

Pam Osborne interviewed by Ruth Sheldon on 12 June 2009 for

Britain at Work 1945-1995 Oral History Project

RS: Just to start with, could you tell me a bit about where you grew up?

PO: I grew up in Twickenham. I was born in West Middlesex Hospital which is in Isleworth, but I grew up in Twickenham. From a historical point of view, I was actually was in a Nissen Hut ... We lived in a Nissen Hut until I was eight.

RS: What's that?

PO: A Nissen Hut?

RS: Yes.

PO: Oh. They were put up after the war where there was war damage, where there was bomb sites and things. And they were sort of semi-circular. You've probably seen them on sort of military-type things. They're sort of semi-circular and they put them up after the war as emergency housing before they put up the *lovely* pre-fabs, which some are still around. They were very, very basic and I lived in one of those until I was eight. And then we moved to Hanworth where they'd just put a brand new council estate, so we moved there. And the Nissen Huts were eventually demolished. They were only supposed to be for five years, but as I say, I was eight when we moved and I was born after the war, so ...

RS: When were you born?

PO: 1946. I've got an older sister. She was born during the war, in '44. But they were only supposed to be up for five years but they stayed longer. But having said that, it was happy. It was a very happy time. Then I moved to Hanworth, in a spanking-new council maisonette and I went to ... after junior school I went to grammar school, because obviously that was still in place then. And I left school when I was 17. I stayed on until the lower sixth because I did commercial. I didn't do A levels. And then I did my first job then. My first job, which was at British Eagle Airways, which was based... actually on Heathrow. So that was my very first job.

RS: And what was your school like?

PO: The school?

RS: Yes.

PO: Lovely! The school buildings still exist, but it's now an all-girls comprehensive. But it was a co-educational grammar school. It was again, a very, very happy school. It was very much a community. So much so I'm still in touch ... We've had lots of reunions. I'm still in touch with quite a few of the people that I was at school with. It was a lovely school. It was a very, very happy school. But I wasn't overly academic, I have to say, which is why I didn't go along the A level university route. But I did the commercial side and did shorthand and typing. And my first job was as a junior typist, I think that was what it was called.

RS: And you mentioned your sister. Who else was in your family?

PO: I just had one sister and Mum and Dad, obviously. Just one sister who as I say was older than me.

RS: And what did your mum and dad do?

PO: Both of my parents worked at Sperry's, which was along the Great West Road. In Brentford. My mum worked in the packing department, I believe, but my dad was a scientific engineer. Sperry's did gyroscopes and so my dad was a scientific engineer.

RS: So they worked in the same place.

PO: Yes.

RS: How did they find that?

PO: OK. Eventually my parents actually divorced, but I don't remember there being any problems in working together. And I did a holiday job at Sperry's. I can't remember exactly what I did. I can't remember exactly what I was doing. But I know I had to sign the Secrets Act because they did military stuff.

RS: Oh, right. So was that while you were still at school?

PO: Yes. And again when I was still at school I did a Saturday job at Woolworth's at Feltham, which was ... I know all this is now gone, but it was totally different to the Woolworth's that you would recognise.

RS: What was it like?

PO: Everything was all ... All the counters were wooden and all the colouring was the original colouring, which was sort of red and yellow. A dark red and a sort of custardy yellow. Everything was their colouring. And they used to sell things like broken biscuits, and stuff like that, which is something that isn't done now. And it was all the old tills where you had to press down. Nothing was electronic, obviously. Everything was manual. And we used to have a little pad sort of tied to us where we could work things out. If you're having to add up a few things, rather than do it on the ... The till didn't do it for you. You had to actually add up. Had to add up what it was and then take the whole amount. You had to know your maths a bit, which is not like now, obviously! It's all done for you.

RS: Do you remember how you got the job?

PO: I had to interview, but I did have an auntie that worked there already. So I don't know! But I did have to have an interview to get it. I also worked on the holidays there.

RS: And what were the other people like there?

PO: Do you know what, I really can't remember anybody that worked there. Because it was only a Saturday job. So I honestly can't remember.

RS: Do you remember if you liked working there?

PO: I enjoyed it. The store manager wasn't very nice. I remember him, but I don't know what his name was, but he wasn't very nice. Yes, I did enjoy working there, it was nice and it obviously gave me a bit of pocket money. Which again was really nice. I didn't like it at Christmas particularly. It got really, really busy at Christmas. It was quite nice working there.

RS: Can you remember how much they paid you?

PO: Not for the Saturday job, no. I can't remember how much. My very first proper job at British Eagle, I was paid ... I should know what this was ... It was something ... Two and sixpence. It was ten pounds two and sixpence, I think or something like that. It wasn't a huge amount. It wasn't bad money for that day. It was ten pounds two and sixpence I was paid. My second job was thirteen pounds ten shillings. Which is 50p now. So I actually got quite a good raise in money for my second job, which was at Minimax. Fire extinguishers.

RS: Going back to your first job, you left school and did you have any help in terms of finding a job after you left?

PO: No. You just ... I don't think there were JobCentres ... It was much easier to get a job then, it was much easier to get a job. And most people assumed that they would leave school and get a job. I probably saw it in the paper. I can't really remember. But I had to go to an interview obviously and got the job. I left school at Christmas. That would have been 1963. And I started at British Eagle just after Christmas. I stayed there about a year.

RS: And you were working as a typist?

PO: Yes. What I had to do was ... The flights ... The people on the flights ... I don't know if it was the Captain or whether it was someone else ... They had to write out a report of what had happened on the flight and if anything peculiar had happened. And I just had to transcribe that from their handwritten on to typing. If they'd had any problems anywhere, or if the accommodation wasn't good for the cabin staff. And it was actually very interesting, now that I look back on it. It has sort of all brought it back. It was really interesting because sometimes, as now, things went wrong and baggage got lost and they would just report it back on what had happened and I would just have to transcribe them and type them up. It was actually quite interesting. You got to know quite a lot of the cabin staff. It was very ... It was a very family-orientated business. I can't remember the name of the man who owned it, but it was owned by a person. And we all sort of knew him. It was quite family-orientated.

