

**MARGARET THOMAS INTERVIEWED BY DAVE WELSH ON 1 DECEMBER 2011 AT THE
LIGHTHOUSE FOR BRITAIN AT WORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1945-1995**

(Margaret Thomas left school in her native Scotland and worked in various departments of the Civil Service: initially the Ministry of Defence and then the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, before moving to London to re-join her first employer. Thereafter, she worked for several years at British European Airways' West London Air Terminal, having joined in 1967, and then worked for BEA's in-bound travel service, Windsor Tours, eventually leaving in 1979 to have a baby. Having initially returned to employment after a 6 year break bringing up her son, by working for a term as a classroom assistant in a Primary School, Margaret worked as an Examinations Officer at The Poetry Society for nine years; performing the same role at the Central School of Speech and Drama for a further two years, when the scheme was taken under its auspices. Finally, Margaret worked for many years, undertaking a variety of roles, for the General Dental Council, until taking her retirement. Margaret has lived for most of her working life in West London.)

DW: Margaret, I wonder if you'd mind starting by telling me about when you left school? What was your first job and what happened?

Right, I left school when I was 17, having done 6 years at an Edinburgh Grammar School. I joined the Ministry of Defence in Ambeck in Perthshire as a Clerical Officer. We were dealing with the Royal Naval air fleet. I stayed there for two years and then I transferred to Edinburgh on the same grade to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Scotland. I was there for about 18 months and then I moved back to the Ministry of Defence in the Empress State Building in Earl's Court, and I was there for, I think, about 18 months. This was at the time that, well, probably, the first time that the Defence budget was being cut and I dealt with re-fitting nuclear and conventional submarines and the budget went; so it was very boring sitting there pretending that you weren't doing the crossword. It was actually then that my then boyfriend, later husband, came home one night with a clip from the Evening Standard, and it was looking for Traffic Control staff at the West London Air Terminal; and the requirements were, I think, two GCSEs (or whatever the equivalent was then), one in English, one in Geography. So, being full of confidence, I said 'I can't do that, I don't have Geography.' It wasn't taught at the school I went to, past 15. He pointed out that it was maybe a standard of education that they were looking for, so I applied, off I went for an interview: the first interview in my life, it was horrifying! In those days they had two intakes: they had the beginning of the year, gearing up for the travel season; and also the people that hadn't been kept on from the year before; because everyone started temporary and then you were made permanent depending on the jobs that were available, spaces they had; and, what they did, later in the year, the good ones were invited to come back in January. So, I was the late intake and they wanted people to start a.s.a.p. Well, in the Civil Service, you had a month's contract, so I said I couldn't do that, so they said 'Oh well', and they talked about the uniform, which was really like a service uniform, and a triangular hat, and I was told that I would have to have my hair off my face. Well, my hair doesn't do off my face, and I pointed it out to them. Perhaps I could grip it up somehow, and I thought 'this is going nowhere'. Anyway.....

DW: Were they quite strict about that? About uniform?

Oh yes, totally! It was a navy jacket, nipped in at the waist, and straight pencil-line skirt, it had to be a certain length, navy blue court shoes, light stockings, and it was a white shirt. So it was really an old service type uniform, beautiful material; heavy bow; and you wore your hat at all times. You did not run. You addressed passengers as 'sir' and 'madam', but it all seemed right: in those days the airline industry [was seen as] quite a top job. You were looking after people, not treated as a load of riff-raff, as one is now.

DW: So remind me of when this is exactly – what year did you start at the air terminal?

This was in 1967 and I stayed in Traffic until 1973. So, just to go back, my boyfriend phoned me the next morning at work and he said, *'there's a letter from BEA'*, and I said *'it didn't take them long'*, and he said, *'do you want me to open it?'* He said, *'OK, you better get to Personnel, you're starting 4 weeks on Monday!'* So I said, *'whoa!'* The salary included shift work : we worked from – there were variations – but the basic shift were from 6:30 to 2:30; 2:30 to 10:30; and 10:30 to 6:30; and the shift pattern was for 3 earlies and 3 lates, or 2 earlies, 2 lates, 2 nights; and you did 2 nights, I think it was every 2 or 3 weeks; and it was a straight run, including weekends, but you could swap shifts. So there were a band of people who loved to do the late shifts; a band of people who loved to do the early shifts because you could go out in the afternoon; go home and have a kip, get ready for the evening. So I started in Arrivals and Departures, and it was meeting people off the buses and getting them on them, and just acting as a general information point. Now, the coaches left for Heathrow Airport, there was a coach for every flight, you checked in at the Air Terminal and, if you were on the flight coach, if that coach broke down or anything went wrong, the plane would wait. Sadly, I can't remember how much the fare was. I've got 5 shillings sticking in my mind from when I started but I don't remember. It was a very, very busy place, it was popular, obviously.

