

Deborah Collins

Discovering Stratford Village – Working Lives, Working Community 1890-1990

Jim Ludlam: OK. So can you tell me a bit about your early background when you were young, before you started work?

Deborah Collins: OK. First, shall I say who I am? Make sure I have my name on the recording. Deborah Collins, known to my friends as Debbie, born in Cornwall on the 14th of September 1957. So my early background is that I was the village headmaster's daughter in a little village by the sea in Cornwall called St Mawes. My father died when I was six and three-quarters so we had to go away to Exmouth for a couple of years while my mother trained to be a teacher (she'd been working as a teaching assistant in my father's school). Then we came back and we lived in my grandmother's house in the same village. So I went to secondary school in Truro, the city nearby. Then I went to the University of York to study English and Politics, but I'd wanted to be a journalist from the age of 11.

So I worked on the student newspaper there and maybe a little bit on the student radio station. Then when I left university aged 21 I thought I'd probably quickly get a job on the local newspaper (which was the way in in those days). But I found the people who were getting all those jobs were the ones who'd done a postgraduate course in journalism and there were only two in those days (there are loads of them now) which were at City University, in London, and Cardiff University. So I was getting turned down for jobs that people who had done those courses were getting. Then I found a radio journalism course which was just starting almost on my doorstep in Falmouth in Cornwall at the technical college there. I believe they now run that course at Falmouth University, which didn't exist in those days. So I did a year's radio journalism course and I learnt all the things you need to know for print journalism as well, such as law, central and local government, shorthand, typing, and interviewing technique; and did a couple of work experience placements at two local radio stations in Plymouth – the BBC and the independent one there.

At the end of that course I wrote again to the editor of my local newspaper in Truro, the West Briton, which was a weekly paper, and he said he didn't have anything available at that time but he would put me forward for the group interviews. The newspaper belonged to a bigger group, the Northcliffe group. I was sent to the interviews and tests in Cheltenham in Gloucestershire and got offered a job on the local newspaper there in Cheltenham; in those days you served indentures on a local newspaper. So you had in-work experience while you were also doing a bit of studying. I think we also went on a block release course in Cardiff for six weeks, and then after about a year and three-quarters I did my proficiency test run by the National Council for the Training of Journalists. The NCTJ still exists but the qualifications are somewhat different now. And so I became qualified, got my pay rise, became women's page editor and arts page editor, and then after four years on that newspaper moved to the Southern Evening Echo in Southampton where I was television editor. I'd enjoyed writing theatre reviews so I thought writing about television might be the next and most enjoyable step. So I worked there for about two years, and then moved to London to freelance, which proved quite difficult at first again to find the work. In fact I worked for Newham Council for three and a half months in what was then the Rates Office (I don't think it was called Council Tax then), before finally getting some regular work on a new newspaper called the News on Sunday, which was launched in 1987. It was supposed to be a leftwing Sunday tabloid, but it struggled a lot, partly from the fact that it was based in Manchester rather than London. So it was far from the seat

of government and it came across a little bit like a local newspaper. It had some funding from the Trade Union movement, but ended up in the ownership of the Oyston family, who owned Blackpool Football Club, and eventually it closed down. I think it was launched in March '87 and finally closed down in November '87. After that I found myself for a couple of years taking Rupert Murdoch's shilling, on his tabloid newspaper Today, which was using some new digital techniques and, like Eddy Shah, Rupert Murdoch was sort of trying to break the print unions, which happened when he moved all his newspapers to Wapping in the 1980s. So I was there for a couple of years and then moved into magazine work on a new magazine, What's On TV, run by a company which was then called IPC. It subsequently was named IPC Media and later Time Inc. UK when it was taken over by the American company Time Inc., a subsidiary of Time Warner.

I remained in the National Union of Journalists all the time from my first job in 1980 until I eventually left my job at Time Inc. in April 2017. But the unions were actually derecognised at IPC in I think about 1998 or 1999, so from then on my union membership was rather a token thing because we didn't have any activism any more.

JL: Can we just go back slightly, this will colour what you say. You wanted to be a journalist very young – why?