RS: So it was quite a small organisation?

PO: Yes. Quite small.

RS: And did they run their own flights?

PO: Yes. They flew Viscounts and Britannias. I think that's what they were. Obviously they were prop. And we had like huts ... We had huts over on the east side. The east side of the airport. I could either get off at Hatton Cross and walk through, or there was a bus stop halfway through the airport, halfway through that side, where the road actually followed what the original lanes were around the airport, that they actually took over as a perimeter road. And it was quite wiggly. Now, if you go across the airport, it literally goes in a circle around it, but originally it used to follow the little lanes. I used to get off at a bus stop there and walk

across ... well, you can't do this anymore ... I just used to walk across. Not where the planes were taking off, but where they would be sort of pulled on those little tractor-y things. There was no fencing. There was a security man there, but that was about it. We used to walk across. You can't do that now, it's fenced, totally. And they have moved the road now. But it used to do. I know this is recording, and I'm showing you this, but the road now comes like that, but what it used to do was that. That now has been totally taken away. And we were just ... There wasn't security. Not like there is now.

RS: It must have changed hugely, Heathrow.

PO: Yes. Where I was, there were little huts, but I think they've all gone now. And a few hangars. And there was the BEA canteen that we used to go to which presumably isn't there anymore. That bit where I was is totally gone. There's nothing there anymore that vaguely resembles ... There are still huts over there, but they're further over. They're not the ones I went in, or worked in. So there were just like huts. And there was only Queen's Building and Terminal One I think. I don't think Terminal Two had gone up by then. So it's grown! Hugely grown. The tunnel was in place. I remember that being built. But I'm sure there was only two terminals at that time.

RS: How common was it for people to fly?

PO: How common?

RS: Had you flown places?

PO: I actually flew as a child. We went to France when I was a child. We did a cycling ... We cycled around Normandy and around Brittany. And we actually did go by plane. But, when I worked at the airport, no. I didn't fly until I was well into my adulthood, other than then. I couldn't afford it. It was still quite a luxury, I think, to fly. British Eagle was, I suppose, the equivalent of something like British Midlands. It was a little independent one. We still had BEA and BOAC which became BA. And there was Pan Am, which is gone. It was pre-package, I think. Packages sort of came out in the 60s, but I don't think they were going when I worked there. So I never flew. And I think it was still quite expensive to do so.

RS: What were the working conditions like?

PO: At British Eagle?

RS: Yes.

PO: Probably not bad. Not bad. I guess Health and Safety would have stamped on anything that we did then, because we used to go and sit at the edge of ... not the runways, but we were very near what is still, I believe, the crossways runway for crosswinds. And as I say, we weren't stopped from walking anywhere, really, so I guess **Health and Safety** would put a stop to a lot of the stuff we did. But no, the working conditions weren't bad. Their photocopying was really weird because it wasn't like a photocopier, it was almost like a photographic machine. And they came out wet and you had to be careful they didn't stick together. I have no idea what system it was, but I know they came out wet and you had to be really, really careful before they dried off otherwise they all stuck together. So by today's standard, everything was pretty primitive. It wouldn't ... a manual typewriter... I guess there

was a switchboard somewhere, but I'm not sure. Or whether they were just direct lines. But my actual working conditions weren't bad.

RS: What kind of hours would you work?

PO: I think it was something like ... It probably was nine to five. I think it was nine to five and I think we probably had an hour for lunch. It might have been three quarters of an hour for lunch. And as I say, there was a canteen that we could go to that belonged to what is now BA but would have been BEA I think, at the time. But there wasn't anywhere we could go for lunch that belonged to British Eagle. I probably took sandwiches. I can't really remember.

RS: Were you a member of a union?

PO: No.

RS: Were other people?

PO: I guess they were. I would imagine that the pilots were, and any of the sort of mechanical people. They probably were, but I wasn't. I don't think I was ever asked to join a union, actually.

RS: OK.

PO: I don't remember being asked. Certainly, the first time I joined a union was way, way later, when I worked in a school office. And that was far most recently. No, I never joined a union, but there must have been unions in there because the pilots would have had a union certainly.

RS: Why would the pilots have had one?

PO: Because I know there's a pilot union, so they must have. There is a pilot union. Don't know what it's called, but there certainly was and still is a union of pilots.

RS: So you left there after about a year?

PO: Yes. I went to Minimax, which was based in Feltham. It was actually based in the old manor house. The head office was in the old manor house. But they had a factory which was in what is still called Minimax Corner at the other end of Feltham. The factory is gone, and they have preserved, very strangely, just the door. And it is remote, standing there, getting overgrown, looking very sad. They didn't preserve the whole front of it, which is very sad. The manor house was lovely, actually. It was really nice. And still looked like a manor house. I believe it's still used by Tesco's. Because there's a big Tesco's opened there and I believe they've got offices in there, but I may be wrong. But that was an interesting job. I worked in the sales department there. And that was quarter to nine to half five and I think we had a three-quarters of an hour for lunch. But we had fifteen minutes morning and afternoon for tea break. We weren't allowed to smoke in the office, so that sort of pre-empted ... We weren't allowed to smoke in the office but we were allowed to smoke in the canteen, which was on the grounds. And again it was a bit like ... almost like a typing pool in that there were a lot of us in one office, all doing different bits within the sales department. I processed the orders as they came in and I also had to chase up ones that hadn't been

delivered, the fire extinguishers these are. Which we called "PODs", which was "Proof Of Delivery". I think they were sent by train mainly. And that was a fairly interesting job. I had to go on a course that the salesmen had to go on. So I actually had to go around the factory to see how they were made and how to put a fire out, which is quite scary! But Minimax were very, very well-known for fire extinguishers. You see them in old films. They're the sort of conical ones. After I left, Minimax was taken over by Chubbs.