DW: Where about was it?

It was in Cromwell Road, where Sainsbury's is now; and now there's the Sainsbury's building and all the flats above. They're obviously new but it was called the West London Air Terminal and there was a huge coach park for the buses. The ground floor was Arrivals (that's Sainsbury's), and the coaches came in off the Cromwell Road, deposited the passengers and their bags. There were 2 big carousels and the offices were behind that, with a big reception desk dealing with queries; porters brought the bags in. The drivers of the coaches were the London Transport bus drivers in their last couple of years; so it was a plum job for them, they loved it!; and, do you know, it was great fun being a girl at that time, I'm being very sexist, but, you know, all these drivers that thought we were the bee's knees. You know, *'morning, darling!'*, and the porters as well, they were a fun crowd. So, you started in Arrivals and Departures, there was a departure gate for each flight. You'd sit on the gate, make sure the passengers were OK, they'd already checked in on the concourse, which was on ground floor level. Once the coaches came in the basement, then they went round the corner and upstairs and they pulled in at the gates. The porters would bring the bags along, there was a belt system that went down and then they just decanted them onto the coach. The passengers could go on any coaches they wanted, but that wouldn't guarantee them their flight. Then progression was onto check-in (if they thought that you were good enough). I can't remember if it was on interview, or if you just applied. I don't really remember how you got to check-in but, eventually, that happened. That was promotion; and then we had Terminal control, which was up on the 2nd floor of the building. The passenger bit was the ground floor, then there was the concourse on the first floor, which also had the gates; and there were shops – WH Smith's was there, and there was a café and a restaurant; and then the 2nd floor was starting to be the offices. From our office on the concourse, there was a spiral staircase up to Terminal Control, which was a huge area finding the night shifts, where people would go up and play Ouija board and used to scare the death out of each other, and we had a link in Terminal Control out to the airport. So you closed the flight, you told them the bus was on its way, and they knew when to expect it, and then you gave the details of the passengers' bags, the weight of the bags.....

DW: This is all before the days of computers?

No, BEA had Beacon, which was one of the earliest computers, and it was a very good system. So everything was loaded on but we were still in voice contact on a sort of squat box with the airport, because the computer wasn't up to saying *'the bus has gone'*. We read out our sheet to make sure that it coincided with theirs. I can't remember what the other details were but there was a lot of voice control.

DW: Just going back, this was run by BEA [British European Airways]. Had it been there very long, was it relatively new?

It opened in October 1957.

DW: The idea [of the Air Terminal] was to get all BEA passengers from central London, to go to the terminal, and then they would be taken by bus to Heathrow. Because, obviously, today, people won't understand that, they'll think, 'I'll just get on the tube'.

Don't forget, it was passenger service, which is a concept that I don't think people have nowadays, and it was to make it easy for people; because flying was still relatively expensive. The travel market was starting to boom but you still had the concept of looking after people who wanted to travel with you; and, BEA, its raison d'être, if you like, was to fly the flag. The service was what it was about. The thought of people having to get on the tube with their bags – we were trying to stop them having to do that. The other thing was there weren't airport buses in those days. I think that it was about the time that the airport bus started, but I'm not sure; but it was around that the time that the Terminal stopped, because it was BEA at West London, there was Victoria, which was BOAC, and PANAM, as I remember, they had a terminal at Olympia on High Street Kensington. They had coaches going out that way to the airport. It was past Olympia, heading for the High Street. I think it's the Hilton Hotel now. They were on that corner. I don't know if TWA had one; Aer Lingus had one in Brompton Road.

DW: So all the main airlines had those terminals?

Yes, and people could come and buy a bus ticket and get on the bus, it wasn't just passengers. If you were going out to meet your friends and relations you could pop on the bus.

DW: I didn't realise the extent [of the Terminal services].

Oh yes, it was big, and it was a very, very good service. Then, I actually left traffic in '73, and I joined what was Windsor Tours, which was the in-bound equivalent to Southern Holidays, which was BEA's package tours abroad. We brought packages into the UK. I'd just got married, was fed up with doing shift work and, also, the Terminal was going to close. Those of us in Terminal Control were offered an interview with air traffic control, and the thought of guiding aircraft, it scared me to death! I also didn't want to work at the airport. My family was based in West London. So I joined that and the Terminal closed totally in the Spring of 1984, but they stopped doing the buses, I can't really remember [when] but something like '74, '75; and all the airlines pulled out.

DW: What was the reason for that?