DC: From about the age of 11 I wanted to be a sports journalist at first. I think at that age, oddly, I was very much into horse racing and I wanted to be a racing journalist. I can remember writing a fan letter to the racing editor of the Daily Express, of all things, and being very proud to get a letter back. A couple of years later it became football. I wanted to be a football journalist, but after that round about the age of 16 I got quite political. So then I wanted to be a news journalist, I suppose, rather than a political one. Then I went to university and did all kind of diverse things for the student paper, including arts journalism which is more what I ended up in.

JL: So you ended up in IPC, which is where most people at that time would be ending up. How did you feel when things started to kick off at IPC towards the millennium when we had all the business at Wapping?

DC: Yes, well, the business at Wapping had been earlier than that, I think, in the '80s. I know a lot of print journalists actually refused to move to Wapping with the Murdoch papers, at the time that he was making the print unions irrelevant by opening his own print works at Wapping and making large numbers of them redundant. As far as the NUJ at IPC was concerned – yes, it was quite hard to take. A lot of people were quite angry about it and felt rather powerless. I think the time in my life when I've been the most active in the NUJ was on my second paper, the Southern Evening Echo in Southampton. I remember we had a series of one-day strikes and then a longer one and that was about pay. We were trying to get a pay rise, and there were two unions – the National Union of Journalists, and the Institute of Journalists, which was more rightwing and had a smaller membership. I can remember how angry we were when we actually managed to get our pay rise as a result of the strike, but the IoJ members were given their pay rise a month before we were. So we had won them the pay rise and then we didn't get it until after they got it – they were rewarded for what we had negotiated.

JL: And you said that in your early days in journalism you were quite politically motivated. Is that what drove you into the union or were they two entirely separate things?

DC: I think they were entirely separate things. As far as I recall it, it was not a closed shop at the Gloucestershire Echo, my first paper in Cheltenham, but the majority of people there belonged to the NUJ, and there might have been one or two IoJ members. So it was just a normal thing to join it. The head of a local newspaper branch was always called the Father of the Chapel or the Mother of the Chapel (i), and I remember when the Mother of the Chapel we had decided she didn't want to do it any more I ended up being MoC, as we called it, for about six months. This was long before email communication and mobile phones. And there wasn't much communication between the NUJ headquarters and us and I was mortified to find out that I was supposed to conduct a vote on a particular day on whether we should have industrial action, and hadn't even known about it – but the NUJ didn't care. I'd not held the vote among my members and the NUJ didn't seem too bothered about this. It all came to nothing really. But I only did that for about six months until somebody else could be found who could step in because I didn't really want to be an organiser.

JL: How did your employers respond to trade unionists in those days, in those earlier days?

DC: I think, you know, it was all normal. We would try to negotiate a pay rise, then if we didn't get it we would have a one-day strike or threaten a one-day strike. It was a normal way of doing things. Our employers didn't seem too concerned about this. I certainly didn't ever fear for my employment, but I've stayed in the NUJ all my working life in case I ever did need them to defend me at an industrial tribunal, if I were unfairly dismissed or whatever.

JL: But that's never been necessary?

DC: That's never quite been necessary, no. I've certainly had my troubles with Time Inc. in recent years but I've never called on the NUJ to defend me, no. I now count as a retired member so I just pay them a small annual fee to stay in touch with them.

JL: But they are still there if necessary?

DC: Yes.

JL: So you said that when you started it was shorthand, etc., etc., etc. How have you seen the way things have developed in terms of how mechanisation, etc., has changed your job?

DC: Yes, when I first started we did shorthand, we used old-fashioned typewriters and bashed away. And we used very cheap paper. We'd have a sheet not much bigger than A5 and put it in the machine with a carbon paper and take a carbon copy of everything – these were referred to as 'blacks', the carbon copy. And these would be passed through the news editor, who'd read them and check them and then down to the... through the subs [sub-editors] to hot-metal printing. At the Southern Evening Echo typesetting was becoming computerised, and I remember the print workers, who by now were called 'compositors' – they had big old computer screens with a lot of green type flashing up in front of them. So stuff was already being typeset in a computerised fashion, which was just four years after I first started with the old-fashioned typewriter.

