviously 'cos of the lighting, people's eyes got damaged. You had lights on your machine for threading the needles. The dye from the denim caused problems as well. The bath water would be blue! If you were going for a night out, you put your hand in bleach to take the dye out.

MAUREEN: I remember the time that woman got her finger caught in the button hole. Once the machine started it couldn't stop. Girls had rivets in their fingers, they had to go hospital to get needles out.

RAE: There was friction burns – you'd no skin on your finger tips. I can mind my Mother cutting my food – I couldn't stand the feel of it. You didn't wear plasters cos they drew you into the machines. I went to bed with gloves on. Kathleen (the nurse) put on New Skin.

MARGARET: There was lumps where you used to ram your hands off the folder. The friction of the thread gave you a "beard". Fifteen years in, we got an air thing to take the oose – the fluff - from coming up at us. Years down the road, they gave us ear plugs. There were hearing tests all the time, in the hearing booth, to see if there was any damage. But it was difficult for you to adapt to the ear plugs, working in the factory for years. You had to take them out to hear instructions. You learned to pick up things over the noise. Shows how you can adapt. There was the aches and pains – sore backs. They taught you exercises – so you wouldn't make a claim!

JESSIE: They were quite Health and Safety conscious. We had a mask but you couldn't breathe with it on. There were ear plugs. When I was on the turning stack, I was blue, all down my front and arms. I had to go and scrub myself every night, and I mean scrub, to get the dye off.

NAN REDPATH: There's days you were tired and fed up and wished you'd never seen the place, but that passed. I very rarely took a day off . Only twice – once when I got my finger slashed. It was a knife in front of the machine. Just one of these things, you maybe just lost concentration for a short time. That was all changed after that. A lot of changes (to increase safety).

MARGARET: There should've been a guard. Neil Redmond came up and modified things and made a part to make the job easier or safer.

NAN REDPATH: A lot of changes for different machines. It was years before they realised the hearing was getting affected. The earplugs – it was difficult to adjust to them. They found out stress-related injuries. There were exercises for your shoulders.

MARGARET: Sometimes they gave you five minutes in the morning to do your exercises.

NAN REDPATH: They did help. Some materials were very hard.

MARGARET: Your hands were so sore you would cover them with Vaseline and wear cotton gloves when you went to bed.

NAN: To try to keep them moist.

ELSIE: Levi's were strict in Health and Safety. They brought in a fan and gave us rest breaks – ten minutes every hour just to get a drink. You weren't supposed to smoke - some did in the smoke room.

EILEEN: In the toilets to begin with, then the canteen, then the smoke room.

ELSIE: I used to get awfully angry – one person said it was too smoky for her! They even put in extractor fans – there was that much tar, they didn't work!

EILEEN: I stopped smoking – you didn't realise how stinking it was.



Levi's Smoking Room decorated for Christmas, (circa 1998).

Left to Right. Isobel Gavin, President of the Social Club; her sister, Eileen Reid; and Chris Kerr.

ELSIE: Once May had to pick up a severed finger – management had to do that. First thing you done at night was blow your nose 'cos it was that choked up with the fibre. At one time they were going to get masks. They were there if you wanted them but they were too hot and restricting.

EILEEN: The machines were awfully hot. But you couldn't please everyone. When you opened a vent, somebody complained they were getting a draught. It was hard work. That's what's wrong with us today – arthritis in the hands – and people died young. The majority was cancer. Makes you wonder.

THE COMPANY: SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Levi's liked to celebrate the development of the firm in Whitburn with special events. They were also very progressive in the regular training and motivational sessions they arranged for their employees.

MARGARET: Levi's 25th Anniversary was June 1994. We all brought in our photos. We got an extra half hour for our lunch. There was a big cake. It went to charity.



JESSIE: But it felt no different – we got no more money! The 20th Anniversary was a bigger occasion. A dinner with wine and a disco in the big Forum halls in Livingston. You took your man with you. The bus picked us up.

MARGARET: And in 1996, there was “Working Towards The Millennium” when we got our blue t-shirts. A buffet with cakes and juice.

MAUREEN: There were tables outside the factory. In the drive we had tents up.

JESSIE: A big marquee.