It was too expensive and [also], I think, because of the better connections to the airport. As I've already said, the airport bus could take people. I think, as I remember, the traffic was becoming too heavy, and to guarantee that if you got on a coach, it was knocking the flight schedule, and it was too expensive to start doing that. So that was it.

DW: How many people, roughly, would have been working there in the time that you were there? Up to a thousand?

Well, actually, in the whole building, it must have been because it went up to the 8th floor, and the 8th floor was the Penthouse suites, and that was for the managers and chairmen. The 4th floor, that was the holiday group: it was a huge Southern Holidays telephone sales and the tours; there was publicity; passenger relations; marketing; and quite a lot of people in marketing and things, who had been Macindoe's men, with burnt faces and things. It was a bit of a shock when I went into the office job and suddenly saw somebody who had been really badly burned, and there were quite a lot who were employed by the airline.

DW: *You said that you got fed up with shift work: what was it about shift work that you [didn't like]?*

Well, it was just that my husband did 9 to 5 and my friends did 9 to 5. I couldn't say *'yeah, I'll go to that party'*, it was *'if I can get a swap'*, and [the same with] weekends. I generally did earlies or nights because that left you social time. But it became [a bit much] and 6 years was enough. But it was great while it lasted because one was working with people who were of a very similar type educationally of girl; I can't think of the proportion of male to female, probably, at a guess, 10 to 1.

DW: *Predominantly women, then?*

Yes, predominantly women and quite a lot of quite posh ladies because, I remember, I wasn't going to be made permanent in my first year because I'd been the last one in, so first out. I was called up to the office and I was told how pleased they were and I thought *'mm, here we go'*, and they said *'look, we will guarantee you a job on the 1st of January, and you'll be permanent with all the perks of the job.'* I said, *'yeah, but I'll be leaving at the end of October, there's November and December to pay the rent'*, and I was told that *'Harrods are always very pleased to have our girls'*. I said, *'if I'd wanted to work in Harrods, I would have gone there!'* They wanted a guarantee signed that I would come back and I said I couldn't do that because, I said, I might find a job that really interests me. I said, *'but I'll certainly phone; I love working here.'* The next day I was called back again and I was given a contract.

DW: *So you negotiated your way through that and got a contract, didn't you?*

Well, that's how sounds but I didn't have it in me to do that; I said it how it was and, well, it worked. So, the perks: in the first year – and this was even temps – you got an inaugural flight. Obviously, you had to go there and back in a day but it was free. So the three of us went off to Schipol, and we had a day in Amsterdam, saw the red light district, had [inaudible] for the first time and, whoa, it was great fun! Then, once you'd been there for a year, you got concessions and you paid 10% to go to on standby on any BEA flight. There were Interlines, which were other airline packages, really to let you see how the airline worked. So that involved free flights and highly reduced hotel accommodation, going on safari, you name it. BEA, unlike other airlines, they weren't keen about us applying for free tickets. They gave out free tickets to other airlines at the drop of a hat but they didn't like their staff having them. It was just one of those quirky things. Because I had great friends in Canada and I went to a reception at Air Canada, met the UK manager. I was just chatting about my chums and he said, *'look, get a letter, have a flight to Canada, anywhere within Canada, and as long as you want.'* Whoa! Could I get the letter? I asked around, who could get me the letter? It turned out there was one manager – not a manager – but, nonetheless, off I toddled to tell him my sad story. *'What's that old git been saying to you?'* He was senior in the terminal and he interviewed me. There were three of them sitting there, the woman who looked after personnel was immaculate in her hat, and her hair off her forehead, everything, just beautifully made up; the station manager; and this other chap, who wore glasses and was quite short, very, very nice, kindly man. He was a bit deaf and when I'm nervous my voice goes. *'Tell us about your jobs.'* *'Well, I work in the MOD, and I stored nuclear and conventional submarines.'* So, the other two said *'yes'*, and George said *'you do what?'* So I said [soft intonation], *'I stored nuclear and conventional submarines.'* On the third time of me repeating it, worse than ever, the station manager said [loudly] *'she stores nuclear and conventional submarines!'* At which he lowered his glasses, peered over them, and said *'Good god! Who do you work for?'* Anyway, he got me my ticket to Canada. But the other good thing was that you always had people to go places with. I think there were about 120 or so of us, permanently, in traffic; so, obviously, in that gang, you're going to get quite a crowd that are like-minded and, quite often, after an early shift, we'd go bowling in Streatham or just go for a walk.

DW: *So there was a real social side to the job?*

Oh, absolutely! On a night shift, we'd go down to – in those days they had the mail flights, and I think they left us at about midnight or half twelve, something like that, going to Edinburgh, Glasgow and Belfast and, also, people could travel on the mail flights. They cost about three quid for a ticket.