So by now it was... I started on the Gloucestershire Echo in 1980 and the Southern Evening Echo in 1984 and remained there until early 1986. Then the next newspaper I worked on was News on Sunday, using fax machines at their small London office to send copy up to Manchester where their headquarters was. I don't know what their print processes were because of it being in Manchester.

And then on Today newspaper from 1988 to 1990 the journalists were directly inputting stuff... Yes, by the time I got into IPC, again it was all direct input.

JL: Today interests me... because that was a real marker, wasn't it, in the newspaper industry, or at least it tried to be. Perhaps it needed Murdoch to come along and develop that. Did you actually start at Today right at the beginning of the newspaper or did you move in later?

DC: According to my notes (which I've helpfully taken for myself)... Today newspaper was launched by Eddy Shah, the first man to take on the print unions in 1986, and I was there from 1988 to late 1990, and by now it had been bought by Rupert Murdoch.

JL: Yes, I say it's interesting as I used to work just round the corner, so I used to see all the rows outside in the street.

DC: Was that when it was in Pimlico or when it was in Wapping?

JL: In Pimlico.

DC: Yes, I worked in the Pimlico office, and after I left it was moved over to Wapping. When I was at IPC I was made redundant in 2004, our whole department was made redundant. We were doing TV listings and the section I was on was doing them for What's On TV, and every year the Press Association (PA) which was based at a village in Yorkshire called Howden, their TV listings department had tried to not outbid us, but under-bid us – offer IPC the same service for cheaper than our department was costing them, and finally they succeeded, and our whole department was closed down and our listings operation was farmed out to PA. You won't believe they were saving the company a million pounds a year because they were employing young inexperienced people up in this village in Yorkshire, Howden. During the time I was out of IPC – because I did eventually make my way back there after a few months – I again worked for Murdoch at The Times at Wapping. I did quite a lot of shifts on their special reports section, which was kind of an advertorial pull-out which might be about... for instance, the very first one I did was about Belgium, so there were lots of features about tourism in Belgium, industry in Belgium, farming in Belgium, chocolate in Belgium. They had a very odd computer system whose name I can't remember at The Times – it was very clonky. But I remember that by the time I got my head round it I quite enjoyed working there. But around about May 1995 [DC means 2005] I found my way back into IPC and became a features sub-editor, since the listings department had closed. Features are much more interesting to edit in any case than TV listings are.

JL: Eventually you stopped working for an employer, you became self-employed?

DC: Well I always... technically I wasn't self-employed. I went back there from 1995... not 1995...sorry, 2005. I was made redundant there in 2004, September, and found my way back in there in about May 2005 and was there ever since on a freelance basis, but also on a full-time basis. So I was treated like a staff employee with a proper contract, and so I had holiday rights, sick pay and all the rest of it. So my last 12 years there were spent on that basis, and in terms of how HMRC saw me, I was also a full-time PAYE employee rather than self-employed. My daughter, who's 25 now, is different, she does bits of journalism, bits of cat-sitting, waitressing and music teaching, and so she is having to do her tax return like a self-employed person.

JL: So when you stopped work was that a natural progression of things, or did you make the decision to stop?

DC: I begged them for voluntary redundancy as things had been getting progressively worse there over the last few years. In 2008 the company moved into its own purpose-built building on the South Bank, called the Blue Fin Building. But in order to make or save money over the subsequent years we let more and more floors to other companies and our staff were squeezed into less and less space. Some magazines were closed down and eventually the building was sold, so that we became tenants in the building that was originally built for us by the company that owned us. Just before Christmas 2016 we were moved to a leased building at Canary Wharf called 161 Marsh Wall, I think it's called. But just before that, first of all in the Summer of 2016 they brought in some new technology that I could see from the off was going to be very difficult... make life very hard, and I started thinking, how soon can I retire? – I don't like this. And then they invited applications for a load of voluntary redundancies and I applied and didn't get it. In October of that year, 2016, I saw a whole bunch of beloved colleagues depart including my editor and my deputy editor, who I'd worked very well with... and then yes, to add insult to injury they sent us off to this windblown three floors of a four-storey building, which has now been further reduced to two floors of a four-storey building, at Canary Wharf. And working practices were changed. As soon as we finally somehow got on top of the new technology, which is called Content Station and we called it 'panic station', they started doing more of what they called hubbing, which was having pools of sub-editors, picture desk people and production people who were no longer working for just one magazine – you had to work on several of them at once and you might be rotated from one magazine and one chief sub to the next in the course of a week or a month. And I found myself having to work on magazines I didn't like so much, or I was about to, and in teams of people I didn't like so much as the one I had been in.