MAUREEN: A film – telling us about the certificate. We were due to get a lot of money in 2001 – one year’s 1996 salary.

JESSIE: Jenny Darroch said it wasn’t worth the paper it was written on.

MAUREEN: If we worked for the next three years, we got a year’s pay in the millennium. (The closure came first) It was to stop bad attendance. There were quite a few bad attenders.

JESSIE: You’d to get people in your section to keep up to target. We flung that out – told the supervisor.



Levi's 25th
Anniversary,
June 1994.
Staff in the cafe
marked the
anniversary by
bringing in
photographs.

MARGARET: After they built the extension, there was a downward trend. They tried to automate it. Folk were made redundant. There was a giant machine from Germany for spreading the fabric and cutting the jeans out. Many employees from the cutting room floor were allocated new jobs.

MAUREEN: And there was the Share Plan. We got shares in the company.

MARGARET: I sold mine to buy my son, Tommy, a bike.

JESSIE: They wanted to buy the shares back years later. The Haas family wanted the factory to belong to the family. Most folk had sold theirs to the bank – they were out for the money.

MAUREEN: I still have two, worth about £1.27.

JEAN: There was the Aspirations course. You didn't have to go. You got paid for a day off work. You went to work then the bus took you to Hillcroft. You got your lunch.

HEALTH AND SAFETY PILOT SCHEME

The idea of a Health and Safety scheme within a section came from an Aspirations Experience meeting in Whitburn where the sub group were discussing ways of making all employees more aware of, and to accept more responsibility for health and safety issues within their own section.

A pilot scheme was set up in Assembly 3, designed to involve and encourage everyone within the section to become more involved in the area of Health and Safety. Initially, a weekly meeting was held between the Health and Safety Representative for the section, the Section Supervisor, Mechanic and a volunteer Operator. General topics for discussion were for example housekeeping, preventative accident awareness, dangerous behaviour, fire regulations and evacuations, etc.

Since the pilot started in May of this year many valuable points have been raised and discussed. Operators have expressed a great interest in the scheme and their input has been very constructive. Accidents within the section have also been reduced, and due to the success of the pilot, it has now been extended to the Prep section. While still in the initial stages of the scheme, we wish the Prep section every success.



Our picture shows Assembly 3 Supervisor, Jenny Robertson, Mechanic Alan Ross, Safety Rep Margaret Johnston, together with the volunteer Operators who have taken part in the scheme to date - Liz McMillan, Lynn Murdoch, Sheryl Hunter, Lynn Reid, Joyce Gilmour, Jana Brannon, Susan Liddle, Sandra Nimmo.

Article in the Levi's 501 Tabloid (in house news sheet) describing how a group of workers taking part in an Aspirations course went on to develop a scheme to improve health and safety in their section.

Nan Ross's son, Alan is featured in the report. Alan Ross served time as a mechanic until the closure. His wife also worked at Levi's.

MARGARET: One off each line went. You played games and things – with Lego and quizzes. 1994 was Training and Development.

EILEEN: The last course we done was Diversity about not miscrying anybody – getting on with people. Then they shut us down.

ELSIE: You came out of the courses with a different outlook. I felt I came out a stronger person. I think that's where Aspirations and Diversity helped. After that people were more likely to come forward and say, "I think this and that" – which I think is brilliant.

EILEEN: It was to make people not selfish, to make you think what you're going to say.

ELSIE: It made people more vocal. You went about for an hour being blind, to see how many people would come to your aid. Oddest people came to help you. You depended on someone to get your tea.

THE CANTEEN AND CHRISTMAS

JEAN: There were subsidised meals.

MARGARET: They made Christmas dinners for you at the canteen. The staff served – they dressed up. Sam, the manager, wore an apron and fancy hat. They had a disco playing requests and an extra half hour for dinner. At Christmas you got a turkey and a hamper, everything you'd need for your Christmas meal – every single person – and they raffled so many off for old age pensioners. You put the OAP's name and address and I won one for the woman downstairs. You got quite a few things at Christmas - your hamper with wine and a mug with the year you had just worked.

JEAN: The regular meals were good. Soup, chips, the salad bar and filled rolls and cold meat.



