

Name: Lorraine Bowen

Duration: 00:19:51

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So, could you just explain when you came to here in Milton Keynes and John Lewis and what it was like when you first started?

Well, I first started for John Lewis Milton Keynes in John Lewis Oxford Street but I came to the shop in May 1979, so I was one of the first two partners to work in the shop and it was still a building site then, so my first memory is coming into here, it was completely concrete, there was nothing that signified it being a shop and, over in the corner here, there was a builder lying asleep on the floor with a copy of The Sun over his face and a dumpster truck next to him. It was quite bizarre really. There was no running water, the escalator well and the lifts weren't there, just where they were going to be, so you went up and down two flights of stairs every day. Occasionally somebody would come up with a bucket of water to the top floor 'cause there was no running water on the second floor but initially we couldn't even have tea or coffee in the shop because it was a building site. So we had to go out to the builders' Portakabin, which was out in the, what is, the east end car park, and we had bacon butties and cups of tea with the builders.

What did it feel like, working at this time?

It was really exciting. It was kind of strange because there was nobody here but it was exciting because you were starting something and I think...I'm quite a process-driven person and I like things to be done in a particular order, so I kind of felt that everything that was happening was in the right order because I was here from the start, so all the planning of the recruitment, everything that happened here – obviously what was going on in the store was all about the building and I had no control over that but watching everything was really exciting. And I remember I started here in May, along with the managing director's secretary – we were the two people that went into the Portakabin, and the builders were told not to swear when the ladies were in the Portakabin. I seem to remember a little table in the corner that was kept clean for us because obviously they didn't want us to get our clothes dirty – but yeah, that first...that excitement of being involved in something from the start, I'd never experienced that before and hundreds of people were going to arrive and I knew

them all by name. I typed every single offer letter, I helped interview partners, I stood and did business dress – which is the clothes that they used to wear – I did business dress demonstrations to keep the crowds entertained in Stephenson House, ‘cause we interviewed over a thousand people in two weeks, and so I...people still, now, you know, forty years on, will say to me, “Oh, I remember you at Stephenson House, you showed me the business dress,” or “You interviewed me and gave me my first job.” So there are people, all these years on, that still remember that but it was just a real excitement. It was like being part of, you know, something being born, you know, some major event. And my husband and I both worked for the partnership for two or three years before we came here so, yeah, it was a real...John Lewis had that real community family feel about it then and coming to a new store with everyone else was something I don’t think you could replicate unless you had that kind of experience.

What was it like working in..? Obviously the fact that you started in May, May '79...

Yeah, May '79.

...when it was still the building site? How did it feel about..?

It was hard to imagine what it was going to look like and there was lots of areas you couldn’t go to so I...you know, we literally came into the store and went up to the second floor. We occasionally could have a look round as the toilets were finished, or this sort of area’s going to be the managing director’s office – the managing director had his own toilet. It was rather bizarre. He had a big office with an area for meetings and next-door was a small toilet and he had a key to let himself in and he was the only person that used it. *[Laughter]*

Wow, I never knew that.

Did you not know that?

Don’t give Paul, our managing director, don’t give him any ideas.

Well again, where we’re standing now would have been the furniture department. Obviously, in 1979, it was still part of the building site but this is where the furniture department eventually became. Outside in the, what we call, the east end car park, or the John Lewis car park as customers referred to it, were the Portakabins. That’s where the builders had all their breaks. It was probably all the equipment out there as well but I just remember the Portakabin we were directed to for our bacon rolls. So myself and the managing director’s secretary would go out for our breaks

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there and have a bacon butty and a cup of tea so it was a, yeah, surreal experience.

How did you get from your offices to here?

We would have had to come down two flights of stairs. We were only allowed to use certain staircases on certain days. Sometimes they would be closed off because they were unsafe, in terms of people like ourselves walking up and down them. We didn't have to wear hardhats and things in those days, it wasn't quite...I'm sure the builders did but we didn't. So we would come down the staircase that we were directed to – it was usually B staircase, as it was known, which was where the partners' entrance then finally became. So we would come up and down two flights of stairs, so we were quite fit by the end of it, so worked off the bacon butties.

And what was it like having to come through the store to then have to go get your tea and sandwiches?

It was quite a trek and sometimes there was no lights – the electricity would go on and off – so you had to be quite careful. We still wore our business dress, our nice clothes, but we made sure we had flat shoes on so that we didn't trip.

And what was it like to work...going in there with the builders as well, when you..?