DW: Right – I'd assumed that all the mail went by rail. I didn't realise there were flights delivering mail.

No, mail flights – the last flight was the mail flight; because if you were in the Terminal on a Friday night, you'd have the Irish brigade coming in. Oh, we went to Dublin, as well. You'd get that, you know, *'It's me old mother, she's dying; I've so got to get on this flight.'* I'd say, *'I'm so sorry, but the flight's full, but we could get you on the 8 o'clock?'* *'Maybe she'll get better. I'll try again next week.'* We'd go through this! In Terminal Control you had to do a lot of paper work but you usually were done by about one and there was a canteen in the basement and a bar: there was a bar on every BEA premises in the country because staff were not allowed to go into pubs in their uniform. I'm not saying nobody did but it was not done, you wore a coat or something. That lasted the whole time I was there; the thinking being, that you could have been mistaken for air crew and, seeing the pilot of your flight or the air steward, not a good idea!

DW: Did you have a Summer and a Winter uniform? Did you have two types or was it just a standard issue?

No, it was the same thing, because we wore jackets, and as far as the jackets were concerned, you could take them off in the Summer; but I think if you were going outside, or formally, you still had to wear the jacket; buttoned.

DW: So you're obviously conscious of this film that's on about PANAM: does that bear any resemblance [to your experience]?

But then I didn't fly.

DW: No, no.

There were the trolley dollies and the people who wanted to be groundstaff, not to look after passengers, just to get them on their way: when I say not to look after them, not to be with them for hours in a small space. You know, if I'd wanted to be a waitress, I'm sure I'd have done that.

DW: I suppose that film, and all that carries, is about showing a particular style of air travel and rules for the staff, and the uniform.

The rules, and the glamour, in a way; because we were known. You'd walk down the road and 'Oh, BEA', and then later in the 70s, I think it was Hardy Amies that designed it. Of course, his design and the material we got were two different things, but with bright red coats. It was actually a dress and a jacket and this bright red, sort of tent-like coat with a hood. So, of course, they could see you coming ten miles away! Night shifts, we'd go off to Covent Garden and have a quick bite to eat, take orders; obviously the duty officer knew that you were going, and the porters would come. There would be 2 or 3 porters and 2 or 3 of the Traffic crowd. The porters would go into the pub and we'd go off on our own because they thought that we had a better chance of getting bargains. You had to buy the big crates of plums, peaches, whatever, so we'd get them and then off to the pub, and go and get some more, and then get back to the Terminal and then everybody would cough up, and you'd divvy out the fruit. I remember my total disappointment. I'd never been to Covent Garden and there was this huge wall of flowers at the back, and there were roses, and there was no smell. I was so gutted. That's my big memory of Covent Garden market. Yes, it was a

very social place and before Christmas we'd go on a day flight to Jersey or Guernsey and get a load of duty free purchases. Yes, it was social, it was great fun and, in your 20s, fantastic.

DW: Can I ask how much you were earning?

Yes, when I started it was approximately £20 a week; that included shift pay. I don't remember what the shift pay was. But it was considerably better paid than staff at Heathrow now. I was quite horrified when I heard that there were problems some time ago and it gave the salaries, and I thought '*whoa!*' So that was with shift pay and, obviously, that was the lowest of the traffic scales that I went in at. I don't remember how it progressed but I do remember when I left in 1979, I was the manager in Windsor Tours, and I was earning over £8,000 a year, which was good money in those days. So the airline was a well-paid job, I think I can safely say; and, of course, that was no shift pay.

DW: Could you describe to me how check-in, and all that, has changed today? Is it more or less the same when passengers are checking in at the airport? Is it the same kind of basic thing?

Yes, you came in, you said '*good morning, madam*', that's how it's changed! That's not fair, they do generally say '*good morning*', but '*madam*' – if you didn't add '*madam*' you'd had it, if anyone overheard you. You put the suitcase on the scales, you took their tickets, of course, that bit wasn't computerised when I started. So you wrote on the ticket what the bag was, what the weight was, tore off the ticket, gave them a flight card and labelled the bag; wrote the flight number on the bag and labelled it. Anyone could check in anywhere they wanted. We also had late check-in and that was devoted to the flights that were closing; I think something like 15 minutes before the flight closed late check-in would kick in for that flight, and you had your own porter on late check-in, who would carry the bags down rather than having them disappear in the system. Then you had a squat box, late check-in down to the gate. You just said, '*right, flight closed: last passenger on the way with the porter*', and that was it. Then we had the Irish problems and the Tel Aviv problems. [With] Belfast and Tel Aviv, you weren't allowed to check in normally for those flights, you had to go to a special desk and that was pretty high security. I remember one day I was doing the Belfast flight, a lot of the passengers dumped their bags just in front of the desk to save them wandering about. But I got there and this bag is going *tick-tock*, so I got the security chap who came up and these were retired security men! He carried the bag, and I went with him, into the back of the coach park, which was open, put it down, opened the case with his keys, and there was a clock. To my horror, he took the back off it. '*Please god!*' Anyway, it was a clock.

