

Britain at Work Interview with Mary Williams on 5th September 2010
by Kathleen McIlvenna

If we start chronologically, we should maybe start with your working life, what age you started working.

I started working at 14. I came out of school and I got a job. We were orphans. I was the oldest one. My wages were 15 shillings a week at that age. I remember 14 shillings of that went to my mother to help her on the farm and help her have some money. 30 shillings a week was what we had to live on so the other 14 that I gave her was very important. I worked in a British restaurant in Derry in the cash office and I was there for a while.

Did you say you worked in the cash office?

Yes, I worked in the cash office where they took the money before you had anything to eat. That was about all and that's where I did my first job.

So was it near Derry you grew up then?

Yes, we were seven miles outside of Derry. There was 2 buses a day, one at quarter past 8 in the morning and the other one at quarter past 6 in the evening. That's all we had. No one had any cars. My main means of transport was a bicycle when I wanted to get anywhere and we had to go 50-60 miles on a bicycle and really think absolutely nothing of it. Everybody was doing it. So I went to a secondary school in Derry and that secondary school was for shorthand and typing and some other things and I got past a few certificates and I thought with any luck, I can get another job. At least you'll get some paper work to help, but no jobs were available for Catholics and that's what I was. You would go in to ask them or get in and be interviewed and the interview would finish up with "and what religious denomination are you?" and you'd answer them and then they'd say, "We'll let you know". You never never could get a job. So I ended up writing to my uncle in America and at that time, I was reading all the time. My head was full of the pictures, my sister and I used to go to the pictures - Saturday night was our big treat and used to see America...so important, so big and we were so small. So I wrote to my uncle and asked if I could come out there. He took me there. A lot of years I was there, 6 or 7, in America. He sent me to school there. I went to university there.

So you were in New York?

Yeah. My uncle got me a job. He was working as a manager at a big hotel and they had managers for everything, managers for transport, managers for goods. So he got me a job working for a hotel in New York in the front office there. I didn't value it at all. He was a very strict man and I was curious to see New York and to go places and there were so many don't do this, don't do that jobs.

How old were you when you were in New York then?

I went there at about 15, 16 and I remember coming into it. Coming over on the Queen Elizabeth and seeing it. Everything was a dream and you were seeing what you saw in the pictures. To get that ship, you had to cross over here to go to Belfast on the boat and then come down to Southampton and it was like something...it was kid stuff really for me. I remember coming in to London here and getting whatever train it was at the time to go on and in the carriage, there was a man with a lot of gold on. It didn't mean anything to me, it just looked nice. And anyway, the next place I saw that same man, he seemed to have a lot to do with the catering. During the time going down on the train, I remember telling about the amount of different ice creams I liked. So the first thing that man did

was make sure every ice cream I wanted, I got. It was quite an experience, the boat. There were a lot of Irish immigrants on it and they kinda looked after little people like me. Then I met my uncle in New York.

What were the wages like in New York?

Oh it was fantastic wages. I remember the first amount of money I got was 32 dollars, whatever that is in money. And then it was a question of getting some decent clothes to wear. The American clothes compared to the Irish clothes were very very far removed from each other. That hotel in New York was amazing. 104 storeys. No it wasn't, it was quite near the empire state building which was 102 and it was just up the right and then Macy's was down the road. It was a panorama of what was about. And Broadway was just up the road and Times Square. So you could see all around. I'd only imagined this and there it was.

So you worked on the front desk?

Yeah I worked on the front office. There was a whole row of offices and my job was on a teletype machine. That's the job I did and that's the money.

So what were you teletyping?

Don't ask questions like that! That was so long ago I just don't remember.

How long were you there then?

A couple of month's maybe? Not a long time because you get restless feet.

What were the hours like?

I think they were just office hours, I don't think it was anything unusual that I worked. And the man in charge of the office was an Irish man and he must have been the man that my uncle consulted to get the job in the first place. I remember thinking I really wanted to see New York a bit more. But don't go to Harlem. There were a hundred and one 'don't do's' and every one of them was getting on my nerves. So one day I went up and said I wanted to give my notice. And then the manager called my uncle. I wanted to get somewhere else. I did try a lot of different work there. You could get a job easily. The very fact that you were Irish would get you a job there. They had a very good reputation, the Irish there. They were hardy and reliable, honest workers and their reputation went in front. You could get a job. I can't remember what the next thing was, but while I was there, I worked in restaurants.

What did you do there?

Waitress. You had to come out in front. To be allowed out onto the floor, there was an inspection every morning and no slips could show below that uniform. That was very important. I think the hotel in new York was quite into it too because you there was a lot of Spanish people employed there and I remember when we used to go to get something to eat and there might be a big long counter and those Spanish people could take an order and they could shoot the plate and it would stop right in front of you. They didn't use English; they'd use their own language. They were very hasty tempered. Everybody that worked anywhere where you would come into contact with the public, you had to pass a uniform inspection on a daily basis. Clothes, hair everything. Blokes had to be fine shaven. But it was a good lesson. I remember going down below the hotel, where all our

wardrobes were kept and whatever we had, and one day, an argument started between two Spanish men and they were in the catering staff and in a second, they were throwing knives at each other. And it was fast. The hotel detective came down the stairs with a gun. He pointed it at them and said you're out of here. That's the first time I'd ever seen a gun. So that was an experience. Also, on Independence Day, it was a special 4th July. You never realised the size of the place – if the lights went out, how dark it would be. I remember being kinda scared when the lights went out for a second. Also, at the hotel, people on the desk taking the bookings would have to take note of people arriving with no luggage. There was one man came minus his luggage and he wanted a room at the top of the hotel. What did you think he was going to do?

Jump.

Jump off. That's what he did. He jumped. It was frightening. But New York was a fantastic place to live.

How long were you there for?