RS: How had you found out about that job?

PO: My sister worked there, actually. Yes, my sister had worked there and got me job, but she worked in the finance department. She worked in a different one to me. And it was more money. I think it was thirteen pound ten shillings, which was not bad pay then. And I was very happy working there. The only reason I left was I got **married and I moved**. I stayed there until ... Let me think about this. I started there in 1964, so I stayed there until about '67.

RS: And what were the other people like who worked there?

PO: Mixed. Very mixed age range. And generally, very happy. It was very happy working there. Like all places, you get the odd miserable person, but generally I was very happy working at Minimax. And they did look after us. Again it was fairly primitive by today's standard: manual typewriters ... And what was very interesting was the switchboard was the old Doll's Eye one ... You're looking at me!

RS: My knowledge of switchboards is very limited!

PO: It was a Doll's Eye switchboard. It was called that because it had little holes, that when the phone rang, or when it was engaged, I never worked it so I'm not sure, a bit used to come ... a sort of rounder bit used to come like old-fashioned doll's eyes.

RS: Oh, right.

PO: But the gentleman that worked the switchboard was blind. I remember his name, his name was Mr Alti and he came with his guide dog everyday and worked the switchboard simply by hearing and touch. And when he took messages, he had a little machine that he did them out to be transcribed. No mean feat that, I think, actually working the switchboard when you're blind. He was a really, really nice man. And his dog just lay there all day. But it was an interesting job. It made me very aware of fire. Very aware of fire. And I stayed there, as I said, until I got married.

RS: Where there a mixture of men and women working there then?

PO: Yes. Yes there were. The divide was men were managers and women generally weren't. The only managerial that was female was actually in personnel. Other than that, the man were all managers and the women weren't. Basically. And the sales. The sales reps were men. There weren't any women sales reps.

RS: Why do you think that was?

PO: Because women actually didn't have many rights then. I know it wasn't that long ago, but they didn't. They had to be backed by a man. They couldn't get finance on their own or

anything like that. They had to have a male guarantor. And I guess it was a case of we sort of knew our place. That sounds terribly old-fashioned, women didn't ... The women that were career women were often looked upon as being very hard and not really very nice. Very pushy. But I think it's because they had to be. There weren't that many career women. It was generally accepted that women got married, had babies, didn't work. And most women did the office work. You didn't really get anybody that was in managerial that was female. Very few. Going back to when I worked at British Eagle, we had one lady that came who was divorced and it was almost a scandal, the fact that she was divorced. Ooh, we have a divorcee working for us! I mean, I'm divorced now, but at that time, it was pretty unusual. Pretty unusual for women to be, well anybody, to be divorced. Women just didn't. There was something a bit odd about women that were sort of career women. It just didn't seem to happen. I'm glad it's changed. I'm glad it's changed.

RS: When did that start to change?

PO: There must have been some sort of Act of Parliament! Probably in the 70s I think it probably started to change. The finance became easier. Women's money was ... When I got married and we were getting a mortgage, my money was not taken into consideration at all. Not one penny of it. I was actually asked, despite the fact my money wasn't taken into consideration, when we were going to start a family, or if we were going to start a family, which would not be allowed as a question now. Personally, I'm not sure that it's a bad thing because then you knew you only had that money to rely on and the mortgage would be paid. But that's just a personal opinion. Women ... I went and bought a washing machine, probably in the 70s and didn't have to have a guarantor. It went down in my name. So yeah, that was probably, the 70s, that things got better for women in that respect.

RS: And did things feel different in the workplace? At some point?

PO: I don't think I can answer that because I took time out to bring my children up. So I don't know. It probably did. When I had my children, there wasn't maternity leave. You were expected to give up work and look after the children. There just wasn't maternity leave. And so that was what was expected and you did it. Again, I'm not sure that's not a bad thing, but again, that's a personal opinion. So I didn't work from 1970 until about '79.

RS: So you left Minimax in about '67 did you say?

PO: Yes.

RS: And did you go somewhere else then?

PO: Yes. I went to work for a company called Norsk Hydro – do you want me to spell that? Norsk Hydro, which was a Norwegian chemical company. They offered me the same money I was having at Minimax, which was fine. They were based in Twickenham, and I understand they still are, because I had moved back to Twickenham. And they were the equivalent of something like ICI in Norway. A very big chemical company. And they dealt with polymers. PVC polymers. I don't quite know what they did with it because that wasn't the side I worked on, but that's when sort of I went up a gear in how the offices were beginning to get ... nicer places, not nicer places but technology was beginning to kick in a wee bit. I had an electric typewriter and the switchboard was very easy to use. It was just a flick up and flick down thing. We took it in turns on the switchboard. It was a very small

company when I went there. It got bigger and bigger. But there were only a few of us when I first started work there.

RS: So was there a head office in Norway?

PO: Yes.

RS: And another office in London?

PO: Yes, we were Norsk Hydro UK Limited that I was actually working at. The one in Norway had a hugely long Norwegian bit attached to it, which I wouldn't even begin to remember! It began with KV, as far as I can remember. But that was a nice place. We actually had a ... Again, a male /female divide. The managers were male. We did actually have a Norwegian as the manager. He'd actually come over from Norway and was living in England. Had an English wife. But that was a very, very happy company as well. I think I've been blessed working with very happy people!

RS: Was it different working for a company that was kind of more international?