Jean Fleming (far left) and Pearl Tennant (right) pictured with Santa at the Levi's disco, December 1984.

MARGARET: Sometimes it looked really good – you knew you shouldn't have took it but you did!

At Christmas I took two nights staying late to decorate the rafters over the machines on the line. And I came in early at 7.30am. I got a row from the head engineer and Health and Safety 'cos there were live wires and he asked me to be very careful.

When we finished it looked great. Everybody looked forward to Christmas.



Christmas at Levi's! On the left, waist band machines; on the right, band end machines.

THE SOCIAL CLUB AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The employees at Levi's had a busy social life with many regular events, outings and parties often organised by the Social Club. They also raised large sums of money for a wide range of charities through their Community Involvement Team – the CIT.

NAN REDPATH: The girls gave me a night out when I left. It was after work and my sister said they'd take me out for a meal. We went into the bowling club for a drink. My daughters were with me. Walked in and lots of people were there! I couldn't believe it when I walked in. All the lassies were good to me. Margaret organised it...

MARGARET: Cos Nan was there all the time I was there. I used to collect for everything. I went down the line. I was the repair hand. When I didn't have a lot of repairs, I used to go for collections – for the decorations, the lucky dip (photo).

NAN REDPATH: I remember my 20 Year Award. Told Sam I wanted a television for my grandson. Everyone wanted gold bracelets. When I was retiring, - know how he buys you a necklace or something – I wanted a driver, for the golf! Also bought me a set of Rennie MacIntosh glasses. See at Christmas, I got presents from all the lassies on the line. I got presents from the Supervisors.

MARGARET: When it was your 18th, your 21st, your engagement, you were getting married, you were having a baby, a special anniversary – you always got a present from every girl in the line. There wasn't one that said, "I'm not putting to it". Even if you didn't talk to the person, you still put in!

NAN ROSS: I was in the Social Club when I was Supervisor. There was quite a crowd, Pearl and Margaret. The best part that I thoroughly enjoyed was the kiddies' parties, going for all their toys. We went through to Glasgow.

MARGARET: Every Levi's worker, doesn't matter how many children, they all went to the party. All sat on Santa's knee for photos to be taken and received a fantastic present.

Whitburn

Sam then addressed the Whitburn people - whose destination was not too far away ...their celebration was held in a marquee which had been erected in the car park; a Dixieland Jazz Band played; there was a man on stilts for further entertainment ... and Lunch - burgers, coke, chicken and all the trimmings - was served on the lawns in front of the plant. It was a lovely sunny day, and if you can picture the scene..the plant could easily be mistaken for 'Tara' and the whole event a scene right out of Gone with the Wind.....



June 13th 1996 – a red letter day ! Popular Plant Manager, Sam Whitefield addresses Whitburn workers on the Global Success Sharing Plan. This was one of a number of simultaneously timed events in the 3 Scottish Levi's plants in Bellshill, Dundee and Whitburn to announce that provided a cumulative cash flow objective was reached by 2001 all Levi's employees would be presented with a cash payment equivalent to their 1996 base pay.

NAN ROSS: Babies in the afternoon with the parents. The older ones later. We had the discos. We done well. We had all the bus tours, the dances. Going home on the bus – everybody singing, carrying on.

After retirement, I got invited back, if anyone was retiring. Used to go down a lot. Any nights out, they always involved you. I can't say too much. The Social Club done a lot for hospitals, took presents, TVs.

JESSIE: The Social Club had a Hallowe'en Night and everyone dressed up. I'll start with Easter – you had the Easter Bonnet Night in the canteen. You brought your own bottle. You got prizes for the best Easter Bonnet. There was the same at Hallowe'en. You dressed up and whoever was best dressed got the prize. Then they brought out the no smoking so it was no longer in the canteen, ended up in the bowling club.

We paid 50 pence a week for the Social Club. They also took off your insurance and bus fare.

WHITBURN SOCIAL CLUB NEWS

PAST EVENTS

8th July -

Western Night

Canteen meal served by canteen staff, a great night was had by all.

13th August -

Blackpool Trip

4 buses left Whitburn Plant for trip to Blackpool. A great time was had by all but unfortunately, they had to come home at Midnight!! Much to their sorrow.