Let's say about maybe 3, 4 years, maybe more. I was wandering around from job to job whenever I felt like getting in and looking at it and seeing what they were doing and what the money was. In every instance, it was money. How can I get it? And the final thing that really interested me most, you know on television, you could see millionaires, but the only way I could see it was on the pictures every Saturday night. So I wanted to see if they really existed or was it just a fantasy. And they were there. Myself and another girl decided that we were going to have a hunt around to try and get jobs in these big houses, Fifth Avenue. We'd just been kids dreaming. And sure enough, we got a job. Both of us got employed. We were like a network of skivvies, you might say. They were so so good to us, millionaires. I remember I hadn't a clue what all the spoons and knives and forks were for and I had to follow a butler round the table and know what all these little things were for. They already had a cook who'd been there a lot of years and the lady of the house said to me, "Mary do you know how to wait on tables?" and I said no I don't and she said before my guests arrive, you're going to wait on me alone. It was a long table and she said "I'll teach you". In the meantime, the cook taught me. You could learn quick then if you wanted to. And so much beautiful things they had. So much silver and so much things that were magic for us to look at because we were lucky o have a few spoons and a knife at home. But they had everything. They were so good to us. Whatever they had on that table, they shared and we had exactly the same thing. You had to work long hours there. The money was very very good because we weren't paying living expenses you see. I ended up part of my time working somewhere which is now preserved territory. That's Newport, Rhode Island. Rockefeller's were neighbours. There was a magic circle of America's top brass and we were their servants. And every house was full of us. I remember one season, we served them all year long, and they wanted to treat us and they had yachts moored along there. They took us out on the yacht and the type of table we would serve them at, they sat us at. And they put some of our uniforms on and they served us and took us nearly to Bermuda. It was magic. We were so homesick. The family at home, no brothers and sisters. Loneliness was eating us, literally eating us.

Is that what brought you home?

No it didn't. That was only part of it. I ended up going to Massachusetts. There were big factories there, great big dress factories. They wanted workers. They'd give you a week to learn. They didn't want union in there at all for whatever reason. At the time it meant nothing to us because we didn't know enough. But they weren't keen on union anyway. I remember getting myself a job in there and then they'd give you a week to learn. They were power machines and they were so fast. I got sacked by the end of the week. They said you can't work if you're not fast enough. But somehow or another

that angered you and set off something else and I went straight from that place to another factory. I ended up supervisor on that line. My operation was P16. I never forgot that. The fact of getting sacked acted like a kind of trigger for some strange reason.

So you were making dresses?

We were making dresses. 500 dozen dresses. The weather in the winter was very cold there. If a union had got in there, they might have made them do something and you couldn't afford to make a mistake. You couldn't be seen to have anything like a health hazard. If you had an accident, the best bet was to go home and pretend you weren't feeling well because if they found out, they would say you were accident-prone and you couldn't admit to anything. I saw somebody's finger caught in a big needle and it went right through her and we said quickly, quickly, get her out of the factory. That's the safest thing. If you wanted to be employable, you couldn't cost them no money. It was quite an interesting experience so it was.

How long were you there for?

Let's say maybe a couple of years, it might be even less, I'm not 100% sure. That's looking back far too far. We were living in a place where Franciscan nuns were and they ran a boarding house for us. We had a lot of different nationalities there. My best friend was a Portuguese girl, Elsie de Santos was her name and she used to take me home. We had big appetites and they wouldn't feed us that well at the boarding house and she would say, "Mary, you're coming home with me, my mother will cook for you". And she hadn't a word of English and we could have a conversation. I never intended really to leave America, but something happened at home and I went home. My sister got sick and I only have one sister. I have four brothers and only one sister. I decided to go home again. I had a return ticket to America and I didn't say anything, but I remember about the time I was thinking I was running out of time and I was going to just leave with the clothes on my back, my mother said to me I know what you're going to do and I'm asking you not to do it. But I had to be going. I took the bus anyway and I went to Derry. But I didn't get on the train to go to Belfast to connect to the boat here. When you go away from things, you're always looking for the bright lights. So I was home a while then. Pining really. And then I saw London Transport advertised and my mother accepted that, strange enough. It didn't seem so far away. You could take the trouble to go back and forth. London Transport, that's how I got to be here.

So was it advertised in Belfast?

It was advertised in the Belfast Telegraph and the Derry Journal and also advertised in all the leading papers in the south of Ireland as well. They collected girls from all over Ireland. Then we went for interview in Belfast.

How did you apply? Did you have to phone up?

You were sent an application form and they assessed that and then you had to have a medical test. That's if you were in the running. So you see their doctors and you had to be physically fit for the job. 55 of us passed the test and 55 of us were met at Euston station by London Transport people and taken in their coach out to Elstree.

Did they pay for your transport from Belfast?

They paid, we didn't pay for us. They told us that we would be trained at Chiswick and sure enough we only had a couple of weeks training. They took us out round the area they were going to employ

us in and in the case of me, and in the case of quite a few of the rest of them that I knew, we were taken round this area here. My job was from Edgware bus garage and at the time, they were very short of bus conductors because other jobs would pay more and this job had unsocial hours. Anyway, they brought us to Elstree and I had a very very nice place to live there. My room was room number 4. The buses absolutely fascinated me and they still do, dunno why. I still have a fascination for the look of them things. They used to repair the buses there and at a certain hour in the evening, the buses would go out like in a train, and we would wonder where they were going. I remember my nose against the glass watching them buses going. We had a good canteen there and we had a lady in charge of it. She was our warden or something.

At the hostel?

At the hostel, yes. And her name was Miss Warburton. Miss Warburton got 55 of us with all different accents from different parts of Ireland. She was a London woman. A very nice person. She had to live on the premises. We used to have music on at night and there was one particular song that she said about it, if I hear the sound of Father Murphy at 2 o'clock in the morning, I'll call the mental institution to take me away! Father Murphy was a famous one for us, it was like a rebel tune you see. That was our favourite song. We were all slim and light and 55 of us had different coats and 55 dresses that you could borrow. The wardrobes had locks on them but the same key for every lock so we had access to any wardrobe to take anyone's coat. I remember getting a black one and I never laid eyes on it. You could never trace where it went.

