

Women's Gas Federation! Women's what? Women's Gas Federation! Gas? Yes, like electricity!

I started my gas industry career with the then Gas Council as a library assistant at London Research Station as a teenager! My interview, with the charismatic Tommy Noble (TGN) had to be after hours (unheard of at LRS) as I was working at a local public library on shift. He complimented me on my handwriting, that was the sort of criteria applied to interviews in those days!

Working my way up to the post of Librarian it was technology that defeated me (a running thread in my career) so I suggested another role could be found for me - and it was! I became Information Officer, Communications, looking after staff induction, arranging training, low key visits to the Research Station for school groups, MPs, industry colleagues, girls on work experience etc.

When LRS was threatened with a move out of London I looked around for another job in the industry. Women's Gas Federation were seeking a Branch Liaison Officer for the South East. The essential criteria were that I had to be a car driver and have a Home Economics degree. I had neither and wasn't prepared to get them, but I met other criteria including 'willingness to work excessive hours' and 'physical stamina' and was duly appointed at £13,164 pa on a secondment basis. LRS bought me a business suit and a briefcase and paid my extra travelling costs (to the Belgravia office base).

Well, I like thousands of others had no idea what WGF was...

Hall caretaker "Women's What?" Me, "Women's Gas Federation" ... "gas?" Me, trying to keep sarcasm out of my voice "yes, gas, like electricity" This was an exchange I had trying to book a hall on behalf of one of my branches. The outside world knew nothing of us either.

Often laughed at, scorned and considered a waste of BG resources in fact WGF, a small (under 15 staff) autonomous department of Marketing Division filled a role like no other: a direct link with the consumer at grass roots level.

Anyone could join (there were a few men) for a small annual fee (a couple of pounds?). It was established in 1935 to educate women in the use of gas as a fuel. Electricity and coal had their fair share and promotion of gas was seen as an essential part of the boom in the domestic market, particularly since the demise of the 'servant class'.

The role I took in 1987 was to 'develop and maintain the (32) branches of the Federation in the North Thames and SE regions. to meet with Home Service and PR to discuss and establish future plans to publicise WGF and promote a platform for BG through branch, regional and national conferences, exhibitions and shows'. Under the Presidency of Lady Howe we, the staff, were accountable to a Council of voluntary members as well as to BG itself.

There were 5 Liaison Officers covering the country plus a small admin team and a manager. The other LOs worked alone from their local areas. I wouldn't have liked their situation, preferring the office camaraderie. Many lasting friendships were made by us all, staff, industry colleagues and the members themselves.

Anecdotes associated with our work are legion, many unprintable.

*The trysts and liaisons and activities that were undertaken when you let loose 6 women on expenses (all meticulously scrutinised of course).

*The fury on more than one occasion when it was found we had been booked into a hotel, on a roundabout, on the outskirts of a small town with only a Harvester to eat in and provide entertainment.

*When one of our house magazine advertisers actively propositioned a member of staff to such a degree that stern action had to be taken.

*When a disbelieving Conference audience saw one of us, just on retirement age, proudly parading in one of her original 1960s mini dresses.

*When, at a get together, a miniature train at Bicton Park tipped a carriage load of members out on to the tracks - luckily only one was hospitalised.

*When I went to Rayleigh branch, but to Rayleigh Kent not Rayleigh Essex.

*When I failed to show at a champagne lunch in my honour that I'd omitted to put in my diary.

*When Barbara Castle, who'd been a conference speaker, had to gently reprimand my colleague to go a bit slower en route to catch a plane - reminding her that as an ex Transport Minister a speeding ticket would not be good press.

*When I spent an evening running up and down hundreds of steps in Durham Castle's best b&b suite with milk for speaker Sue Arnold's new baby and later falling up the steps with a tray of glasses - no time to worry about cuts and bruises - remember the physical stamina job criterion.

*Walking down Whitehall in the pouring rain wearing purple, green and white sashes on International Women's Day

*The time I asked a rather well-heeled and well connected member to open a wine box. Clearly she had never seen, or indeed even heard of such a thing

*The subterfuges to help dislodge an unpopular committee member and the struggles to persuade members to take on branch committee roles. It was heartening however, to see how many of these women developed skills they didn't know they possessed.

*Disapproval when I returned from a long long lunch with representatives of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations having enjoyed sitting on the floor of the Institute for Contemporary Arts listening to Peggy Seeger sing protest songs

*The look on Geoffrey Howe's face when he wandered in to a cocktail party at his official residence to be met by dozens of women enjoying his hospitality courtesy of his wife

Branch activities were varied; charity fundraising, fashion shows, endless Colour Me Beautiful sessions, cookery demos (much consternation when new health and safety rules meant the food could not be tasted). Speakers on a myriad of topics, "Breeding Budgies", "Secrets of the Royals", "The World of Tea Towels" - I mock, but gently. The talks on the whole were entertaining and informative. And at each meeting a raffle, tea and a reminder that BG paid for their hall and we had a budget to spend on the branches to develop their links with the industry. Always a warm welcome, even a bed one night for me when my transport home didn't turn up.

One of the aims of WGF was to maintain a network of contacts with other women's organisations to promote the role of women in society. WGF was the seventh largest women's organisation in Britain behind the Movement for the Ordination of Women, the Soroptomists, the Fawcett Society as well as the Townswomen's Guild and the WI. We represented WGF and therefore the industry and felt privileged to have worked with so many inspirational and influential women and groups.

Over the years the WGF became an anachronism. No longer did most women feel the need to belong to Clubs, royalty no longer graced our events although high profile personalities such as Mary Stott, Sue McGregor and Cliff Michelmores were happy to speak and host conferences etc. Then of course there was privatisation of the industry.

Eventually the staff received their redundancy notices (and yes, they were signed in green ink!) and we were let go with a good package to help us on our way.

The WGF was closed in 1994, but the branches too got a package of help, many branches carried on under a different name and are still running today; some Council members still meet and staff keep in touch.

I had five months 'on the dole' then found a job in one of the electrical (boo) institutions, and a year later returned to the world of libraries running a recruitment agency at the professional body, The Library Association. Having been bombed on the tube in 2005, finding London challenging and doing some sums, I decided, the following year, to pack in work, thanked BG for making me pay into my pension aged 19 and retired early and moved to the seaside 3 years later.

Susan Baillie

Women's Gas Federation 1987 to 1993