27th August -

Ayr trip

Good response - but the weather was rather poor - however everyone managed to enjoy themselves.

16th September -

Cabaret Night

Held in Canteen
Another Good Night!!!

28th October -

Halloween Night

Held in Canteen

1st Prize -

Kirsty Rankin

(See You Jimmy)

2nd Prize -

Mary Wallace, Liz Taylor, Shirley Seagust

(Diana Ross & Supremes)

3rd Prize -

Shona Swan, Jackie Cefferty (Black & White Minstrels)





**A Fancy Dress Social Night (circa 1996).
Elsie Jordan as 1920s flapper with Louise Robertson as Dick Whittington.**

ELSIE: When I worked for the Community Involvement Team (CIT), the system was for every £1 we collected, Levi's put in £1. In special cases they put in three to one. We put the dialysis machines into Bangour, the bronchoscopes, the beds for the burns unit – I was fascinated with them. It was like a ripple of air so the body never touched anything solid.

We actually got letters in from people who wanted our help. There was a committee of us – about eight to ten – who decided which projects we'd put forward. We tried to be as fair as possible. The majority of money came from Whitburn.

Before Christmas we did a carol thing – it was a pub crawl. The people were really good. They'd offer you a glass of beer in every one of the pubs you went to. I was never a beer drinker! In summer the bed push was normally a mechanic. We'd the bed done up as a pram. Wee Tony McGlynn from Coatbridge, a wee chubby guy – wore this nappy thing. The "babies" went into the pub and got a half pint of lager and we'd go collecting for the charity with our boxes. One year, by the time we got Tony back, we couldn't get him out of the pram!



The LEVI's Community Involvement Team Road Race, June 1984. Liz Carson, Line Manager, is pictured on the right.

JEAN: Mind we got the wheelchair. And money for Stanmore House and Whitburn Academy.

MARGARET: You volunteered for CIT. It was a lot of hard work and you'd to go and see the charity you were going to help.

JEAN: There were raffles once a month. At the time of the extension to the factory, I won a new alarm system.

MARGARET: I was desperate to win the overlocker (to finish off the inside of your seams). I kept buying raffles and raffles and raffles – and there wasn't many people buying the raffles. Every time there was money, I bought raffles!

JESSIE: It was Friday, all you done was give away money!

MARGARET: Eileen Reid won the overlocker. She said, "I'll never use it." So I bought it off her. And that was it. I still got it. It works good.

JEAN: I won a holiday in Finguerola and I took Mags with me. It was for your performance over all the year. You'd to keep your target up - you didn't have to drop down. Your repairs and attendance all came into it. So many in each section went in for it and there were only one in each section won the holiday. And I taen "Haud it!" (Margaret).



**Mags and Jean in Finguerola. Circa 1988.
Jean had won her President's Award for overall attendance and production.**

JESSIE: I won a rocking horse. The weans were too big for it. I put an ad in the paper for £50. Joanne, my niece, bought it.

MAUREEN: For your 130%, if you kept it up for six months, they took you out for dinner. And you got a watch as well. I got my 130% on Trim and Inspect, Hang Pockets and Serge Panels. That's 20 odd years ago. We went to the Whitdale. They gave you a night out – there could be ten or more, up to 60. At the end they picked out the names to get a holiday. I never got a holiday. Just as well, I didn't have a passport!

NAN ROSS: Every five years, ye got something.

MARGARET: For my 15 years, I got a tumble dryer. For 5 years and 10 years, jewellery.

NAN ROSS: My retirement, I think everybody was there – at the Welfare. A big, big night out. The presents I've had out o' that factory! Sam and Jack McKenna (Managers) were great. Sam made a farewell speech. I got a beautiful present. I stayed till 65 years – an extra five years.

MAUREEN: Mind the Polish lady, wee Liz, they made her retire at 60. At one time they made you retire at 60.

NAN ROSS: We were the beginning of the ones that got to stay on. When the government put it up to 65, we could stay on.

MARGARET: The Social Club arranged Country and Western and Hallowe'en nights. The Easter Bonnets Parade. I've photos of us with Indian hats in the canteen. There was aye something - two or three times a year. And trips for the kids once a year in August. We went to Ayr sometimes or Saltcoats.