So were you all women?

All women, yeah.

All in your twenties?

All in our twenties.

Was the advert only for females?

I don't know. I can't answer that. But it seemed to be all women. I don't remember any men there at all.

And were you all to be conductors?

All conductors, yes. So they took us there to Chiswick and put on us on the buses to show us what they looked like. You used to see all the pubs. At that time we were carrying very heavy pennies and you'd be trying to get rid of the pennies so you'd get the driver to stop, barge in to the pub and get the money changed into the light stuff and also it was easier to count at night, you see. London Transport was an exceptionally good employer. They had their own sports clubs, people would talk to you if you got a bit depressed or something had gone wrong, you know. They had a fantastic atmosphere in the garage. You felt comfortable in it. At that time, buses had been missing off the road before we came and we were on them buses and the buses were running again. And somehow, my bus was 140 and that bus started at Mill Hill and finished at London Airport. And that Mill Hill, that's a council estate down there and the people were very humble. It felt right for them and for you. There was a feeling of camaraderie. It was both between the driver and the conductors and between the people who were catching the bus. There was a fantastic feeling of being at home, being right in the middle of where you wanna be. And you used to get a load of school kids you know. I used to quite like that. This accent again, they used to laugh. They used to all run upstairs

and it was a real problem to collect the money off them. But your job was to collect it. There might be 30 or 40 of them tearing around and you could hardly get them to stop. We used to have fun with them. And then we had the teddy boys with the long jackets and the sleek hair and they would run up the stairs. They would go to The Queen of Hearts, which was a pub just here, cos that was the place for them to be. And they'd come on and run upstairs and separate as they got on and each one would say "he's paying". And before you'd sort it, the bus would be there. You couldn't get the money. They had the staff bus. It used to pick us up at a quarter to 4 in the morning.

What was your working day?

See, the working day was shift work. What I loved about the job, really, was the shift work. It meant that 2 weeks in every month, you would never do the same hours twice, you would never collect the same wages because different hours have different wages. You'd never see the same people and very regularly they'd change the route so that you'd have to learn another route. If you liked variety, we had it.

So a bus came and picked you up at half four from Elstree?

No a quarter to 4 in the morning! That was the first one. There was one that came at quarter to one at night for us and would take us first then take all the men to Borehamwood because quite a lot of them lived up there. I have to say, the blokes that were there when we first came, we were kind of fair game for them. They were amusing themselves but we weren't as green as we looked. At all. So we had a kind of an Irish club down the road here in Cricklewood. While we had lots of fun teasing them and them with us too, we still had our own clubs and that's where we were going. The idea was to meet one of our own really. And that's, sure enough, what most of us done. It was a club, which meant a membership card and if anyone went in, you had to dress properly to go in there. You could go in half dressed. In the case of men, there was no question of them coming through the door if they didn't have on a collar and tie and a suit. And in the case of girls, they had to be dressed, not too short and not too revealing near the top. And you couldn't refuse a dance. The blokes couldn't drink to the extent that they were unstable on the floor. It was very very strictly run. Also the music was there and it was all our own lot from home. All different 32 counties of Ireland. And on the walls, they had all the different scenes of home. You could shut everything out in the world. That's the way we lived there.

So, were there unions in London Transport?

In London Transport, yes. We had unions there all right. Now the unions, when we came there, it was totally unionised, London Transport. When we came, there was a little bit of jealousy among the men because they said we were taking their jobs. There was one very major strike that happened, I think in 1957, and for seven weeks, not a bus ran in London in or out of any bus garage. Now, we were at our hostel and the man in charge of the bus garage in Edgware, he rang up the hostel and said there's nothing stopping you girls. You'll get paid if you come and just appear. Now, if we'd have done that, we could never have worked for them again. We'd be finished. Now, at that time too, a lot of Jamaican men came, and from Trinidad. There were question marks among the men. They didn't know how we were going to react but not one person, neither a black man or a white man or white woman, did anything. No one put a foot through the depot. No one passed that picket line.

What was the strike for?

Oh more money. What they used to do was cut the rota. They were making cuts and these men were dependent on their wages. That money was to keep their families so they was fighting for a

living wage. While we were all union members, what they told us to do, we done. We more or less had to do it. It was understood that we hadn't enough knowledge anyway to do anything else, so what they wanted, we agreed with them. We used to meet in place which is demolished now and there was a tram bus that used to run on Edgware Road. The men who were speakers there were loud, powerful speakers. None of us had anything to say, none of us immigrants really. We had to obey the rules and that's basically what we were doing. So anyway, 7 weeks that was. And in that 7 weeks, the men who lived around that Edgware bus garage did anything they could. They were painting houses. Any jobs they could get. We hadn't much money in our pockets because we were spendthrifts. We spent what we got when we got it. We used to work as cleaners for the Jewish ladies. Anything we could get for a living. They still charged us the rent you see. And also we had to eat. We waited on tables and the men painted and drove cars and taxis. At the end of the seven weeks, they got us back on the road again. And I remember I was working on the 142 bus route. In the front of the bus they had written 'due to a raise in the wages of the drivers and conductors, we have to raise the fare'. That was basically what the message was in 3 or 4 different places on the bus. Now that particular time that I was on that bus, that was the 7 o'clock bus in the morning. It was the workman's bus. And that was not any bus to be tampering with. The whole way down that Edgware Road were factories. A fantastic amount of work available. Really fantastic amount. You could get work.

What sort of factories?

Well, there was Phoenix which was making the telephone things and then there was motor engineering...oh I can't remember.

Would you ever have considered working in a factory rather than on the buses?