PO: Yes, I guess it was, really. Because I was in contact with fairly a much wider area of people. And we had ... for the life of me I can't think of what it was called. We didn't have faxes then, but we had a ... There is a name for it and I really can't remember what it was called, but you sort of typed out your message and it went on like a tictac thing, and then when you sent it, it was translated on the other end. And somebody will know what that was called, but I cannot think for the life of me what that was called now. (Telex)

RS: So that was a way of communicating with the Norwegian office?

PO: Yes. It was ... I suppose it was the forerunner of faxing. And it could be quite difficult to do because sometimes somebody would be trying to communicate in at the same time and then you lost what you were doing. But you literally just typed out what you doing and it went on to a little sort of strip, almost like Morse Code idea, you know. And then just translated ... went through and came out transcribed at the other end. But it might come to me at some point! My skills, my office skills were greatly improved in that office because there was so much I had to actually learn that I hadn't done before. Like the switchboard and this strange machine.

RS: What were you doing day to day?

PO: Do you know what? I have to say, I think it was sales again. I used to be in communications with people in Middlesbrough because that was the where the stuff came in. And I know I dealt with pallets. But what that job actually entailed ... you know it's stupid, but I can't actually remember what it entailed. My boss was the sales manager, so obviously it was sales. I had a lot to do with where the stuff was imported to, which was Middlesbrough and then it was shipped around. It was sales that I was actually dealing with.

RS: By shipped around, do you mean the UK?

PO: Yes. To various companies that needed this PVC plastic stuff to make plastic things!

RS: And in all the place that you've talked about so far, were most of the people working there white or was there any black or Asian people working there?

PO: Mainly white. Mainly white. To be honest, I don't think ... I think there was one black guy in Norsk Hydro and that was fairly late on. Not when I was first worked there. No, I would say predominantly white. Almost exclusively white. Even at the airport. I never thought of that but yes. I never would have actually given that a thought. But yes, they were. Yeah. Definitely.

RS: You then worked at ... North Hydro?

PO: Norsk Hydro. N-O-R-S-K.

RS: Norsk Hydro. For about three years was that then?

PO: Yeah. Must have been. Yeah. And then I left ... My daughter was born in 1970, and so I left just before she was born.

RS: OK. How long did you work for while you were pregnant then?

PO: I actually left at the Christmas and ... Because we didn't have maternity leave it didn't matter. So you didn't have to go right up to the end, to give you extra time after the birth, if you see what I mean. I left at the Christmas and Karen was born at the beginning of March, so I was about seven months when I left.

RS: And how was your employer when you told them?

PO: They were lovely. There was two of us actually that were pregnant at the same time. During my pregnancy, my immediate boss was wonderful. I had terrible morning sickness. I used to get into work and go ... Because I lived five minutes' walk away, I'd get into work and he'd go "Go home. Come back when you're feeling a bit better." I literally was doing that when I had morning sickness. And the other thing that he did which was really kind, he made ... The filing cabinets, the ones that I used mostly, he made sure that they were ... that the drawers were at a standing up level so I didn't have to bend down. He was very, very kind, my boss. They were very, very good. But as I say, no maternity leave so when I left, I left. And that was it. It was a nice company to work for.

RS: Was there ever any conflict between the management and the staff in any of the places that you worked?

PO: I was never aware of any. There may have been. There may have been at managerial level, but as an ordinary worker, no, I was never aware of any problems. There was never any problems about pay or pay rises, I just don't remember any conflicts at all. Certainly nothing where I would have felt uncomfortable working there. No. Perhaps I was just lucky!

RS: During that period, were there any redundancies?

PO: No. Again I think probably it was a good time to be in work, because most people then, it was a job for life. I flitted about a bit, but most people would have started a job and expected to stay there. Well, men, in particular, for life. The turnover staff was negligible. And also, if you did leave, getting another job was not a problem. There was plenty of jobs out there, not like now. I know we're in a recession at the moment, but most jobs now, you

wouldn't say that it would be for life. You couldn't guarantee it. But then, you could probably guarantee that it would be for life. My ex-husband, he started at his job ... He had one job and then he went to the place that he worked at and he stayed there until retirement. It would be early retirement, but that was pretty normal. You really didn't think that you would flit from job to job.

RS: You mentioned that it was slightly different for men and women. Would women expect to go back to the job that they had before?

PO: Generally no. Simply because your job ... If you left to have a baby, your job was filled by somebody else. They advertised for somebody else to come in because there was no maternity leave. And you didn't expect to go back. And there wasn't the childcare. There wasn't childcare because you were expected to look after your own children. I mean there were things like pre-schools, playgroups, but not childcare as women think of nowadays. There must have been nurseries. There must have been day nurseries, but generally you left and looked after your own children!

RS: Do you remember how you felt about that?

PO: What, not having --

RS: About leaving work after having worked for quite a few years?

PO: No, I was fine about it because that's what was expected, and so ... And I thoroughly enjoyed looking after ... I thoroughly enjoyed doing my own childcare. Didn't even think about the fact that you wouldn't be going back because you weren't expected to and it wasn't the norm. As I say, you just left, had your children and brought your children up!

RS: And were there any social activities?

PO: Oh, yes!

RS: What kinds of things?

PO: Always something at Christmas. Let me think ... With British Eagle I think there was a big dinner and dance over at Queen's Building at Christmas. At Minimax I think they had the same, they had a dinner and dance at Christmas. I guess the social activities weren't as much as they are nowadays, it was generally just the one big thing. Obviously, went out with friends, on normal sort of social things, but actually organised by the company ... At Norsk Hydro again, it was a Christmas ... a big party at Christmas. An office party as opposed to a dinner and dance. Which the other ones had had big dinner and dances. But then there weren't so many of us because it was a fairly new company. Yes, an office party at Christmas.

RS: Actually in the office?