JESSIE: The kids got £2 and a bag. We took them to the amusements and the beach.



A trip to the Buddy Holly Show in Glasgow. Amongst those pictured on the bus are: Jenny Darroch, Gertie Love, Sadie Boyd, Margaret Burns, Jessie Willison, Alice Anderson and Grace and Cathie Flanagan.

MARGARET: We all met up at the end of the day – in the pub next to the car park.

JESSIE: Agnes Johnstone was always late for everything! Every trip we went, we waited for her.

MARGARET: We saved up money every week and it started with me, you (Jean), Ann and Bobby for weekends away. We did that for a couple of years – then more people joined – fourteen. Ye wouldn't like to see the photos! We dressed up as punks and everything. Remember the Glenboig, Health and Leisure - the men went to the bookies and the pub. We went to the Oxfam shops and dressed up in all the stuff we bought.

JEAN: We started doing the Mystery Tours. Somebody booked up and you hadn't to tell. We hired the Fauldhouse Community Centre mini-bus – it was cheaper. We'd to name ourselves as a group. When we drew up at Ann Waddle's, we'd t-shirts made up. Everybody had to dress up.



Having A Carry On! Margaret Burns pictured at the “Working Towards the Millennium Day”, (1996). “Not a typical Day.”

THE LEVI'S CLOSURE

When Levi's closed the Whitburn plant in December 1999 without any warning, it came as an enormous shock to the workers. Although the firm invested £1million in helping employees find new work, there was, and in some quarters still is, considerable bitterness.

EILEEN: It was like an extended family. You kened everybody. That's why they were disgusted at the way it closed. Elsie phoned me to put on the news.

ELSIE: I'd booked up to go to Tenerife. I heard when I came back on the Friday. On Monday there was a big meeting with a man from Brussels. He said people can leave now if they want. I didn't expect that from Levi's.

EILEEN: There was people greetin'. A week later, I just burst into tears. It was a big part of your life. One minute you were in with hundreds of people you'd kened for years and they just cut you right off 'cos they could make more profits somewhere else. They were desperate for Inseamers in Dundee. They phoned me. I wasn't interested. None of us were.

ELSIE: You never had a chance to say goodbye. Dundee fought them every step of the way. They went to court, I'm lead to believe. I went into Hall's, the sausage production line. There was a different attitude and a different pay there.

EILEEN: People never settled in other jobs. A lot of the people who did all the moanin' and groanin' about Levi's – you can talk to them now and they say, "I wish it was still open". They didn't realise what they had 'til they lost it.

JEAN: We hoped it was a rumour. I just got married 3rd September and learned I hadn't a job. I didn't get much help from Levi's to get another job. I didn't want to get back into a factory – wanted a change. My sister was going to an interview at Mitsubishi and roped me in as well. I hated it. Only worked for a week when I fell and smashed my wrist (not at work).

A lot of people were disgusted at the way they were treated at the end – by the higher up ones, in America. Folk still feel bitter. That's how we're not getting a lot of people (on this project). They don't want nothing else to do with it. There was no sign we were in trouble. It was on the news – on the telly. The manager didn't know till the morning either. I had just got married and moved from one end of the village to the other end of the village. It was somebody says at the bus stop – we're getting made redundant. It was when ye were on the bus ye realised it was true 'cos everybody was talking about it.

LEVI REACHES END OF THE LINE

Report
by Anne
Caine.

Workers accept closure of doomed plant

The Courier (2nd December 1999) reporting the imminent closure of the Whitburn plant and loss of 586 jobs.

JESSIE: Nobody clocked in. Julie (a Production Manager) explained it was the first she kened. They gave us 90 days notice. It was 2nd December (1999), we got our redundancy. I didn't come back after Christmas. Said I wasn't coming back. I had my pension. By the time I got my tax off, it wasn't worth it.

JEAN: Your redundancy went on your average. You could work it out.

MARGARET: If you had been there for a short time, you got a minimum of £2000 redundancy. In December they asked some operators to work on to finish the backlog. Although they had their redundancy they were paid their average.

JESSIE: They were building a factory and a village in Mexico. It was cheaper there. Folk went out to show them how. Then we got the repairs back again.