No because I was doing a job I really liked. I had fun and I liked the uniform and the people. So there was no time in my head that I was going to leave it. Not one of us left and not one of us missed time or anything. I got married from there. The first house we bought, I was expecting Anne, my first one. I was working til I was seven and a half months pregnant. I was called into the office and they say the driver is scared stiff that he'll have to apply the brakes and deliver. The driver was a married man himself you see. I remember the first time, I didn't really know what was wrong with me, we were getting tea – at both ends of the journey you could get tea you see. And the first thing that happened was that the tea tasted terrible. I remember saying to the driver that the tea tasted terrible. He said 'ha ha, I know what's wrong'. He diagnosed the problem! I worked til seven and a half months because we needed the money you see to get the deposit. The house that we bought was £2850. It was a 3 bedroom semi-detached house with a garage. I can't remember what our wages were at the time but we had £500 of the deposit saved up. We went into the estate agents in Burnt Oak and they devised a means of making his job more secure and that was a Jewish estate agent. So we got the house there and then we had a house with no furniture in it and a house where the electric wasn't as good as it could be. Eleven and a half years we were there. I remember the furniture when it arrived. There was man that came down with a horse and cart and on board that cart, he had 2 cookers. We bought one of them off him and it was 30 shillings we paid for a cooker. That was the beginning. Money again was a problem, it's always been.

What bus routes....?

140, the 52. The 52 went from Borehamwood to Victoria then. The 140 went from Mill Hill to Heathrow. The 142 went from Watford to Kilburn. The 107 was the longest route at that time. It went from Ponders End to Edgware. You could only do 2 trips a day; it was so long that route. And the same with Borehamwood, it was quite long really.

How long did you work for London Transport?

About 6 years and then I had to stop. I would never have stopped if it wasn't for Anne, really. But in the meantime, all the coloured fellas came and they were great blokes when they came. They were so nice to the public. They were the cream of their country, they really were. They cared. They were nothing remotely like they were labelled and that's the truth. They were great blokes. A lot of them with degrees in their own country who could not get any work and the sugar factory had shut down in Jamaica and Trinidad and whatever country they came from. They were nearly all from the West Indies and they were very good men to work with, so they were. But I was there about 6, 7 years, maybe more, I can't remember.

Did you have to leave because you had a child?

Oh you had to go. We had got the house, that was important. Because I was living in one room when I married.

In the hostel?

No no, we weren't allowed any men in there. There were another 3 of us who got married from the hostel and lived in the same lodging house and we had a cooker on the landing. They wouldn't allow young children in that house. That man was McCann and he was an Irish man and he bought the house. We were paying £3 a week for this one room. Anyway, when I was pregnant, he was taking note of it you see. I was told that it would not do well for children. To get this money, it was very very important to get this money that we had saved up. Six weeks after Anne was born, we moved out of that house and we moved into the house we were buying.

Where was that?

Not far from here at all. Holmstall Avenue, it's quite a nice street. I've never done much better really. Next thing, his job went on strike. I'd already lost 7 weeks on the buses before and that was money gone out of our pockets. You see, it was so important. Anyway, I got my sister to come, over from home and her to take Anne. And I'm back on the bus again. I was on for a while.

Doing the same things?

The same things yes. A bus conductor. I was not as sure in myself somehow. I used to like speed but I was different.

With these sort of Routemaster buses?

Yes the Routemasters. And it was fantastic. You learn more in 6 months working on the buses than you would in a lifetime without it. It was a fantastic experience because you met different people doing different jobs at different times of day and you just got the whole panoramic view London and the people who lived in it.

What routes were you on when you went back?

I went mostly on the 140. That went to Heathrow. I was there on that for a while and then the strangest thing happened. You can never part with a baby. She was living in the house and she (my sister) had more skill baby-wise than I had even though she's 5 and a half years younger. When

Annie went to go home because she couldn't stay here any longer, then I had to come off the buses. And I went to try and handle Anne, Anne screamed. She was afraid of me. She'd not really seen me because I had been gone. You need to be with a baby because everything is being forged at that time. It took me a while to kinda learn really and to try to get Anne back for me. I was not her mother as far as she was concerned, it was my sister. We kept lodgers and the lodgers were our lifeline.

What did they do?

The lodgers were working in all the local factories. Some of them were in Phoenix just down the road. It was a good place to work and they were from County Kerry and we used to have a great time because the house was chockablock full of music. There was one time I was coming up the street and they used to open the windows. This was quite a nice street where we were and they used to play the music and it was bouncing off the walls. Also, they all had boyfriends. They used to go and make dates and it wasn't a big important thing like it is today. It was not too seriously taken. So they used to make a date and then make 2 or 3 dates around the same time, so my job was to get rid of the ones that came to pick them and say she's not in. And there was an old car that was stuffed and abandoned and that was a courting car as far as they were concerned. I know 3 of them still.

When did you go back to work then?

I couldn't as then very soon came Mick. 2 years later, he was born. That finished me. I was off the buses then for a while. And off any kind of surer money, but as I say, we had people living in the house. Also, I used to do ironing. I ironed shirts for Scott's Hand Laundry. And of course that was an expensive bloody thing but it was a means of getting money. Also I worked for Avon, the cosmetics and that was also for people who had no other means of getting employment. So as soon as the kids had got up just the littlest bit, I wanted to get work away from the house. I wanted out. I wanted gone from it. As soon as I could, I got a job in the schools and the school meal service. That was NUPE. That was the union there. I worked up in St Gregory's and we had 100 pupils a day to attend to. And that work involved having to cook the meals, helping to serve the meals and helping to clear up after the meals and that was our job. And for that we got...it wasn't a bad rate of pay. There was a lot of competition for that work. A lot of competition. We had a cook in charge and we weren't too brilliant to tell you the truth and she was...I remember her saying one time she says I don't know how any of you women ever ran a house. No meat was wasted. You had to make very very certain. And everything had to be...and her name was Mrs Little. And I was scared of her. Scared to death of her. But anyway, I managed to survive there and I done as much...kept away from her a bit but then she forced me out of the corner. I washed the dishes and I washed the pots and pans and I'd keep out of range of her. Anyway that didn't work and I had to come out of hiding and had to go on to the counter and had to help cut the meat up and generally get it ready and everything else. I was there a while...a good while. I can't remember how long.