PO: Oh yes! I remember having to get a really, really urgent letter off when the party had started! Sitting there, going I've got to get this right, without any mistakes! No, it was actually in the office. Somebody brought a lot of booze and a lot of food in. But other than that, we didn't do sort of social things. I don't know how relevant this is, but Sperry's ... This is going back when I was a child ... Sperry's where my parents worked, they used to do a

huge thing for the children at Christmas. They always had a big, big party for the children. And also a coach trip to a pantomime. Plus a goody bag! They are literally a thing of the past. I don't think anything like that would ever be done again. But they had lovely, lovely big parties at Christmas for children. And as I say, pantomime trips on a coach. I remember going on those. But I think the social things then became for the people that worked there rather than their families. Sperry's also in the summer used to have a big sports day. For the whole of their workers and the families, which used to be on ... There was a biscuit factory place which is now where the Grasshopper's Rugby Club is behind Gillette's on the Great West Road. But they used to have a big summer, sort of big sports day and social gathering. Again, that's something that my generation of workers wouldn't have had. It would have been just ... It wouldn't have been for families, it would have just been for the workers. British Eagle, the man who owned it, and I can't remember his name, he was a millionaire and he used to organise a cricket match in the summer where he lived. Which was very posh. I have no idea where it was but it was a very, very posh place! With horses and stables. So that was another thing, a social thing, but again that was only for the workers, as opposed to their families.

RS: That must have involved bringing together quite different kinds of worlds, really.

PO: Yes. That was quite ... Again, because it was sort of a family ... It was sort of a close knit company. I think that's why. Other than that, it was, as I say, the dinner dances which then became office parties!

RS: OK. Can you kind of put me through what happened next then?

PO: With me?

RS: Yes.

PO: After ... I have four and a half years between my children, so I didn't go back to work again until my youngest was at school, and then I got a job in a playschool. So I ran a playschool for ... Trying to think how long I did that for. A couple of years. I think I spent three or four years doing that. I'm not sure of the actual timing.

RS: Where was that?

PO: That was ... It was a pre-school in Uxbridge. Because when I moved to Cowley near Uxbridge when my eldest daughter was three. And then when they were both at school, when my youngest started school she was five, I got a job in a pre-school.

RS: What year was that?

PO: Ooh, I have to think. '79? Or thereabouts. And that was just basically running the ... I mean, we called it playschool but you'd probably call it pre-school now. I had to do a foundation course to qualify on that, which I did.

RS: Did you do that before getting the job or at the same time?

PO: No, while I was doing it.

RS: And how did you find the job?

PO: In the paper. That was in the paper. Again, I went for an interview and got it. And I stayed there ... Trying to think ... Probably about three years. And then I got a job as a dinner lady which actually paid more! And that was in the local junior school where my daughter went.

RS: What was it like returning to work after having looked after your children?

PO: It actually wasn't like working because I was working with children. Although it was a job, it wasn't like ... I hate to say this, but a proper job. It wasn't like a proper job. And it was just sort of an extension of looking after my own family, in a way. So the nice thing was obviously I had a bit of money. I had a bit of money coming in. But it wasn't like working working. The pre-school was only three mornings a week. And the dinner lady obviously was only an hour at lunchtime every day. I didn't work school holidays, obviously. So it wasn't like sort of returning to work as such. I stayed as a dinner lady until my youngest was ten. So I stayed there a couple of years. Then I got a proper job! Which was in a senior school school office. So that was like returning to work properly. So that would have been in '84.

RS: What were they like, the jobs at the pre-school and as the dinner lady?

PO: They were actually quite good fun, I have to say, and it's ... I mean, they weren't hard work. For the pre-school, I had to obviously plan what we were going to do and it was sort of run by the mums, I suppose like a co-operative in a way, and so they had a lot of input as to how it was done. And we had a mum's rota, so they helped. And again, this was pre having to have police checks and things like that, so the mums just helped. I was the only paid person, the rest were the mums helping out on the rota system.

RS: So who was your kind of manager then?

PO: I suppose the mums were, in a way, because it was run by them. The lady that ran it before me, the one who gave me the job, she eventually left and it was taken over by the mums. As I said, I was the only paid one. We did have to sit down and plan. No, we did get another lady that was paid, I beg your pardon. And she was originally a mum and they brought her in. And she was paid as well.

RS: And were you paid by the mums as well then?

PO: Yes, it sort of came out of the kitty, yes. And I can't remember how much! I did enjoy doing that but I got to the stage where, because my children were growing up I didn't want to be talking about nappies and tantrums and things like that. I did sort of grow out of it, I suppose, and that's when the job at the school came up and I left to become a dinner lady. And again, it was like an extension of family, because they were the same age as my children, because as I say, my daughter was at the school.

RS: What was that school like?

PO: It was just a bog-standard junior school, really. I knew the teachers, I knew the staff anyway because my children went there. One had gone through and the other was still there so I knew all the staff. And also I was on the PTA, so it was not a bad job and it was before children got horrible! I wouldn't like to do it now, I have to say. I'm not sure I'd like to do it now. The kids were good and most of them knew me. I enjoyed that.

RS: Was it kids from the local area who went there?

PO: Yes, it was the local junior school. It was a church school. It was quite nice working there. I enjoyed that.

RS: And then you moved to the ... Was the senior school a separate school?

PO: Yes, it was at the time called Evelyns School but it's been rebuilt and changed and it's now Stockley Academy. Yeah, I had ... Again, that was in the paper and I felt I could take on... It was a part-time job but I felt I could take on more hours because my youngest was about to go to senior school and they were able to look after themselves. Again, I saw it in the paper and applied, was interviewed and then got the job. Which was good. That was like going properly going back to work. I worked afternoons. I worked from one 'til four-thirty. It might have been one 'til four. And I worked in the school office. Because it was a school, because it was a local authority, they were still a bit behind technically. They were just getting computers in, and I have to say that I did blag my way in a bit on that one because computers ... and I said a typewriter with knobs on, which I'm afraid I do still tend to think! It was actually like going back to the Norsk Hydro office because it had the same switchboard and it had electronic typewriters and that was about it. They were just bringing in the old BBC computers which were typewriters with knobs on, basically. I mean, nothing like there is now. Absolutely nothing like there is now. But for me it was very good, returning to work, because it was like stepping back in time almost to what I was already used to. And so I became technological. I sort of grew with it. Which was really good. And I loved working there.