They...I think they found it quite strange. Most of them just carried on as normal. They were told not to swear but we weren't, you know, we weren't...I was quite young, I was only twenty-one but, you know, it wasn't something that we hadn't heard before, but they were quite....I think it was a bit of a novelty for them to have the two ladies in the corner, so yeah, it was...they probably found it quite a novel experience. *[Laughs]*

[Break in interview]

Right, so we're here on the second floor of John Lewis and this is where all the administration happened back in the seventies and eighties. My office was over here, the staff office, where all the recruitment took place. Next-door to us was registry because John Lewis have a very particular style and registry had a registrar who was the mother of the branch and she was there to oversee and make sure that everything was done properly and that partners have a place to go. So my office, staff office, was over here. All the offices were up here. Next-door to staff office we had registry. Registry's a peculiar thing to John Lewis because we had a registrar and the founder had instigated registrars and it was like the mother of the branch, so partners could go to registry and speak confidentially about any problems that they

had and managers and the managing director were overseen by the registrar to make sure that everything was done properly. We also had the cash office on the second floor, so in those days the staff were paid weekly, so all the wages were done here and people paid their accounts, their John Lewis accounts, at cash office. We had staff training; we had business dress, all the outfits that the John Lewis partners wore. There was a special room when you would go and choose your business dress. Service desk was up here as well.

And there was just seating around here so it was all carpeted and there were seats that just looked out over the escalator rail and on a Tuesday evening at six o'clock when the shop closed – didn't have late nights on those evenings – we would move the chairs and have a keep-fit class, and that went on for years. So John Lewis were very well-known for having clubs and societies. They were all subsidised; we had a social secretary, so she would organise parties and trips. And we would have big events in the branch because, again, on the second floor, to the back of the second floor, we had the partners' dining room, there was a partners' restroom, there was a bar, a social club bar called the Secklow Lounge that was open after work in the evenings with subsidised drinks. We had a funny arrangement in the dining room: we had the rank and file staff would eat in the main dining room; at the back of the dining room was the section managers' table, so if you were a section manager you could sit there; and if you were a department manager or above, you could eat in the senior dining room.

[Break in interview]

I think in most John Lewis branches, you know, back in the sixties and seventies, it was always like that. They were very good at encouraging people to work hard but to play hard and they created lots of clubs and societies. And in this branch, Milton Keynes being a new place, if you stepped outside of John Lewis there was nothing in the centre – the trees were like matchsticks, you had Lloyds Court, you didn't have all the buildings going all the way down to the station – so we had to make our own entertainment and up here, on the second floor, the staff dining room and the partners' restroom had sliding doors so, when you pulled those back, it was an enormous place, you could have a party for a couple of hundred people, and so we did have...we had Christmas parties, we would have bonus parties. As partners retired people would have quite elaborate retirement parties. At Christmas we would have something called 'Words and Music for Christmas' and the...there was a city centre chaplain...

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[Break in interview]

Yeah, so you have to remember, when we came here to John Lewis in Milton Keynes, partners from other branches – so from as far as Edinburgh to London to Southampton, Reading, they all came to Milton Keynes. A lot of them came as young partners who wanted to marry and get the opportunity of a house – and we actually, talking of young partners, we had a Young Partner Society, so if you were under the age of twenty-one, you could be part of the Young Partners Society and they organised lots of events. So there would be, as I say, parties, there would be ‘It’s a Knockout’ type of days, we had fêtes and galas. There wasn’t quite so much emphasis on raising money for charities and things then, as there is now, but it was more about bringing people together. There was very little to do in Milton Keynes. You could go to the village pubs but, as far as working here, they wanted everyone to become part of the John Lewis family, part of a real sense of community, and so all these events would be organised so that, on a Friday or a Saturday night – remember the shop was open Tuesday to Saturday; we were closed on a Sunday and a Monday – so if we had an event it could be on a Sunday night and nobody would have to come to work on Monday, so you could have a big party and a late night. And those events would all take place here in the branch. The catering staff would make all the food, young partners would work on the bar, the security people would get time-and-a-half for working downstairs as we all went in and out through the partners’ entrance.

But the parties and the events would get bigger and bolder, they would have a department manager/section manager Christmas party, which obviously the rank and file partners, as they were known – everyone else – objected to a little ‘cause it seemed a bit elitist but if you were a department manager or a section manager you thought, ‘Well no, that’s fine, I want to have my party.’ And those events would all take place here.

At Christmastime – as I think they still do now – at Christmastime there would be a staff lunch, a partners’ lunch, and the department managers would dress up – there’d be a theme so they would dress up in fancy dress and serve all the partners, so that was great fun. Then the section managers would dress up and serve the department managers in their senior dining room. And those sorts of events were all photographed and filmed and it was a real sense of...you know, departments would come together, so the menswear department would all be sitting at one table having their Christmas lunch – obviously with enough people still left on the shop floor to serve the staff – but there was a real sense of department camaraderie but also branch camaraderie. And then there would be partnership events, where we would go as John Lewis Milton Keynes, and compete in events, either sporting events or gala days, and of course you’d

bring the trophy back to John Lewis Milton Keynes, so there was a real sense...