MARGARET: There was a factory in Bothwell in Strathclyde after ours. A group of girls went through every day to fix the repairs. There were a lot of repairs.

JEAN: We were quite particular. It was good quality work we did. Two or three of our mechanics went to Dundee, as it was a smaller factory.

MARGARET: Over the 90 days (notice), they brought in the Job Centre staff to interview you. They set up in the canteen. They done a portfolio for you – they done that for us – ye took that to your new job. I didn't work for six months. 58 years when I finished – six months on Job Seeker's Allowance - £50. I wanted a sewing job because I'd been a machinist all my life. They couldn't find me a sewing job. They offered me a shop job. I said, "I don't want one". If I seen 59 I'd ring up 95! She said, "Are you dyslexic?" I said, "No, old age." I went to Transcal in Livingston to make cloth seat covers for Halfords. From there on to leather seat covers. It was hard work. I got half the money I got at Levi's. There 'til 60 'til I retired.

When you walk down the street, you still stand and talk to the Levi's workers.

ELSIE: When they decided to close Levi's, they asked certain people back. I was standing in the queue in the canteen. The last Personnel, Fiona Shanks – only there a year – she turned round and seen me. She was shocked, says "I didn't think they'd invite you back!" Levi's felt that our family was there when they started the plant – my sister put the back pocket in the first pair of jeans - and it was right there should be one there when it closed.

MAUREEN: I left in 1997 so missed my redundancy. I had health problems. They could only hold my job for a year. I would've definitely have went back.

NAN ROSS: I don't care what anybody says, it was great firm.

Anne Nicol, she and Kim, when they got made redundant, they opened a sewing machine shop along the road. Levi's gave them help. They've got a rare wee business, the Sewing Box. The mechanic, Craig Valentine, makes overalls up at Polkemmet Road.

My son and daughter were at Levi's as well. It was a good place to work. My son came out as a mechanic, went in as an apprentice. He's doing well. His wife, Elaine, was a machinist as well.

MARGARET: It was a family-orientated firm. My daughter went in at 16 for Job Experience, in the office, filing. They gave her a reference for her filing then she went on to get a job with Mr Aitchieson, lawyer in Whitburn. Then Tommy started as well.

JESSIE: I was going to work for another year and pay my mortgage. It quite suited me. The money for retirement was nothing like you got for your redundancy. A lot were not too disappointed.

NAN REDPATH: The closure was a shock.

MARGARET: A lot of shops shut. The paper shops, Galloway's buses were affected and other small businesses.

NAN REDPATH: The likes of my hairdresser. It made a big difference to their business. Most of us, up to then, we had a wee bit extra, so we went and had our hair done.

We had so much work around here. Then the pits closed, then BL (British Leyland) - everything seemed to go.

It had its good moments. I don't think you remember the bad.

KATHLEEN'S STORY

*Kathleen M McGuigan – Industrial nurse for Levi's, Whitburn,
June 1977 – September 1985 (approximately)*

I came to be employed by Levi's, as their nurse, quite simply because my mother died unexpectedly – and I found it very difficult to get over this. My mother-in-law – quite worried about me – saw an advert for the position in the local Courier, and encouraged my husband to get me to apply for it. I did apply – then never heard any more about it. Weeks later, speaking to someone whom I knew worked in Levi's, I asked if the nurse's position had been filled – she said that it hadn't. There had been about 24 applicants, all of whom had been interviewed, except one. This candidate had not completed the form with personal details like name and address!!! That was me. This was a Wednesday evening. On the Thursday Margaret Wilson went into the Personnel Office and informed the P O who the missing candidate was. I had an interview on the Friday, and started the following Monday. It was only going to be for a year (in my mind) – but I stayed for 8 and became the longest-serving nurse in Levi's, Whitburn (I believe to this day).

In Health and Safety legislation, there is no requirement for a manufacturing business to have hospital-trained nurses. They must have trained first-aiders, whose certificates also must be updated every 3 years to allow them to continue applying first-aid. However, it is a good PR exercise to employ a trained nurse, particularly, as in Levi's case, they contracted one of the doctors from the local health centre to give medical examinations when hiring new employees. It was my job, in this situation, to work up the prior notes for each employee, eg, blood pressure, pulse, respirations, urine sample, etc, and to do an eye test, and colour vision test.