RS: What did you love about it?

PO: The people there were very, very nice. It was in a vaguely deprived area in the south of Hillingdon borough. And for all that, it was a very, very good school. It was surrounded by schools that had then gone grant-maintained, who sort of had the pick. And so the majority of the kids at this school weren't academically gifted. But the pastoral care at this school was brilliant. And it was a very friendly, happy school. I loved working there. The people in the office, we'd bounce off one another. We would often be hysterical with laughter. The staff were lovely. It was a very happy school. I loved it there. My job was typing letters. I had to keep the records up to date. I had to go in in the school holidays and I had to shift the kids' records ... take out the old ones and put in the new ones. I was the one that did the dinner tickets so I could know a lot of the children because of that. I also had to do on a Friday, the calendar, the staff calendar, for the next week, which involved a Banda machine. So I came home pretty high! Do you know what a Banda machine is?

RS: No.

PO: It was like a sort of thick mauve carbon, and you typed it on, and it came on ... It sort of stuck to the other side. So your printing was then in this thick sort of mauve stuff. And then you fixed it to this machine, which was sort of spirit based. And this mauve typing used to just duplicate onto other bits of paper.

RS: OK.

PO: So it was a duplicating machine, but it was a Banda duplicating machine. But because it was spirit based ... I'm sure Health and Safety would not allow one now because I used to come home quite high! And that was my last job on a Friday, so it set me up beautifully for the weekend! No, I am joking.

RS: So that was instead of a photocopier then?

PO: Yes. It was a step further from the old stencil machines, which was a sort of again, a waxed paper and you typed without the ribbon, so it actually cut into it. And that you would put on a machine that had ink in it. And that would go through the bits that had been cut out.

RS: It's amazing the way the technology's changed!

PO: Yeah! When you think about it, yeah. And that one, again, it was an electric machine, but what happened was it would go through the holes that you'd cut in and what you'd actually typed would come out printed.

RS: Right.

PO: I had one of those ... Minimax had one of those.

RS: What were they like to operate, those kinds of machines?

PO: Fairly simple. I mean, fairly simple. You just fixed them on. The one that was the stencil, it had holes along the top of it and you just pressed that in and pressed something down on it so it was fixed like a drum where the ink came through. And the Banda, same principle only it sort of clipped, like a clipboard would and you clipped it there and then it went round, again a drum, where the spirit came through. They were ... I mean, you didn't have to turn a handle. You could put how many you wanted done. The Banda machines had a sort of maximum number that would actually work with the spirit. It would get lighter and lighter and lighter, but ... And that was also what was sent out to the children, these Banda things. But as I say, spirit based and I'm sure they wouldn't be allowed today.

RS: How long did you work in that office for?

PO: I have to work it out by my children's ages. Must have been six years. And the only reason I left is because my husband and I split up and I had to get a full-time job.

RS: And did it change a lot in those six years?

PO: I think probably the computers became a little bit more up to date. But no, not really. Not really. The staff hardly changed. The Head Teacher left the same time as I did, so I didn't see a change of Head. No, I really enjoyed working there and it really didn't change much, because it was routine and that was how ... It worked, why fix it?

RS: And were you working with a mixture of men and women there?

PO: All the office staff were female. The Head Teacher was a male. The Deputy Head was male. But there was a mixture of male and female teachers. And the heads of departments weren't necessarily male. We did have female heads of departments. I don't think it was necessarily that you didn't have female heads, because you did, I mean within the borough there were female heads and female deputy heads. I think it was just at that particular

school there wasn't. There wasn't discrimination then. But we didn't have anybody in the office that was male.

RS: And you mentioned earlier that you joined a union at that point.

PO: Yes, I did join a union. Actually, that was either we all did or none of us did. And we all decided between us that yes, we would. And we did go out on strike once!

RS: What happened?

PO: I can't remember why we went on strike, and I know I lost money over it! I can't remember why we went on strike, but we did. For two days, I believe it was. And again, it was either all of us or none of us. I think it was before the strike, this was all sort of in the offing, and we all decided we all did or we all didn't and that's why we all went out on strike. But I can't remember the reason. It must have been something to do with money. It usually is. And I know I didn't get paid.

RS: Which union was it?

PO: It's changed its name since. It would have been the Local Authority and office worker type union. And I can't remember what it was called then and it has changed its name since. And I should know because we've got it where I am now, but I'm not in it. I can't remember what union it was. But I know it was the Local Authority one.

RS: And how involved were you?

PO: I wasn't, not really. Other than being a member I didn't get involved with it at all. Other than pay my subs!

RS: Why not?

PO: Probably a time thing, really. And I'm not particularly political. And as I say, we really sort of tossed up whether or not we did or didn't. And it was just a collective thing that we did so I didn't really get involved other than actually being a member. I'm not, as I say, particularly political. And that's probably the reason why and also family, and so just didn't get involved.

RS: And were there social activities at the school?

PO: Oh, yeah! We used to do things. What did we used to do? We arranged ... We had quiz nights and we did go out Christmas, we always went out Christmas for a meal. And in the office we used to go out ... We were very good friends and we used to go out for meals and things like that. The social activities at school were actually often school-based. We had the summer fair, and things like that as well. We did do other things. We always had a Christmas dinner and it was usually cooked by the sixth form. I think that was probably the main thing we did, the Christmas dinner.