Sorry, I'm just aware of the time so I'm just going to wrap it up there, so we'll just stop there. On the way out...

[Break in interview]

Right well, I was working in John Lewis in London, as was my husband, so in early 1979 we'd heard about John Lewis Milton Keynes and so we decided to get on the train from Euston, come up to Bletchley and see a little bit of Milton Keynes. As it was a Sunday my husband decided we would just walk a little bit and so we walked from Bletchley all the way up through Netherfield, Springfield, until we got to the shopping centre area – he kept saying it wasn't very far. When we got here it was still very much a building site and we were walking around trying to work out where John Lewis would be when a security guard on a loudhailer told us we were trespassing and that we had to move. So, having had a look round the building site, it looked quite exciting. Steven decided we wouldn't walk all the way back to Bletchley; it was quicker to walk to Wolverton to get the train back to Euston from there.

So that was early 1979, and then we applied for jobs. I was given the job as the staff manager's secretary and involved in all the recruitment for Milton Keynes and so we came up in April, along with a whole team of people. We stayed at the Travelodge in Newport Pagnell and from there we interviewed, over the course of two weeks, at Stephenson House in Bletchley and Lloyds Court and probably interviewed about a thousand people. There was staff managers from various branches came and we did all our interviewing and recruited all the staff locally who were not partners coming from other branches.

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*And what did you think of Milton Keynes when you first arrived...
[Unclear 00:15:07]*

Well, when we came, obviously as we came up from Bletchley – Bletchley: traditional old railway town – but, as you walked up, the houses in Netherfield looked rather unusual with their sort of iron cladding but Springfield...the fact that we were in London and so central and I'd come from Edinburgh where it was probably a bit more rural where I lived, it was nice to see houses made of different materials, there was stone, there was space, there was greenery, the roads were wide. For me, it just seemed like a lovely place to be, it was much more open. London, for me, was very noisy, very loud, very mucky and dirty and I'd always lived in Edinburgh, so Milton Keynes seemed much more friendly; even though we knew no one and we were just walking through, there

was a real sense of how nice and green and open and modern it was going to be. It was very exciting, that walk up, and we decided there and then that we would apply for the jobs, so yeah, that one trip was enough to convince us we would come to Milton Keynes.

Was there any other reasons why you wanted to...? [Unclear 00:16:19]..?

Well, living in London, we had a very small one-bedroomed flat just off the Portobello Road and it cost thirty-three pounds a week – which doesn't sound much now – but we came to Milton Keynes and we had a townhouse on Conniburrow, so a brand new, three-bedroomed town house, for seventeen pounds a week. So immediately we knew that we could save money. Our aim was, obviously, as young married couple, would hopefully to buy a house and that we did go on to do. So Milton Keynes gave us all those opportunities that we would never have had in London and we made so many friends, everybody was so young, it was so exciting, so the whole combination of Milton Keynes gave us a whole new, modern life.

And how did Conniburrow differ to where you were living in London... [Unclear 00:17:09]..?

Well, as I say, a brand new house with lovely outlook. We had a community house on Conniburrow so, although I didn't have a washing machine in the house – there was space for it all, it was three-bedroomed, three-storey townhouse – but we used to go to the community house and do our washing and I did tell my husband a little white lie, when John Lewis opened, I said the washing machine was broken in the community house and we'd need to buy one, so... I did tell him some years later that it was a little white lie but I got my washing machine... *[Laughs]*...in my house in Conniburrow.

And so how did you feel, obviously, coming back the second time... [Unclear 00:17:50]

It just felt right, it felt like...strangely enough, it sounds probably very clichéd, but everything they'd advertised about it, everything we'd read about it, that's kind of what it was. It was a really lovely, modern, friendly place where we were going to make a life and have a family and it just felt like a forever home. And yeah, I've always felt connected to Milton Keynes and yet it was for people coming from all over the country and particularly from London so, in a way, all these people didn't know each other and yet there was this strange feeling of being at home. It was lovely. (Anything else? Have I missed anything? What have I missed? Anything?)

[Unclear 00:19:02] So could you say your name and then how long you've lived in Milton Keynes? So, your name, when you moved to Milton Keynes and how long you've lived here. Then when you started working in John Lewis. So, your name, when you moved here...

...Name; when moved here.

...how long you've lived here and when you started at John Lewis.

My name is Lorraine Bowen and I first came to Milton Keynes in January 1979. I then went to...we then came to work here for John Lewis; I came in May 1979, so I've been here nearly forty years. (Sorry, I looked at you instead of the...I was looking at you instead of the...)

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END OF INTERVIEW