What years was that about, do you think?

That must be the 60's...in the 60's. In the middle of the summer in the 60's and on into the 70's that would be. You see we were half pay all through the summer on the school holiday. We were off with the kids so it was tailored to fit us. The job was right for us. And if we were stuck with a little bit of difference between one school and another, they could bring the kids in and kinda let...that wasn't available very often but it was available. They would let us have the kids inside...let them stay in the staffroom.

So, how big was the team?

How big was the team? Let's see. Not an awful big team at all was there. Let's say the team in the kitchen was about 10 strong. About 10 or 12.

All women?

All women. Yeah, all women. Yeah. And we were all NUPE members there, we had to be. So I was there a lot of years, a good 3 or 4. As many years as took to get me into it. As I'd already got this other stuff, you know, office type stuff. She offered me the job. She was going to quit the job herself because she was tired and she said to me 'Mary', she says 'I'm gonna have to recommend somebody to do take my job over'. I'm not good enough for your job, I'm not even the right material. And so I said it's not any good for me. She offered it. But anyway, another cook came and then I quit because we were used to her, you see, the one we had. So and then that came on was bringing the kids a bit further forward you see. A bit more independent. There were 4 of them. We've got 4 of them here. Anyway, the next job after that was working at Rotaprint. Now, Rotaprint was a printing firm and they had a union. I think it was SOGAT and I was working there as a shorthand typist for the purchasing manager there. I was a good while there.

How long were you there for?

3 years....I must have been there 3 years or more. At least 3.

When was that, the seventies?

Yes the 70's. The union meetings you see, there was un-rest there. Now by that time there were a lot of Asian people coming into the country and they had a harder time really than we had because men came first here you see and they had somehow to establish a place to bring the women too. Often, to get a job, now this is something that I shouldn't be saying but that actually happened to my knowledge, is that they would meet the employment person there and for them to get employed in the factory down below, they had to pay. That's true. That really happened. And the men were very well educated men and I remember one of them saying to me, I could do your job but I wouldn't get enough money for doing it and I can't afford to do it. And they were tying up parcels and that and generally other printing type of work. But that showed the union was there, not as quite rebellious union, so it was. And we used to have a meeting. Everybody had to attend. It wasn't in your interest not to. You had to be there. The meeting was quite tricky because you couldn't...the idea was to try to hold a private meeting but the management were creeping in. Somehow or another. Slipping along and watching. Generally one way or another there was some member reporting type of thing. It couldn't be a private meeting. So the men were kinda scared to talk because often their job depended. Rotaprint had no money. Rotaprint was nearly broke, so they were. Even the Purchasing Manager, for him to get his job, he had to have an investment in the company itself. He had to have so many shares for him to have that job.

What were the wages like?

The wages weren't bad there. Quite good wages, but you were very very under their hand sort of thing. I remember he used to say at 10 minutes past 5 and I'd have kids coming home from school and I wanted to get home, and he'd say take this letter. This letter has got to go tonight. And it'd be 10 past 5 and you'd say god, I've got to get this thing out, you know. You'd be writing to Germany for the inks and all the other stuff was there. And also he was beginning to lose his memory a bit, this man. What I was doing there was, I had a record of every docket, you know, dockets they called

them which everything came in, all in date order, and the boss was a bugger. He lifted the patented thing with them in and pulls one out, and puts them out of date order again. He was a diabetic. And he used to want so many cups of tea that I had to make them for him. Constant annoyance. From getting up, stopping and making more tea for him. And I didn't realise at the time that he was a diabetic. I didn't know it was wrong. Anyways, one time I turned around and said to him, I'm fed up of it and due to circumstances not under your control, I need to give you my notice. He says, Mary, sit down and tell me what's wrong. And I was fed up and I said to him that I can't manage the money. I felt so bad when I found out how necessary that tea was. Anyway, I was there 2 to 3 more years and in the meantime I went up to the college to get more new pieces of paper. I got them up there up in Borehamwood. I got a few more pieces from that.

What sort of qualifications were those?

Shorthand and all the other malarkeys. Shorthand and English. I'd already got it anyway but I needed some fresh ones. New ones. Got to 140 words per minute shorthand, but anyway...

Were you part of a team as a shorthand typist or was it just you?

No I worked directly for him. There was another 3 or 4 and they were working for just anybody but I worked directly for him.

What did he do?

He was the Purchasing Manager. Something would be ordered and they wouldn't have the money to pay. I remember on one occasion, that there was a big great big long lorry arrived from the north of England, with what had been ordered on board that lorry. And he said to me, go down and stop them. Don't let them unload. I went down and there was this big bruiser of a man after having driven down from the north of England and I had to say you can't deliver and he said why not. Sudden confrontation. He couldn't deliver because they couldn't pay. The firm went out of business.

When did they go out of business?

I expect it must have been...I was gone anyway by the time they were gone. You could see the writing on the wall because the management just wasn't there and you couldn't be handling the letters and not know. From there I went to RAF Stanmore. I got a job up there. That was a really tricky job to get because being Northern Irish at that time, Northern Ireland was sizzling. Beginning to sizzle. How they ever gave me a job I don't know. But I got one anyway. It took me 3 months to get accepted there and they wrote, I think, they checked every bit of background connected with me. You never know in your own background what's in it really. By the time 3 months past, I got a letter. Come in and I worked for the Group Captain.

What did you do for him?