JL: And newspapers rely more on the online content – were you involved in any of that? You said you were revolving...

DC: Certainly people were pressurised to produce content for the website and I didn't like that either. Mostly it was very clickbaity – you know, 14 things you don't know about Call the Midwife or something – and I found it all so tedious I didn't really want to do it. I was happy subbing features about Call the Midwife or Strictly Come Dancing, especially since there was a team of very good writers there, but I didn't really want to churn out listicles, as they call them, for the website. I thought, I'm too old for this [laughs].

JL: So you went?

DC: Having failed to get voluntary redundancy the year before, I knew that if I hung on for a bit I'd be among the favourites to get it the next time (that's what they tell you). But when the spring came last year and I saw that I was about to be thrown into a bigger pool, a bigger hub than I had been working on, I just told them I wasn't happy and wondered if there was any chance of redundancy, and they put their hand down the back of the sofa and found a couple of fivers and said, 'OK, you can go in two weeks, three weeks,' and it all happened very quickly in the end. No, they didn't say that, they said, 'We don't want to lose you... Please don't go.' [Laughs] But no, they gave me a reasonable offer and so I went.

JL: So how's life since?

DC: Very laid-back. I haven't been working very much and some of what I've been doing has been voluntary. I'm just living off the redundancy money for now until my mother dies, and she's nearly 99 and very frail. So I think the money might just last, or if it doesn't I'll have to do a bit more work. But I do do some book proofreading and editing on the side and I understand I've got another book coming to me soon – that should be a reasonable earner. Apart from that, I've only earned a few hundred pounds since last April. I don't sign on, I'm not technically old enough to draw my retirement pension, but after the first time I was made redundant at IPC in 2004 I was then around my 47th birthday and three years later I was allowed to draw my occupational pension. So since I was 50 I've been getting some occupational pension every month, which certainly helps. I got a lump sum as well at that time.

JL: I'll ask you this question, it may be a difficult one but my parental background is in the newspapers, etc. Would you say the newspapers – journalism generally since you've been involved in it – do you think it's been driven by technology or by management? Or has one driven the other?

DC: That's a very hard question. I suppose the management have always been under pressure from the shareholders to get in the technology that saves as much money and manpower as possible. So that even local newspapers now operate on a sort of pool system. I've been reading about some venerable local newspaper groups where now all the copy is produced by a pool of journalists in Swansea or somewhere, you know, who aren't actually there on the ground.

JL: And sub-editors...

DC: Some management or proprietors think that you can do away with sub-editors, but they learn their lesson when somebody gets sued for libel because there wasn't a sub-editor checking it or because something gets randomly cut off the bottom of a story to make it fit, that thereby falsifies the story because something crucial has been left out.

JL: The reason I asked that question is simply... well, let me ask another that connects with that...would you say that management has got what they expect out of technology with all the changes? You've been in journalism in the most crucial time... do you think that management have got their expectations of what all this new technology can do correct?

DC: No, I think they are blundering their way through it. When our management, our CEO, brought in this new system at Time Inc. UK and moved us to this smaller office where we were suddenly hot-desking – we'd always had our own desks before – it was only thanks to the hard work and dedication and diligence of some of the people who were right there with their noses to the grindstone – the staff people – that managed to get us all through it. If you manage to miss your print deadline so that your magazine doesn't come out one week then you're in huge trouble because your rivals are going to benefit and people might stick with your rivals. So we had, for instance, a colleague of mine who was head of the art desk, the graphic designers, who I knew was getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning to come in and deal with the teething problems of the new technology, and without him there would have been disasters and I don't think what he did was noticed, let alone appreciated. And we had staff members grappling with this who were on anti-depressants and taking time off with stress and everything. No, it's thanks to the staff down there with their noses to the grindstone that these things work out. Whereas the management write us lovely messages about 'how forward-looking it all is', 'how brilliant it all is' that we're now doing

what they call 'agile working' [laughs]. To me that meant leaping over a bunch of cables while everybody was busy putting their computer back on their desk every morning, because we no longer had our own machines or desks and would plug them in from scratch. Well, we did have our own machines, we had to put them in a locker every night. Various other people including my immediate boss took redundancy in the August, by the way. So I keep hearing from ex-colleagues: 'You're very well off out of it, it's very nasty.'