It was also quite a nice introduction to new employees, who were usually youngsters and often quite nervous, and so it was an opportunity to reassure them and set them at their ease. I was practically the first part of the induction period and would take groups of new starts on a tour of the plant, and also advise them of the upcoming medical. I also had the responsibility of advising them of all the pertinent Health and Safety issues in relation to their machines, and their working practices, and also about their responsibilities to themselves and their fellow employees in relation the H & S Acts. In this way I got to know, really quite well, all the new starts who were employed after me, in a non-threatening, non-authoritative way and this enabled me to build up very good relationships with most of the other employees in the plant – and to this day it is great to bump into former colleagues and friends with whom I worked. At the time it was a great place to work, with some really very hard working people.



**Kathleen in the
Nurse's Room.**

Nobody could fail to be impressed when walking through the swing doors into the machine room. In 1977 there were over 300 sewing machinists, and the buzz, the hive of industry, the noise of the constant humming of machines in that enormous, barn-like room, spoke immediately of the sheer effort of labour that was going on there. You cannot get that amount of effort without some penalty.

The types of injury that regularly presented to the nurse's room were mainly minor, but nevertheless, painful. This was particularly so for the operators of inside and outside legs. It was necessary, when sewing these seams (pushed at high speed through the teeth and needle – I don't know what else these parts would have been called) for the operators to use both index fingers to fold in the seam and feed it to the gadget that took the material through the sewing bit. The speed of the operation literally would lift the top layer of skin from these two fingers – leaving friction burns.

Some of these operators would be sewing in excess of 12,000 inseams or outseams a day. It was particularly trying in the winter, when the frost made the denim particularly hard. I would try all sorts of things to ease the pain. Liquid skin, micropore tape, blue (food) plasters. But for many of the operators it was very important that they could feel the material, and so they just had to get on with it. I felt helpless many times. Denim skelves were also a major irritation to many of the girls, and yet again just one of the hazards of the job. Sore wrists from repetitive movements required support bandaging; buttons through thumbs required removal of the poor operator to Bangour General Hospital, and it was my job to be the driver, and so got to hand out loads of comfort and sympathy, there and back.



Once though, I had to be driven to the hospital with my two hands clasped tightly round the wrist of one of the mechanics, and holding it aloft in the air. He had inadvertently managed to wrap half a pound of steel around one of his fingers whilst modifying a blade in the mechanics' workshop. The blade had not been secured properly and somehow the whole thing came adrift and all sorts of bits of metal ended up in his finger. The head mechanic ran us to the hospital and he had to go into the AE theatre to advise them just how to remove all of that metal without doing further damage. The poor mechanic was kept in, as he required plastic surgery to his finger. These kinds of incidents occurred only very rarely and it was mainly the fingers, hands, wrists, as well as the usual colds, sore throats and so on that made up the day.

Levi's management very quickly discovered that I had other, non-nursing skills, obtained in an earlier life when I was an office worker. I had shorthand, typing, book-keeping certificates and they soon decided that I could be gainfully employed in other areas of the work-place. So, although anything to do with nursing, first-aid etc, always took precedence, soon I was the one called on to key-in letters, reports and so on for the Plant Manager, Personnel Officer, Plant Accountant, Production Manager – as well as do my own Accident Reports, Medical Records. I never wearied. Another wee job that came my way was looking after the plant cars too! I had to take them for servicing, tyre changes, filling with petrol, getting them valeted. I quite enjoyed that, as it took me out of the Plant, and I loved driving all the different cars. I never worried about anything nasty happening when I wasn't there as there were always plenty of first-aiders – and funnily enough – nothing ever did.

I used to relieve the Receptionist at lunch-time – just another wee job I had and so also learned to use the switchboard. This was great fun in the beginning as I would inadvertently cut people off, put them through to the wrong extension, or just end up with a total mix-up. However, everyone was very patient with me and I soon learned to deal with all the lights on the board correctly.