I began the same thing. Secretarial stuff again. RAF Stanmore was recruiting, that was their function. The Group Captain was in charge of it down here. When the RAF wanted to recruit say, recruit to the RAF, if they wanted a Welshman, the recruiting officer would be a Welshman. You see, if you were recruiting me or I was recruiting you, or whatever, they got far more by sending a local man...if they're down in Cornwall for instance, you have a Cornish man in the office so that the recruits are meeting their own. Then there was very strong security there. You had to produce your picture to come in the door. Ireland was absolutely blowing itself up at the time.

So when was this? The late seventies?

Late seventies, coming into late seventies. Not even the late seventies, somewhere in the middle there because I must have spent 3 years there. About 75, I'd say. You'd have to pass security you see to come down. There was a long corridor. They had blue lino on the floor as you go in. I'd used to have to go down the corridor to get to where me and another lady worked. And we worked for the Group Captain. Anyway we get down there, down that corridor and I used to have heels on as I quite liked wearing heels. But when I would come in onto the corridor to get to the long corridor I was going to, I used to go right up on my toes and creep down the corridor. Make as little noise as possible. There used to be a little lieutenant there and he was constantly taking the mickey and he could sense my feet down the floor and RAF men were very important about their uniform. It had to be right. This fella never was right. He'd always have his tie 2 or 3 rungs too low. He'd shout 'spy in the camps!'

Did you have a uniform to wear?

No we weren't uniform staff at all. We were just in the civil service union then. That was quite hard work there. A constant stream you see. The Group Captain would do letters and then he'd change them again and he would find a fault and you'd have to do it again.

Was it confidential stuff?

Confidential. Everything was top secret and stamped at the bottom. They used to say when those blokes were cleaning the windows, we were told to take our stuff out of the machine. And to get the work back in again in the same spot was really really hard work. So many pieces of paper were lost because you couldn't...you see now they have computers, even though they got one finally but then it sat in the corner because nobody knew how to use it. Oddest system that was. But they were very good to us there. We used to go up to that big place where Battle of Britain was directed. So good that was. I used to look at the flag when I arrived in the morning. Where is the flag today? Up or down? Middle? Where is it? That would tell what had happened the night before. And it was up there a while and I never felt comfortable there. I felt wrong somehow. Not happy.

What were the other people like, you worked with?

They were ok. They were alright but I had to earn my wages pretty hard there. I used to see people who didn't work as hard and you would get a government report to type. Now that has a special layout, a special plan and that was very hard. Hard to do and you had to do that exactly right. And the wages weren't particularly good either. Money wasn't enough for me.

Was it better than Rotaprint?

Rotaprint? No. It was less than Rotaprint. They recruited us at Uxbridge. That was the recruiting place that we had to go to. RAF Uxbridge.

Where did you see it advertised?

Where did I see it? It must have been in a paper local. It had to be because that's all I was reading at the time. The local paper. And I worked with a very very nice lady and she showed me the ropes, which I wouldn't have known. I wasn't used to that kind of having to be so careful of security and so careful of locked drawers. I really was not happy there. Not at all.

Did the union have much involvement, the Civil Service Union?

No, very little involvement there. We saw very very little of them. There was very little involvement there. We were in the union but I remember one time they gave a time and motion study and that was very difficult, you know, to type. You can't have somebody standing over you while you're typing. At that time they were looking at cuts so I thought...I couldn't drive a car you see. And one of the ladies says to me, you want to go smarten yourself up and learn how to drive. She bought me a provisional license to try. So that was the first attempt to try to get a car and pass the test, which took me three tries by the way. I didn't even pass that test. Anyway, I was looking. I was beginning to get uncomfortable with it, because of this business in Northern Ireland, so I felt very uncomfortable at that place. It wasn't as good an atmosphere there at all. So I see this job advertised by the Met Police, totally different kind of job. I had no idea what I was applying for. I just didn't know.

Was that in the local paper again?

Yeah, local paper. And that was 1978 I think. I applied for the job. I went to 3, The Mall, Kenton, and there was a sergeant in charge there and her name was Sergeant Ranger and I was interviewed for that job. And at the time, you see, while I was up at RAF Stanmore, I also had another job, I was working at night at Wembley Stadium at the ticket office. About 2 or 3 times a week I went there. And so I was telling her what I was doing for a living and I had this other job. And then she said to me, what month were you born in? And I said I was born in February. And she said 'oh, you're Aquarius' and I thought what does that matter. A week later I very quickly got a reply come to the door. But the job then was 3 shifts, 7 til 3, 3 til 11 and 11 til 7. That was the job. We had a Deputy Assistant Commissioner there and a whole lot of brass hats. But they were the best bunch you could ever meet or work for or be under the same roof as. They were fun. They were totally different from RAF Stanmore. There was a light feeling in the air. We were in charge of the building. Anything that went wrong in it, we had to get the contractors in and get it attended to. We were in charge of everything coming in or going out of the building. It was a busy job. On reception in there. We were taking some phone calls but not all. There were more calls coming about Wembley because Wembley was a main switchboard. But we were taking a good few. It was a busy job. They were fun to work with and I knew immediately I was not leaving. At all.

What was your job title there?

There, that job title was Section House Warden. That was my job. The money was very good money because we were on shift work pay. Any extra holidays or anything at all, it was nearly triple the wages. Very good money. Best I ever had anywhere.

Was there a union there?

