

“High Heels and Hard Hats”

Talk by Debbie Greensmith, 20 January 2026 Review by Marlene

As with our previous talk, our January offering featured a speaker who outlined activities which could be considered by some members as being outside of their comfort zone.

Debbie was a former teacher who swapped the school environment for that of the construction industry, encompassing working on construction sites, railway bridges and tunnels. She did point out that school life was not without its dangers, telling us about breaking up a confrontation which could have had an unpleasant outcome and which led her to leaving teaching.

However, the main theme of her talk was to question what is still holding women back from entering the construction industry. At present, only 15% of the workforce is female. General factors (applicable to many industries) which she mentioned included gender inequality (where salaries for women in some fields are substantially less than the men's for the same work), and the perceived traditional role of the woman with regard to caring responsibilities, needing flexibility around school hours and similar.

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This is especially pertinent for the construction industry as site work could be 3 hours or more away from home one day, another day even further. Debbie acknowledged that the strength factor may also play a part, as women are perceived as having less, although she did give an example of one woman where this was not an issue. Even PPE products (such as high-vis jackets) are designed primarily for the male wearer and may not fit properly. As an aside, Debbie did mention that this issue is now being addressed.

Measures to provide career paths for all sectors of society are being stepped up, for example, through advertising for more STEM graduates and students to enter the industry. (STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) is an interdisciplinary approach with hands-on learning to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical applications). In addition, there are more rules and policies in place now to counter sexism at work.

As background to her current role, Debbie described how a teacher also had to be a social worker/carer/behaviour manager, useful skills for her new career field. She started in the railway industry, undertaking a number of courses covering subjects such as site safety. She was offered a job as a trainer but this was not the route she wanted to follow, so ended up with a variety of roles, from organising rota and carrying out actual track work on the railways, to leading a social media campaign to get more women into the industry.

As Interface Manager, her main role is acting with the community and attending community meetings. When visiting local schools, she holds female workshops to generate more interest in working in construction. In addition, she is part of the project management team and has a supervisory role acting as negotiator to bring peace and harmony to large sites. She is also a Mental Health First Aider, useful for problem solving in a situation where the workforce is often away from family and home comforts for a length of time.

Debbie gave her audience some examples of major tasks and projects in which she has been involved. These included: a railway bridge on the Isle of Wight, the Horley subway project, where 353 workmen were on site over Christmas to replace the rotting structure and get it sorted in three days, the refurbishment of the two Bo-Peep tunnels (567 people on site) and the Hungerford Bridge. At the Hungerford Bridge site, the encapsulation tent covering the bridge was not fireproof and Debbie told us that she watched London's New Year's firework display with a great deal of trepidation.

In summarising her new life, Debbie admitted that it could be tough (conditions often cold and muddy, lack of suitable sizes of PPE, toilet facilities etc.) but emphasised the need to recruit more women into all aspects of construction to ensure a depth and variety of skills for this industry sector.

Our thanks to Debbie for a very interesting and thought-provoking talk.