DW: It was a clock – you're still here!

I'm still here! I mean, you had a few hairy moments, like, you've got the Tel Aviv flight, those passengers are ready to travel with their bags, so you discover that one of them's gone AWOL, and you have to get all the passengers off the coach; all the bags off the coach; they identify their bag; and then the bag is put in the left luggage and we did have lockers, and we had an IRA bomb in the left luggage lockers, so from then on there were no left luggage lockers; and I don't think there are any left luggage lockers, still, at airports. If there are, I've not found them.

DW: Did you have lockers yourself, as staff?

Yes, but that was in the staff area in the basement.

DW: What about when you went up and did the traffic: what was your typical day there? Describe what you would have done. You would get in for the early shift, say.

You got in 6:20 on the button. Again, there was great camaraderie. If you were late, your opposite number couldn't go home. If you were late, there was a good reason. So you got in, you took over, any problems that they had, anything outstanding; you just took over, because there were still

flights going. It was busy: you'd sometimes have 2 or 3 flights closing in 5 minutes so you had to get the flight closed from late check-in, then you'd tell the gate *'flight closed, you can go'* or *'there's a passenger on their way'*; then you had to get in touch with the airport to give them the number of bags when the coach left; if there were any problems.

DW: This was all by phone?

Well, yes, this was a squat box, a direct link that we had to the airport. We did have a landline for emergencies and we had a direct phone line as well, but we used the squat box. Then once the last flights, the mail flights, had gone you'd set up for the morning and get new sheets out, checking what was happening; checking if there were any problems; you had to be around to make sure that the bus had arrived safely at the airport, in case they were going to call you to say something was wrong. We thought we'd lost a coach one time on Arrivals. They were the coaches with the trailers behind and the driver locked the trailer, got in his coach, and away he went. I was in the Arrivals Supervisor's office and I looked up and saw this commotion. It wasn't a commotion, there was something wrong. So I went out and the driver is having fits because the gates of his luggage van were open and the luggage had gone. So there's passengers, and no baggage, I thought *'OK, this is one for the Duty Officer!'* It was actually quite funny but it wasn't funny for the passengers and we didn't have an answer. Clearly, it was opened, but then other coaches were coming in. We were aware that there was this coach that was missing. *'OK, there's got to be a connection.'* Then this coach pulled up, the driver just flew in and he said, *'Miss, it was awful!'* He said, *'I'm following him, his trailer opens, a case comes out, so I looked [he looks back in friendly fashion]; and I look again and I'm waiting; I've got to stop my bus, get the bag, then the trailer got full.'* He's got it all along the trailer and he couldn't let the passengers out in case anything happened to them, but they were all taking the bags. So we've got a bus. Anyway, they were all united and I don't remember any baggage claims coming from that one but obviously, if there had been a problem, we would have compensated them. There were no questions asked about mishandled baggage.

DW: How long would it have taken a bus to get to Heathrow from you, approximately?

About 40 minutes.

DW: I wonder what it would take today?

Well, exactly. You can see why it stopped. The coaches left one hour before the flight was due to take off.

DW: You see how tight it could be. I want to ask you about trade unions: were you in a union? I know the sector was quite unionised.

I was, against my religion. Traffic was not a very union-minded part of the airline but BEA was a very strong airline, it was TGWU, I think. That's ringing a bell. They negotiated very, very good pay rises. *'So we're doing all this work for you.'* Some of us had a problem about the money that went to the Labour Party and then we discovered that you could opt out. So we joined the union but I can't say that we were active and we never went on strike. Sometimes it was tempting because, if the airport was closed, we got the backlog. We had no planes but you just tried to put people on [buses]. It was chaos if there was a strike or, indeed, if the airport closed because of fog. Any delays, we got the backlog because the policy was to boat and train people that could be boat and trained. The further destinations you would try and get them on different flights. So the domestic flights, if there was any problem at the airport, they would be bussed to us and we would then book trains for them, and send them on the way to the station, but with one of our buses.

DW: There weren't really any serious industrial relations problems because I know at BOAC there were quite a few.