A union yeah. The CSU again but there was very little commotion from the union. There was no need for it. There was not a lot of us there. All the people were employed up there in the offices. When I first went there, you see, we had the detectives there and we had first the cadets. There's 126 16 to 19 year olds there and they were recruited all over England and we had the training men there too in that place. The job was quite an interesting one because the kids were first time away from home. They were in a really hard environment. They used to be paraded in the hall. Great big reception hall there and they used to have come down and stand in rows. Their uniform and hair was examined and the girls were very hard pressed. Hard and lonely and homesick. Their home was there. You're at an age when you have a family of your own; you've got to find out if you notice anything wrong with these girls. Get talking to them. Find out what's bothering them. Get talking to them and get them to tell you, to tell us. So we can tell someone. The police said we're investing a lot of money in

these girls and we don't want them to leave. Be a friend and be a mother to them, the girls, the young kids. We used to go upstairs at night and go up and hear a kid sobbing, alone. Brothers and sisters gone and in a very tough male environment. And the men weren't all that keen on them. They didn't make it easy for them at all. And then they used to take them to Wales for training and they had to walk. You see, most of them had soft feet and weren't used to long walks. They let them off at Bushey and make them walk from Bushey to Kingsbury. By the time they got back, they were often blistered. The kids were missing their parents and hating the routine and we weren't allowed to call them in the morning. They said as much as any of your jobs are worth, if one of you walk up the stairs and call them...they had to take responsibility and do their job. They used to stop them getting sweets. They weren't allowed no desserts, no anything like that if they were judged not to be performing well enough in the gym. I remember one little girl, Evans was her name, she was a Welsh girl. There was the trainer, maybe 2 or 3 trainers, and I knew one of them very well, McNally was his name, the girls would have to disarm a man and to throw him. How to do it. She could take McNally off his feet and throw him sideways. They had to be able to go along roofs, high up. Then they put them on a rowing machine. And then they'd take them to Wales. And Wales they'd test them up the mountains. I remember saying to one of them, how are you sticking to this and she said, 'if you've got no bottle, you've got no business'. We were there with them. The girls were happy, this was an all girl house, only the trainers were men.

So they stayed there?

They stayed there. 126 of them in the rooms, which were reconverted to suit them. Then they took them to Hendon and we were not sure where we were, what was gonna happen for us.

When was that?

That would be about, maybe '81. About '81 I think.

How many of you were wardens?

There was 5 of us. There was relief and there was 4 others. 4 I think, 4 Section House Wardens. The next lot that arrived was the detectives. They were a bunch and a half. Goodness gracious me. They were everything. House full of them.

More than 126?

A lot. A full house of them anyway. They used to have a big lorry parked outside and also maybe a big van, maybe with 3 or 4 ladders on the top. Their time of action was night, or early hours in the morning. We had them for a good long while.

Did your job change when the purpose of the building changed?

No, it was far far more then. The phones were going like hell then. We had to then go on as telephonists because Wembley wasn't taking the calls. We were trained then to become telephonists so we had 60 calls a minute. Fast fast fast. You had to know the numbers. I had a very good recording memory so I had a memory for numbers and I didn't need to look, I would just know. If you didn't get it quick enough, you could see a build-up, like. There couldn't be any build up there. You had to get it through. Also, at the same time, there was a lot of building workers there. That's before this. We had to search the building for what mistakes they'd make. Things they would leave unhooked. I remember one night, this was before them detectives arrived, there was a fire in that building. There was paint. And the paint was very flammable. There was a sanding machine and it

heated and that's what set it. Anyway, we lived through that, how I don't really know how. I think I was on duty that night. Anyway, we got it quickly and it was covered up. It didn't go any further but it could have. 1994 finished me up there anyway. From one way or another I done nearly 20 years between the whole two civil service jobs and that was me finished in 1994. I enjoyed it. It was fantastic.

Did many people work there as long as you or were the people changing quite a lot?

I probably was one of the longest persons there. I didn't go to Hendon anyway. Anyway, I was coming of age. I could have lost out earlier really. They accidentally lost my details which gave me another 5 years.

Looking after the running of the building and then it more sort of towards switchboards and then did it change again?

No, no. Finally they were going to take them all I think. That building belonged to Brent Council though we could never manage to find out for sure. That building has refugees in it now. As far as I know, they're still there. It's a very unusual building, that. I have the drawings of it upstairs. Anyway 1994 took me away and then I got bored. I had in the meantime been going to University of Westminster, you see. I got more or less through one of them degrees. So then I decided to do another one. A Masters.

What were your hours like by 1994?

1994, we weren't working...not quite so much shiftwork. Our latest number was 7 o'clock in the morning to 7 in the evening. They twisted it around so that we weren't actually doing that nightshift because they called in the security. There were these coloured blokes going to college and they could study at night and also earn a living. So that's how we lived. Then I went up to university and I fooled around there for a while. And got the pieces of papers. Then I went into voluntary. There was these disabilities in kids. I worked for 4 years. I've got papers for that in there. I worked with kids that were disabled. You see I have a girl with a disability, so I knew a thing or two about that. I used to go down to Wealdstone and go on the computers there. I went to college in between and got a few more pieces of paper. Disability down in Harrow. That was quite good for a while. The men that were in charge there. There was 2 men, and them 2 men, and I didn't like what I saw happening because I think they were using disability to make an easy living for themselves. And that upset me. I remember writing to them. You see this Learn Direct thing? It's useless. If you're a disabled person that goes into learn and they're not retaining knowledge. I wrote to the man and told him it was a waste of time. I told him that if he really seriously wants these people to learn something, send them to Harrow College, not Learn Direct. They were using us volunteers to make a very good living for themselves. I fundraised for a while. I remember taking them a thousand pounds. We got talking to the Conway's owner. And the Conway's have a club, a golf club. And they raised among them, a thousand pounds. And that was handed to the disability leader's on Christmas by me. I was waiting...I needed a letter back from them to acknowledge and to thank the men. And there was no letter by 7th January. I was blazing angry. I jumped out of bed one night and typed. I used every bit of knowledge I had on a computer to get a really good looking thing but they were finished as far as I was concerned. Because they didn't thank the men. The boss came and he took that cheque, from Conway's and didn't even buy them a drink. And Conway's now dead. £1000 raised and the least they could have done was put a big thank you to the golf club. It didn't happen. I wrote it anyway. I sent the letter that I typed out myself, I typed in their name and said, that's what you didn't do and what you should have done. And for that reason, I don't want anything more to do with you. There was two men, these holy men. I knew that there were others. There's a disability home down