RS: Were there some good cooks in the sixth form?

PO: I think they had help!

RS: So you stayed there for six years.

PO: Yes.

RS: And then where did you go after that?

PO: Then I went to ... Only for a couple of months I went to a little company ... I think it was MPL at Hayes? And then they moved to Conbrook. But I was literally just there for a few months because I was made redundant. It was taken over by an American company and I was made redundant. So we can just skim over that one! I worked in the sales there, but I wasn't very happy there. It was coming out of schools ... I'd always been in academia ... not academia exactly, but I'd always been in the school area, education, and it was totally different. They weren't overly helpful in telling me what I needed to do or was wanted to do. I actually wasn't very happy there, so in a way it was quite good! Although, at the time I was very upset because I needed a full-time job. When I got home, there was, in the local paper there was a job being advertised at Brunel University, which I applied for. And I was on the dole for awhile. And then suddenly I got an interview for this job that I'd applied for. And I've been at Brunel ever since! Doing various things.

RS: At the point when you were made redundant, did you have any kind of rights or anything?

PO: No, not really, I hadn't been there long enough. I think they gave me like a month's money in lieu, and that was about it really and then I just went on the dole. No, I hadn't been there long enough to have any rights, really. It was a fairly small company and it was taken over by an American company and they made a big shuffle around and they made quite a few people redundant. As I say, I wasn't overly happy there but I was really worried that I needed a full-time job and suddenly I hadn't got one. I was very fortunate that this other one came up fairly quickly.

RS: And you found that all by yourself?

PO: Yes. It was in the local paper.

RS: Was there any support or anything offered to you after you were made redundant?

PO: No. Not really, no. I signed on on the dole. Had to go down there every fortnight or whatever. Had to prove that I was looking for jobs. I had to take all these little things where I'd sent off for interviews. I had quite a few interviews, but then this one came up at Brunel, which I had applied for. I mean, it was some time afterwards. It was a month or so afterwards that I got an interview, so I just thought I hadn't got an interview, but they were obviously a bit slow in sorting themselves out. So I got an interview and I got the job! So that was good.

PO: I've been there sixteen years now, nearly seventeen years.

PO: '92, does that sound right? I started there in the end of October, the beginning of November. That would be '92 wouldn't it?

RS: You had a couple of months.

PO: Yes. And my youngest grandson was born then, so it was actually quite nice! And I started in the computer science department as post-graduate secretary, so I looked after the

post-grads. And then within that department I did several different things. I ended up being research administrator and PA to Head of Department. And then I moved to be Pro Vice Chancellor's PA, and that was in 2000. And I've been doing more or less the same job ever since. But now I'm part-time.

RS: Right. And what was the atmosphere like there?

PO: Brunel? Oh it's lovely at Brunel. It's lovely. Like most academia, there's politics with a small "p".

RS: What kind of things?

PO: It's just politics with a small "p"! There's always going to be that in academia. Sort of small disagreements at the top somewhere along the line. Generally, I'm very happy working at Brunel. I've always been happy there. Again, it's one of those places where people tend to stay. In the non-academic side the people tend to stay for a long, long time. The academics do move around more so, there's more turnover academic staff than there are non-academic. I would say non-academic tend to stay much, much, much longer. I mean, I've been there seventeen years.

RS: Has it changed in terms of the technology in that time?

PO: Yes. Because in the meantime we've got the web!

RS: When did that ...?

PO: I don't know! Not all that long ago really, the web. Sort of crept in, didn't it?

RS: Was it after you started?

PO: Yes, certainly after I started there. And obviously it's a huge tool to be used now in my job. Finding things. You know, looking for anything, really. For instance, we've got somebody that has been offered an hon. grad this year. Part of my job is to look after the local residents. I field their complaints, generally. And we will be inviting them to come to one of our graduation ceremonies. And in my letter to them I will be putting that this particular person will be getting their honorary grad. And I've looked on the web to find a bit about her, that I can add to my letter a bit about her so they'll know. That would have been impossible without the web. So yes, it's a useful tool in my job now.

RS: And I guess email as well.

PO: Email is fantastic! Email has its drawbacks in that you get such a load of rubbish, and unfortunately people don't now tend to read email. Global emails they tend not to read at all. What I like is if I am setting up a meeting between say six people, before that entailed six phone calls and then oh no, suddenly I can't do it and another six phone calls to eventually come up with ... Now I can just do an email and say can you do these dates and it's so much easier than actually trying to do that on a phone. I still prefer, if I'm doing a one-to-one meeting, I much prefer to phone. That is so much easier. To ring up someone and say I have his diary in front of me, are you free then. So the phone I find ... it's still ... a much more personal thing. I do prefer that. But email, yeah. If you're trying to get in touch with lots of people, it's much, much easier. And very quick, obviously. But people are getting very

complacent with emails and they tend not to read them or forget to reply now, I find. The novelty's wearing off.

RS: Do you think it's affected the way that people communicate?

PO: Yes. I think it's impersonalised – is that a word? Impersonalised? I'm not sure that's a word.

RS: I know what you mean.

PO: People email people that are in the next office. Which is why I still prefer to pick up the phone. Yes, it's made it all a little less personal. And I think email can sometimes be misconstrued. If you're talking to someone on the phone, they can hear by your voice if you're joking. If you're just being a bit flippant, you can tell in a telephone call. If you try to be flippant or a bit casual in an email, it can come across totally not what you mean it to come across as. And I think you can upset people in emails because of that. It's a bit like texting. I think things can be misconstrued by email. It has its uses, but I still ... I guess it's because at heart I am still an old-fashioned PA. And I do much prefer the personal touch. Technology is fantastic. It has its place. But I still think that you can't beat the personal touch. And I think we don't use it enough now. I think technology has pushed it a bit to one side. Everything now can be done ... You can register for things, you can pay for things, you can buy things ... Everything can be now done online. And it has taken that personal thing away. I still... outside of the job context, I would still phone and order something over the phone than online even though I can do it online more easily. As I say, it's simply a personal thing. I prefer the personal touch. But having said that, for booking meetings for lots of people, email beats the phone hands down! But that's only if they reply. Not everybody replies and then you end up having to phone them anyways. Yes, I've seen technology ...from sitting with an upright IBM typewriter ... to what we do now, it's a pretty short period, really. I suppose it's half a lifetime. It's not even a lifetime, it's half a lifetime. And it's really, totally changed the face of office work.