There were a few but they were at the airport. I don't know about BOAC but BEA had them, too. I don't remember them being bad. I remember strikes. I remember one strike at the airport, it was generally baggage handlers. On one, the guy had been caught with his hand in a bag, and they went on strike. Now, please justify [this]. Even our porters did not come out over that one. I mean, there was a lot of dishonesty that went on. I don't remember [that many industrial relation problems] but I just joined because it seemed the right thing to do; because of the benefits that it brought. I remember when I joined Windsor Tours, and that was up on the 4th floor, until we got our proper offices. This chap came along and introduced himself as the 4th floor union rep. He said, '*if you've got any problems with your manager, you come to me.*' I said, '*if I've got any problems with my manager, I think I've got a good enough relationship that I'll go and tell him about it!*' He said, '*that isn't the way you do it here!*' I said, '*I'm sorry, but it's my way.*' Because we were a team of nine – but you're going to get the union in because your manager's upset you? Do me a favour!

DW: So, this is about the time you'd moved to Windsor Tours. You'd left BEA.....

No, I was still at BEA. Windsor Tours was a BEA incoming travel agency.

DW: So you moved to there, in which year?

That was in 1973.

DW: You were there until when?

1979. We were shifted to Victoria, I think in '78. That was a huge management change because BEA and BOAC had amalgamated. So there were two of everything and they were also planning to close West London [Air Terminal] and planning to close BOAC's Terminal in Victoria, and we were in offices across the road; very small building, with its bar at the top. That was an amalgamation of us because our General Manager – he had an office at Beacon House in the Heathrow perimeter – went, and we got an overall manager, who was keeping his beady eye on things. The other guy was ex-forces and great fun, a huge piss artist. The new guy was much more new management style and, as I say, they were both just one away from board, so very senior men. They shifted us to join to join BOAC's in-bound agency, and I think there were 6 of us and 6 of them. Our manager beat their manager, our assistant manager, we had two assistant managers, one of each. It was all part of the big scaling down that was going on.

DW: So there were big changes, then, [taking place] in the late 70s?

Oh, huge changes, yes, and also it stopped being our job to 'fly the flag'. When I joined Windsor Tours, depending on the destination, I dealt with a group of things. So you fill in aircraft from, let's say Naples, and you might have various groups, but we had a Naples office, they were BEA, I think that there were a couple of traffic people, there was also a sales manager. Then there was the overall manager and a couple of other bods. On the tour side, they were trying to get people out of Naples into the UK and then when we had them, I would arrange tours for them, tours of the country, whatever they wanted to do, basically.

After I left, which was in '79, I think it was about the following year, BEA stopped flying to Venice, Naples and various other points. Now, there's no BA flights to Spain; maybe to Madrid; and I'm not sure about Malaga, don't think so. There was also the start of the Package airlines. That all had a huge hit on what we were doing; but when it was our job to fly the flag and keep these routes open, and Greece was another big place, in fact we employed an agency to deal with our in-bound tours from Greece. We charged next to nothing for the seats so, obviously, we had a huge advantage, and that was just written into the budget that these planes would fly, because it was our job to fly them the flag in these parts; Eastern Europe.

DW: *Is that the big change, then, that's happened?*

Yes, I would say, but don't forget I left in '79, so it's a long time ago.

DW: *OK, do you want to talk about afterwards? After you left BEA? Where were you working then?*