Charlton Road and I used to visit and be a friend to one or two of them and bring them little tit-bits. So that's where I am today. Apart from I worked in the schools then! I decided then, ok I'll go to schools, I'll volunteer. So there was a teacher down there in Glebe School and she was nice. She was Lorraine Montera and for three or four years I went down there and I used to be in her classroom. There were 27 nationalities in Glebe School. Sometimes it was difficult to communicate. It's really hard for a teacher. If the child's first language is not English, how do you reach? A lot of kids were refugees. You'd get a child and the child would tell you a story. Mrs Montera used to say, find out about that youngster and go to the computer room. And somehow I managed to communicate enough to find out about the child. I remember on one occasion, the question was how do you get the child to talk? A nine year old could tell you stuff that would make you wonder why you ever grumbled about anything. Them children had been dragged up. They had nothing. They were stowaways on ships, their father arrested, they had no homes. It stays in your head. It's not what people think. And there's one little family, there was 4 of them, they were refugees. They were illegals. They had only one room and there were about 6 of them, just up the road here. The child wants to do something for the teacher. He's about 8 or 9 maybe and he said will you come to my house for tea. 2 of the teachers were invited by that little lad. The teachers went in deference to the child. Lorraine herself arrived as a refugee, the teacher that was teaching there. So she knew. She went up to the house and the child had little biscuits and bits of small things and glasses of orange juice. They felt humbled. About a week or so later, the men came and they took the family. They were illegals and they were removed from there and I don't know whatever happened after that. That's basically what I've been doing up til now. That's as much as I can tell you Cathy.

Thank you very much. When you left the Met in 1994, what was your day job when you left?

Receptionist.

I think that covers most things really. I mean, I get the impression there wasn't really much union activity in the Met?

No. Union, no. It wasn't needed you see. We were in the union but there was no activity. And I don't think upstairs there was none either. That was all civil service people that were up there. And there was no disturbance. The only place that was really disturbed was London Transport. We just needed the money you see, we didn't need disturbance. We were all dependent. Conditions weren't bad. You couldn't honestly say, this has been horrible. That wasn't the case at all. The only time it ever really...you see, the Met, like everywhere else, were told to make cuts.

The 80's or the 90's?

The 90's. The MET were told to make cuts. And we were expensive. And we were told by the sergeant in charge that there was a possibility that our job would go. And in the case of me, I was already a very old age citizen anyway. That's the only time there was a threat, in my time there.

Northern Ireland was in difficulties and the MET were entertaining RUC there. You see, a lot of RUC officers were injured. One time, I was on the desk and a battalion of RUC came in. Now I come from quite a riotous sort of place back home. There was a lot of trouble in Derry. I remember being afraid for the first time in my life. You see, to work for the Met was traitorous by the standards of home. And I had a family. I had my brothers all there and my sister. I thought 'where are these officers coming from? It's a possibility I might be recognised'. So I remember phoning upstairs and saying 'take the desk' until we got them through. I was afraid for the family at home. I could have been identified. People were getting killed at home and the RUC was getting blamed. And of course there was blame on both sides, there was no question about it. I was afraid that day. I managed to stay out

the way that day, just took longer in the loo than I should have been and got somebody to hold the desk until they were gone. But there was a man from Straban there. Straban was a very notorious hotspot.

Did you ever experience or witness any discrimination at work?

Well, once upon a time, yes, with the very person I was working with. Kings Cross Station had been hit and my workmate came in and she said 'what are these people doing here?' It was directed at me, what was said. 'Why are these people in this country? What are they doing here?' Looking directly at me. And I remember the sergeant in charge saying, 'now what has this got to do with Mary?' and I never forgot it though. She was anti-Irish. She was xenophobic. Only British, you know, nothing else. At the same time, she was a very good person but she had a terrible racist mind. And also there was a little bit of it with Indian people as well, I have to say. You had to be very careful. That same person was caught out one time with something she read in the paper and there was an Indian lady in the office overheard her and she ran upstairs and started crying. And you see the police would not tolerate racism. Anything racist was destruction for them because everything depended on them not being racist, you know. Anybody working for the Met police could not be racist. They would not last any length of time because it would be dangerous for the police, you see. But I never found discrimination there anyway. I thought they were fantastic.

What about on the buses?

Oh no, no. Nothing. It was when we went in at first of course. 55 of us up there, skirts. What are these people doing here and all that stuff. Taking our jobs. We used to have fun on it though. That time on the transport when they put the prices up, that was quite tricky going to Kilburn that morning. That first morning after we had 7 weeks off with not a bus on the road. And there were these notices up saying you have to pay more because these people are wanting more wages. We got the bus safely down there and nobody got angry. On the whole it was a job like no other. It was a fantastic job, for me anyway. I wouldn't have gone.

How did the bus fares work then?

I can't give you full...that's going back so far. You see, tuppence, in 1959 was a fare. Two pennies. A sixpence could have got you a good long way. And when the coloured fellas came on, they weren't used to the British money you see. They weren't used to the way of speaking either and they were learning to drive and some of them eventually got to be drivers. They had dollars over there. So these fellas were tormented trying to figure out what a bob was. It was another world from the one you grew up into. It was a nice world though. London is a nice place. You can have fun in London. It was safe, remarkably safe. We used to hitch a lift with long distance lorry drivers and I wouldn't dare do that today. I used to hitch a lift down to Elstree and the uniform would save us. We got lifted in by the police a couple of mornings if we missed the staff bus. As they were coming in to the entrance to the garage, they'd started ringing the bell shouting 'we're bringing your staff in!' London was a great place to be. It's a nicer place to be. When i got married then, nobody had a washing machine. It was a long long while before anybody got one of them things. A whole different world altogether. You could never imagine, looking at it now. You'd say 'what happened? Why? Why so much change?' The computer did it, I think. I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else really. Not at all. That's the best I can say.

Well, thank you so much for your time. It's been really interesting.

You're welcome. Do you fancy another cuppa?