

# The 'World of Work' at Crabtrees

By Mary Baker



1956, and having left school at the age of fifteen and a half, I commenced a full time secretarial course at Walsall Technical College, where I stayed until March 1957.

During that course, the group I was in were taken on visits to different companies to see what the world of work was like, with the prospect of possibly finding a job. As I lived in Streetly, it was thought Birmingham might be a good area.

I cannot remember all visits, but two of them were IMI and Birmingham Royal Mint. IMI impressed me because not only were we shown around the works and offices, we were also introduced to a Telex machine (which seemed like magic). The Mint was also a fascinating place. However, as I would have to travel by three buses to get to IMI and two to get to the Birmingham Mint, my parents decided Birmingham was not a good idea.

My father knew a lady named Barbara Bache, who worked as a secretary at Crabtree's, and as Barbara had taken an interest in me, she said she would ask if there was a possibility of a position there. She sent a message to say the Personnel Department would like to interview me for a vacancy for a junior in one of the drawing offices.

When I arrived at the office entrance of Lincoln Works, I was greeted by the uniformed Commissionaire. It was all a bit daunting for a youngster.

I was taken to Personnel Department for my interview (I cannot remember the name of the person who interviewed me). After a question and answer session, I was asked to take some dictation and transcribe it into a typewritten document. Then came a typing speed test. The lady who supervised, was watching to see if I touch typed. (*What a difference to the acceptable two finger typist of today!*). I wondered if men were tested so stringently when they were interviewed, or was it just for the ladies?

Following these tests, I was taken to meet Mr Middleton, the person in charge of Control Gear Drawing Office.

We had a good discussion, but I was trembling, as he seemed quite aloof and very formal; I was terrified he would think I was not suitable. At the end of the interview he said Personnel would let me know if I was successful. My immediate thought was, 'I have not got the job'.

However, a few days later I received a letter asking me to commence work just after Easter 1957.

Suddenly I felt very adult. I now had a job, and my mother ensured I had suitable business-like clothes. I left the full time course at college, but continued my studies by evening classes, which I attended four evenings a week.

I started work in the drawing office as junior to Molly Flaherty, Mr Middleton's secretary, which meant I not only had to take shorthand and type for her, but also from other people in the drawing office. Sometimes, Mr Middleton called me for dictation. I trembled each time as he never seemed to smile. I ran errands and had to learn how to use the plan printing machine which was the responsibility of Gary Parkes and David Donaldson. It was quite a different world for me having to work with men and women, as apart from junior school, my senior education was at an all girls' school, I was a 'Girl Guide', and the college course was entirely made up of girls.

Mr Middleton was a strict man, and most people were in awe of him. If he thought the office was having too much chatter or a laugh, he would stand up and peer through his office window with a look of disgust on his face.

I also remember working with Mary Jeffries, Margaret Howes, Jean Handley, Keith Watkins, Roy Spencer and Margaret Beech.

The whole drawing office experience was fascinating for me, seeing the drawings originated, then being turned into actual products manufactured at Lincoln Works. Perhaps this particular office was the best place to start a career because it gave me the opportunity to see things from the beginning. The draughtsmen designing, the tracers tracing those drawings, and then being printed for use by the engineers in the factory.

When I arrived for work each morning, the first thing was for Molly to take dictation and instructions for the day from Mr Middleton. Whilst this was happening, I would do the filing of the previous day's work, go round the office to see if the draughtsmen needed any typing or errands, and if any stationery was required it was part of my role to collect it from the Stationery Department.

When Molly returned to her desk, she gave me my day's instructions.

Being able to visit the different departments in the factory helped my understanding of how electrical products, which one takes for granted, are produced. I looked at light switches, and plugs and sockets, quite differently. Though I will admit I never understood the larger industrial switchgear.

In order to find my way around, Molly first took me on a tour of the offices, which was an education in itself. I tried to understand the functions they all played in the administration of what went on in the factory. How important it was that everything synchronised; the sales, the orders, the recruitment of staff, the designing of the products, the accounting. The whole organisation of ensuring it all happened correctly and at the right time. It was a large learning curve for a youngster just starting work.

Another treat was waiting for me.

I often called at the company's telephone exchange, and watched the operators answering calls. I saw them plugging long cords into small sockets, then pressing a lever which rang a telephone somewhere in Lincoln Works. I wanted to have a go, and one of the ladies let me answer a call, and with her guidance, I 'plugged in' the cord, pressed the lever, told the department who was calling, and finally put the outside line cord into the appropriate 'factory' connection socket. I was pleased with myself. However, I was not sure I would want to be cooped up in that small telephone exchange every day.

It did not take long for me to settle down and find my way around the whole factory without a 'guide', for it was part of my job to deliver memos to the different departments.

On my tours of the works, I was amazed by the noise of the machinery in some of the departments. The hand presses in the Press Shop were operated by ladies in their floral aprons. (*Strange I should remember the aprons*). I was surprised to see so many ladies, and could hardly comprehend how quickly they worked. The Metallurgical Laboratory reminded me of the school laboratory but on a much larger scale. The foundry was another department I found interesting; I could not understand how those men worked in such incredible heat. Everything at Lincoln Works seemed so vast. My head was buzzing.

I well remember when I saw, for the first time, the square flat light switches. I was impressed, because in my home we still had round ones, which protruded quite a lot. I thought how modern the flat switches looked.

Learning about the role each department played was quite a challenge. I remember both Control Gear and Switch Gear departments interested me, because I was learning a new use of the word 'gear'. Previously I had only associated gear with a car!

At school and college, especially for girls, we were not really prepared for the experience of a manufacturing situation. My college training was focussed on gaining office skills, but I soon learnt that it helped a great deal if one can understand the work of the company. It all made more sense if you knew a little about what was being dictated or even when just copying from manuscript.

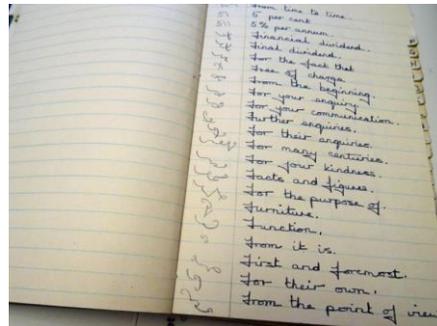
I was really enjoying my work.

Lunch was taken in the staff dining room, and afterwards I sometimes walked into Walsall town centre, or in the summer, I might take a stroll in the Arboretum.

When it was time to enrol for the September 'commencement of college' to continue my studies, the college suggested that to save me attending four evenings a week, I could ask for day release from my job. I asked Mr Middleton, who said he would enquire with Personnel. The answer was that only apprentices were allowed day release. I could not really understand this because I was always being asked about the course I was on and the results of the examinations I had taken. Those were the days of, 'It's a man's world.' Girls did not become apprentices at Crabtrees.

After two enjoyable years in Control Gear Drawing Office, and because I had gained my RSA S11 certificates in Shorthand, Typing, Advanced English and Secretarial Duties, I was promoted to Works Office, working for Eric Whitehouse. I was now ready to go forward with my career. I still continued my studies because my aim was to achieve S111 level.

### Shorthand book



The End

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