I left because I was pregnant. I didn't do anything until my son was 7. I did some work in the school, you know, going in to hear the kids read and that sort of stuff, and then there was a class starting after Easter, the teacher had to get them up to speed by June/July, and the Head asked if I was interested in going in to help. So I said 'yeah'. It was strictly for one term. It reminded me of what life was outside, but I wasn't qualified to do anything. The airline had long gone and, also, I knew it wasn't the same. I saw an ad in the local paper for The Poetry Society and it was for Education Office Assistant/Typist. There was a technical hitch to this. I'd never ever been on the other side of a typewriter but I thought 'yes, I can do it.' Anyway, I phoned them up and said that my typing wasn't terribly good but [I'd do my best]. They said, 'Oh, that's fine, come along.' I gave my old manager at the airline as my referee. My next door neighbour had a portable typewriter and she was a P.A., so she showed me how it worked and how you did things. So I practised a bit. This was the night before the interview. So off I sailed, and it sounded quite interesting. Then there was the typing test and I knew it, there was an electric typewriter. Right! So I said, 'if I could have 5 minutes to familiarise myself with this', and they also gave me Tippex, I said, 'haven't you got a rubber?' I thought it was deeply unfair. They gave me a letter to copy and it was tabulated. So the only way I could think of doing this [was in a certain way], because finding the keys was the challenge. The magazine editor had an office next door and he wasn't in, and he had a manual typewriter. So the Education Officer and the Exam Secretary staggered in with this original typewriter. I thought, 'that's fine!' So I went 'clunk, clunk', she was sitting here, she was sitting there, and after about 5 minutes the Education Officer said 'right, well I think that...' and I just burst out laughing. I said, 'come on, you can't stand this noise no longer!' 'No, no, no!' So I went to get my son and when I got home the phone was ringing, and it was my boss from the airline. He said, 'Well, girl, you've got the job!' I said, 'Oh, come on!' He said, 'Well, they've been on the phone to me for a personal reference.' So, I got the job. It turned out they were looking for a typist and they later employed one! But there were manoeuvres running, their exams were going, and they were also looking for someone to fill that job. So I moved seamlessly into the Exams job. Then that fell foul of the Arts Council, because it was these nasty private schools. Well, I was a bit peeved about that because it had been a very, very big thing for the Poetry Society, dealing with elocution. So, of course, all the private schools and they also did Bible reading; so all the private schools and the convents in the country doing their Bible reading, and the Church of England; Bible reading; but also verse reading – all nice young ladies with say, Liverpool accents, got them ironed out of them by the Elocution teacher. It was big in the Guildhall, Elandar, and the Poetry Society. Then the Arts Council stopped the Bible reading, so, of course, lost the schools. When I started it was about 1% of state schools did it. I still think it was a very, very good thing for kids to do, just give them a bit of confidence. Going in, saying 'good morning' to an examiner, being scared, but we always had someone take the little ones in. Suddenly this person doesn't have two heads, and pick up the certificate for it. I felt quite strongly about getting the state schools in, and I had a bit of freedom to use some of the money I had [from the Arts Council]. The private schools subsidised the state ones. So, in about 8 or 9 years I had about 10% of exams being taken by state schools, which I thought was good. The Arts Council didn't because it didn't reflect the state/private [ratio] in the country. The Central School of Speech and Drama were very interested, so the Exams [department] and I went to [work at] Central School and there was one chap there who was a Deputy Principal, they had a few Principals at the time, then there was a problem and he left. So that job only lasted two years. I thought, 'OK, where do we go from here?' I sent off 9 applications, I remember, I got 3 replies and interviews, of which I got one; not too bad. I came 2nd in all of them. I'd applied for a job with a medical something or other and it was chairing peace things! One was a Fine Arts gallery, it was great; they were in such a muddle, and I was really interested. The chap phoned up and said, 'I'm so sorry.' The day I was interviewed they'd had a

late application from someone with an MA in Fine Arts. OK, no contest! The other one was the General Dental Council, and that was in the Education team, and I didn't get that one, either. I came 2nd and 'please can we call you?', 'yeah, fine, of course you can.' He called, the person that had got the job lasted 2 days, and would I still be interested? I finished my career in a quasi-Civil Service! I didn't like the job at all. It was boring and horrible.

DW: Where was that one based, then?

At Wimpole Street: they are the equivalent of the General Medical Council for Dentists, and it was to do with visitations to the Dental Schools abroad; South Africa, Australia, New Zealand; to say that their courses were fit for purpose, and this was checking the documents.

DW: That was it, then?

Yes, it was dire, getting them out, I hated it! I thought, 'OK, 6 months, and I'm off!' After 4 months my boss said that Education was taking for the examination (spot the connection) and that was for dentists coming from abroad. They had to take an exam to make sure that their qualifications were up to speed; unless it was one that we recognised: i.e., Australia, New Zealand. He said, 'would you be interested?' 'Oh yes, anything!'; and that was great and I got that into shape and it really grew. Then I applied for further promotion. I was a manager – it was Policy Management, actually. Then we got a new Chief Executive who turned it into a team and, in the end, I became council secretary, because he was looking for someone to just deal with our council. I was writing papers because I was still dealing with policy work as well. In the end, I took on Equal Opportunities. The bill had just been passed when I was there. I thought that this might be interesting. It wasn't, it was dire! It was quite interesting in bits, just to see how far behind we'd got in some things and making sure that everybody treated each other properly, because when I started there, having gone from the Poetry Society, that was a very, quite left of centre, group of people, and I went in there and I thought 'Mm, they've airbrushed the others out'. It was white middle class to a person, although there was one Jewish woman. Of course, I was Scottish. There were a few Scots around. Then we got a new Personnel Manager, in the days when they took people, who broadened it out a bit. A few black faces started to appear. I thought, 'well done!' Of course, it's a very changed place now; it's just like everywhere else. It was a very traditional, medical [environment].

DW: This would have been in the 80s?

No, it was the 90s; the early 90s. Because, looking at all the papers, in the 90s it was still 'Dear Smith..... Yours Jones.'

DW: Much more formal!

Oh, totally! When I joined the Registrar was addressed as 'registrar' (up one's own 'whatsit'!) Then we got a new registrar who was Chief Executive.

DW: Oh yes, that was a big change: the re-naming and re-structuring of job titles.