One time at reception one of the young lads came in from his lunch to ask me to come quickly to see one of the other lads. They had been playing football and it was a regular occurrence for one or other of the team to have gravel injuries somewhere on exposed skin. The lads played in the car-park and so were always hurting something. I used to pretend that I was having nothing to do with their injuries as these were not work related, and used to huff and puff at the boys and tell them to stop being nuisances. However, this lad looked really anxious, and after my initial, customary response, I thought I better take a quick look. Yes – this was something else - two broken bones through the skin and muscle of the forearm – and shock. The lad was taken off to hospital, by ambulance this time, and ended up with steel plate and pins in his arm. He could have nothing for shock, as I knew this was going to involve an operation. Football was stopped after that (for a good time anyway) as the Company was not insured for this activity. I was at that lad's wedding a few years later. His lovely wife was also a Levi's employee. And now, many years later still, I have had both of their boys in front of me, in classes in school, where I was the teacher. Amazing.

The Community Involvement Team was a great innovation of Levi's which allowed us to put something back into the community. Levi's either gave us £2 or £3 for every one that we made ourselves (I can't quite remember). We used to hold raffles, make tablet, sponsored events, all sorts. We would have bed-runs down Whitburn Main Street, with all of us dressed up in costumes, and collect money from people on the way down. The bed would be donated from Tippethill hospital if I remember correctly but it would be such a good laugh doing the runs and we must have raised thousands over the years for good causes. I think I still have my CIT badge. I remember once we had to go into a competition with other UK CIT teams to win quite a large sum of money for something local. Each team had to present a really good case for why your team should win. Even to this day I feel a wee burst of pride in our team because we won, and a children's home in Bathgate was given loads of outdoor equipment, bikes, and many other goodies. That was a great day.

One day, I remember, one of the Paediatricians from Bangour came to our plant to receive a cheque for the purchase of prem baby units. When he was being taken around the plant, he asked how many pairs of jeans were produced. 77,000 pairs was the reply. Was that in a year? No – in a week! He was well-impressed as well as very grateful for the cheque.

Another memory I have is of a lot of ‘suits’ – top management from British Leyland, London, arriving in the factory one day, and being given a tour by our own top brass. Leyland Bathgate were having a very poor time of it with lots of aggro between workers and bosses, strikes, lay-offs, walk-outs – you name it, it was going on in that plant, just a couple of miles down the road from where we worked. Well those men walked through our plant, and you could hear nothing but a solid hive of industry from start to finish. It is reputed that one of their managers told ours that if the workers at Bathgate would only perform half as well as they were witnessing in Levi’s, from mainly women, then Bathgate would be secure. Sadly it was not to be – but Levi’s Whitburn was going from strength to strength, and were the best, most efficient production plant, not only in Europe, but in the whole operation, at that time.

One thing I do remember though – was when a contract was going through the lines, and something was wrong with it. Invariably, one girl after another, who found her way to the nurse’s room for whatever reason, would tell me that there was something up with the material, or the cut or something. However, the production target had to be reached for the week, and the contract would be shipped on time – regardless of the operators’ misgivings, and there would be many. A week or so later, back would come the shipment to be reworked. How the girls would moan at the supervisors about how right they were. Nevertheless the garments had to have their seams unpicked, and the jeans sewn again. I usually quite enjoyed the unpicking bit, because I would go out, sit on one of the lines, and help unpick garments – listening to all the gossip. I loved it and still have my ‘quick unpick’ at home.



Christmas Eve at the Levi's waist band machines with Sharon Bradley, Jackie Mackay and Marion Johnson.

The social life at Levi's was brilliant. We had Easter Bonnet 'do's', Halloween 'do's', Christmas 'do's', Any excuse for a 'do', 'do's', events for our children, open days, all sorts. Then there would be weddings, silver weddings, birthdays, sadly – funerals too. This was a happy, thriving plant at that time, and everybody knew not only how to work hard, but how to play hard and enjoy themselves too.

Eventually – however – I decided to retrain so went to university, got my degree in Business Management and went into teaching. My one and only school was Whitburn Academy, which I love, and guess what? I have taught children of the youngsters whom I put through medicals all those years ago – and I really enjoyed telling the kids in my Business Management classes all about those times and all about those hard-working Levi's girls. It was indeed an honour and a privilege to work with them.