RS: Are there any other ways that you think office work has changed?

PO: More men! Yeah, we do have a lot of men in admin now. And it isn't looked upon as being a female job anymore. As I say, I'm an old-fashioned PA, which I guess will die out. I'm due to retire in a couple of years and my generation of PAs I think is now administrators, as opposed to PAs.

RS: What's the difference?

PO: As a PA, my job is to look after my boss. There is admin there, obviously, but I look after his diary, I make sure that he's OK, I make sure that he has time between his meetings, so I sort of look after him as well as doing the admin and the letters and stuff like that. An administrator is more of an organiser. That's how I see it. I may be wrong. I mean, I personally don't do whizzy-bang on the computer! And they know that. They know I'm retiring anyway. My strengths are the fact that I am a person person. A people person. My inter-personal skills are very good. And that's part of my job as being a PA. I think administration ... Just being an administrator ... I don't mean *just* being an administrator ... But if you're an administrator, those inter-personal skills have to be there but it's more organisational skills. That's how I see it. I may be wrong. The difference ... I think that's

slightly the difference between being a PA and being an administrator. At Brunel, we do have office administrators, office managers ... we have them both male and female. I'm not saying that a man couldn't be a PA, because I'm sure they could, but ... This is going to sound unbelievably sexist. I think that women are still better carers than men. I think that's a maternal thing. And therefore looking after a boss in the way an old-fashioned PA does is sort of caring. Does that make sense? I don't mean that to sound sexist, but I believe that. I believe that it's ... It is more sort of caring for someone as well as actually working for them. It is slightly different. And I think that women are better at that than men are. And again, I don't mean that in a sexist way, I think it's a fundamental difference between men and women. Men can be really good administrators. I'm not saying that they can't, because we have a lot of admin men. The majority of the admin jobs are women still, but we do have a lot men in there.

RS: And you were saying you think there's going to be a move in the future more away from PA --

PO: I think so, I think so because, again, it's a personal opinion. Because I think generally, people go in as administrators. I think there will be a place for PAs in ... for managers and directors and that. But I think generally, in offices I think it will be administrators. A lot of managers now do their own work. Because it's a computer, they can. They do their own letters, they do a lot of their own stuff themselves. Because I've been working in academia for so long, I know that out in the big wide world it's totally different. But I think probably administrators are more likely to be in offices rather than PAs. There's going to be a place for PAs, but I think it will be more just managing diaries and things like that because the way computers now make it so much easier for everybody to just type up whatever they need to do. You don't have to have typing skills anymore, because you ... you don't. Most people can use a keyboard. They won't be using it like an old-fashioned typist did or does. Because I still hover over the middle keys! Because that was how I was taught to type. And so I still do hover over the home keys and I touch-type, still even with a keyboard.

RS: Do you enjoy typing?

PO: Yeah. It's quite funny sometimes where I haven't hovered quite right, and I do have a load of gobbledygook when I look at the screen! But at least you can get rid of that without having to use Tippex! Or years ago, when it was carbon paper behind and you had to stick things behind so you didn't rub onto the carbon paper. Now, that's a wonderful technology. That's taken over from the need to use carbon paper. That was awful if you made a mistake and you had carbon paper behind.

RS: How long would it take then to ...

PO: What ... Tippex was good, when that came out, because before that you actually had to use a rubber. You can imagine you've got your top copy, a piece of carbon and perhaps two copies behind that. So you'd have to put a piece of paper, (tear off a piece of paper) and put that behind the first piece of carbon paper. Then again behind the second bit of carbon paper. Then rub your mistake out. And then remember to take your bits of paper out, and then re-do whatever it was.

RS: So you'd have to be really accurate then.

PO: Yes. It could take forever. You had to be accurate. Tippex was a lot better because you could just Tippex over. But again you'd have to wait for it to dry. Obviously, computers have just taken the need for that out completely, so you don't have to be so accurate. It's quicker if you are, obviously. And people that haven't trained as typists can use a keyboard without being trained because most people use two fingers. So that's a really good thing with computers. And you can obviously do as many copies as you want now because you just hit the print button. So that's fantastic, I have to say. But going back to what I was originally saying about people coming now into offices, it's a totally different ballgame, I think. I haven't had an interview in seventeen years, but I did interview for the job I have now but ... I think interviews now are totally different. You're expected to do a presentation. I mean, I would hate to have to interview now because it's totally, totally different. You're expected to do a however many minute presentation and have it all on a memory stick. Stick it into a laptop. Totally different now. Rather than just going into a room and doing a little typing test.

RS: Is that what you had to do then? At your interviews?

PO: Yeah. The job that I have now, although my role has changed slightly, the job that I have now... bearing in mind that I was already working at Brunel, I was literally asked to do a letter saying ... I had to make the letter up and just do a letter asking them whatever it was ... that my boss was unable to go to a meeting or something. I had to make the letter up basically. Which again, is part of my job. Which I think an administrator ... I don't know. Perhaps have set letters now, I don't know. But because I have always done it, I can just make a letter up from scratch to say what it is I need to say, without a template. That's the word I wanted to use. A template. Office roles have changed so much now. There is a difference between a PA and an administrator, but I think it's going to be more going towards administration, I think. That's a personal opinion!