Yes, because she was very much there to guide. That was how I ended up dealing with the council. He was still officially the registrar but they needed someone to do that work. Yes, that was a big culture shift. In council, when I retired from there 18 months ago, it was still 'in council'. I don't know if it's still like that now but it was [still like that then]. Interestingly, the president was a woman when I joined, as was the registrar. It hasn't happened since. But the council's full of academics, with the token woman, she was representing the dental auxiliaries, and she says she remembers being told – she'd been on it for a long time (it's a hugely changed set-up and everything) – by one of the great and the good, 'you sit down there, dear.' She thought 'sod this', so she slogged her way up through the council chambers and sat up there with the rest of them. I remember one of the dentists, at one of the dental hospitals, saying 'my girls'. 'What?' This was in the mid 90s, but again

he was old school. They loved him, but they did balk, just a bit, at this, the girls. The dentist, in those days, was still top dog and, of course, that was all changed, as well. So it's been quite a varied working life.

DW: I'd like to take you back, just briefly, to the beginning, when you came from Scotland to London. Why did you and why West London? They're the two questions.

Boyfriend! I'd been going out with – well, kept in touch with, difficult to go out with between London and Edinburgh – but I'd been seeing this bloke for about 3 years, and it seemed a bit daft so [I thought] *'let's go to London'*. So I applied, as I said, to go back to the Ministry of Defence (Navy, if possible). The job was in Earl's Court. I came down with a friend and we had digs for a couple of weeks in Fulham. Obviously, we didn't want to stay there, and we found ourselves a flat in Clapham. It wasn't quite the place it is now and it was Clapham Common North side, so you had to walk to get to the Northern line; and I still have the biggest hatred in this world for the Northern Line! I worked in Earl's Court so I had to get a bus along to East Putney and then get the train up, which was alright. So I worked here; played here. I was about to take the [Civil Service] Executive exam, but I was just so bored with the whole place, I wanted out. But I was very skint. I had a job in the Addington pub off the Earl's Court Road. Sorry, I digress from Clapham: I felt that I was in the middle of nowhere and I wouldn't go out unless I was collected and returned. There was nothing was going to get me wandering around there and that nasty Underground. We just didn't like it, so then we headed west again, and there was a newsagent, I think it was John Snow's in Earl's Court Road, by the Underground station, all these flats, you know, the Aussies and every migrant used to be there with their bit of paper, and there was a flat in Palace Gardens Terrace up at 'The Gate' *'Oh, this is more like it!'* We went there, 9 guineas a week. *'Yes, this will do nicely'*; and I've been in West London ever since.

DW: You were, therefore, very close to the Cromwell Road, where you were working, too.

Yes, I couldn't have done the job – I mean, I had to be up at 6, out at ten past, in work at twenty past. So I lived there and then I met my future husband, so that was *'bye-bye'* the chap who had come down to see me. Then, when I was working in West London, we were living just off Kensington Church Street, and sort of around that area. After we got married, we lived in Earl's Court, so it was just a quick trot; always in walking distance. I just seem to have stayed around!

DW: You became a West Londoner.

Oh, definitely! It was much, much later. My husband wasn't a Londoner, but he'd lived there for years and years, but he drove, so he had a good idea of [getting around] London. My way of getting around London if I wasn't with him, was by the Underground, because you knew that you would come up and know where you were. Buses, I was never sure which direction you should be going in. It was years and years before - unless it was in West London - I got on a London bus. Then, the Poetry Society, that was in Earl's Court, as well. I didn't actually move too far! It would be [the case] as it was advertised in the local press. But then it moved to Covent Garden so, when that happened, a whole new world opened up. Whoa! I'd been to Covent Garden but I didn't think that much of it. It was when it just started to be regenerated. Alan used to park his car there. It was like a bomb site there. OK, so this is Covent Garden, and, of course, the market had gone. So it was all a bit tacky and not very nice but then, by the time we moved there, that was great. Then, Central School was in Swiss Cottage – another bit, because I hadn't been past Lord's Cricket Ground. *'Right, this is all great fun.'* Then, of course, Marylebone, say no more. That was another [interesting area]. I was so bad that, when the Poetry Society moved to Covent Garden, I went out one day just for a reccy at lunch time, and it started to pee it down, and it was windy and my umbrella blew inside out and I got lost. I thought that I was back at the Poetry Society and this was two hours later! I thought I was back at the Poetry Society but it was Chancery Lane. I thought, *'no'*.

DW: You were quite a long way [away from Covent Garden].

Yes, so I phoned and said I was in Chancery Lane, I was going home! So that was it.

DW: OK.

I hope this has been of some help?

DW: Yes, thank you, it has been a great help.