JL: I get the same. Do you think the unions could have done more to make sense of all this change?

DC: Not as far as IPC/Time Inc. was concerned because they'd been derecognised and were powerless.

JL: What about up to that time?

DC: There was a lot of industrial unrest in the mid-Eighties over it. I don't think we are ever going to win against the march of technology. If the march of technology is going to make money for the shareholders – no.

JL: Is there anything else that that you wanted to mention (given that you've made notes) – is there anything you thought was important that we haven't heard?

DC: Let me go back over them... a little history of IPC here that I copied down from the internet. IPC was formed by a merger in 1963. Stands for International Publishing Corporation. The magazine division was formed in '65, taken over by Reed in 1970, which was to do with the Daily Mirror, and split from the Mirror Group in 1974. In 1992 a merger made it into Reed Elsevier – Elsevier is a Dutch science publisher – and in 1998 a management buyout financed by Cinven saw it renamed IPC Media. Yes, and I think union derecognition was around about then. I remember the Mother of the Chapel at IPC was a woman who worked as a journalist on New Scientist and that when the company was sold Reed Elsevier kept New Scientist, because Elsevier was originally a science publisher and it fitted in with their whole picture, and everything else was sold.

JL: You mentioned a Mother of the Chapel again. That Mother of the Chapel who you took over from when you filled in for six months – she must have been one of the first on the journalism side as an MoC?

DC: No, I don't think she was. What, you mean it was always men before then?

JL: It always seemed to be that way when I heard people talking... it was always the FoC...

DC: No, I think we were a female-dominated newsroom, well – as far as numbers of staff were concerned. There was a bunch of us in our early to mid-20s on the Gloucestershire Echo, and you know I always look back nostalgically to my years there. We had a great time. We went out together. We weren't all learning together, as some people were more experienced and had been there for a few years. The news editor and his deputy were men, of course. As were the editor and the deputy editor.

JL: Until Rebekah came along.

DC: Rebekah Wade, as she was, Rebekah Brooks. (ii)

JL: She changed things.

DC: Yes, I hadn't really thought of it in male and female terms as far as the union was concerned. It didn't seem an odd thing to have an MoC.

JL: Anything else you wanted to mention?

DC: If I go through the boring history, it was sold to Time Warner's subsidiary Time Inc. in 2001. But we don't need any more of the boring old history, do you? The Wapping dispute was in 1986. Today newspaper, on which I worked, was also launched in 1986. 'It pioneered computerised photo-typesetting and full-colour offset printing', it says here.

JL: I remember the first editions of Today, they weren't very good.

DC: They were very blurry. Today was kind of Rupert Murdoch's attempt at having a more liberal newspaper in his stable. It was aimed at 'yuppies' and people whose politics tended more to Labour or Green. I actually took maternity leave with my first child while I was working there, which again was very good of them as I was technically a full-time freelance there, and they had me back when my baby was three months old. But I remember being outraged by a billboard I saw while I was on maternity leave, for Today newspaper. This is what it was all about... the billboard said, 'Win a rainforest and save the world', so it was masquerading as Green but it was really very consumerist.

JL: That was the beginning of Murdoch's aspirations to take over the entertainment world... Anyway, we're getting very political. Thanks for that... it's interesting.

(i) 'Mother of the Chapel' The female [chair](#) ([chairman](#), [chairperson](#)) or the female [senior shop steward](#) of a [trade union chapel](#) ([branch](#)) in [UK printing](#) and [journalism](#).

(ii) Rebekah Mary Brooks (born 27 May 1968) is a British journalist and former newspaper editor. She was chief executive officer of News International from 2009 to 2011, having previously served as the youngest editor of a British national newspaper at *News of the World* from 2000 to 2003, and the first female editor of *The Sun*¹ from 2003 to 2009.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebekah_Brooks

