

Join me, Clair tells girls



ROOM AT THE TOP: Clair Smith at Soho depot Picture: Central Trains

More girls should consider a career on the railways says 31-year-old Clair Smith, one of a handful of women employed in the world of train maintenance.

Clair has worked her way up to deputy team leader in just six years at the Soho depot in Birmingham.

She is the only woman in a workforce of 30 men.

On International Women's Day in March she called on female school-leavers to follow her example and sign up for an apprenticeship in mechanics or engineering.

Clair, of King's Heath, Birmingham, said: "There is absolutely no reason in this day and age why girls cannot become drivers, engineers, planners or station managers.

"Railways will be an increasingly important means of transport in the future and it's time women played a greater part in the industry."

Clair, who went to an all-girls school but always wanted to be a soldier, is one of two female train maintenance workers at Maintrain, the maintenance company for Central Trains.

"It's not about strength. It's about technical knowledge, team work and dexterity," says Clair. "I've never experienced any sexism or discrimination at work. The lads just see me as part of the team.

"Sometimes being a woman can actually be a physical advantage as my hands are smaller and I can do some fiddly jobs that men find difficult."

Before Clair joined Central Maintrain she took a four-year apprenticeship in mechanics. She also gained valuable experience helping her father on building sites.

Within Central Trains there are 707 train drivers, of which only 16 are women. There are currently just four women train technicians – two are trainees and one is an assistant technician.

However, there are 96 female senior conductors and 51 women are in management posts (out of 210 in

total). Clair's appeal was backed by Central Trains driver Barbara Gee, who was New Street's first ever woman train driver in 1997.

"This is the best job I've ever had," said Barbara, 40, from Olton.

"It's financially and socially rewarding and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to get out and about, meet the public and work as part of a team.

"I think girls are too often programmed to think of the railways as a man's world involving hard labour and greasy engines, but it's not like that these days."

She added: "I get a few raised eyebrows and derogatory remarks about women drivers.

"Some young lads once shouted 'shouldn't you be at home cooking Sunday lunch?' I told them my husband was cooking it."

Westminster action

Three women from Tube Lines, the company rebuilding London Underground's busiest lines, went to Westminster in March to discuss issues surrounding women's involvement in engineering with ministers, MPs, members of the House of Lords and women from around the country.

Kelly Berry, Laura Reynolds and Marina Jennings are all apprentices at Tube Lines.

They attended the Skilled Women event hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Science, Engineering and Design.

It was also attended by Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

Tube Lines is keen to increase the proportion of women engineers in its 3,500-strong workforce. It has organised several events for school-girls to encourage them to consider careers in engineering and project management on the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines.

National Rail Users Conference: Saturday 3 November 2007. Ely, Cambridgeshire.

Yorkshire

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■ ■ Humber ports

Plans to boost the movement of goods into and out of the Humber ports without adding to road congestion were announced in March.

A partnership of national, regional and local organisations, including Network Rail, Yorkshire Forward, The Northern Way and Associated British Ports, has been working closely to develop a package of schemes which will improve rail freight access to the ports at Hull and Immingham, bringing substantial economic and environmental benefits to the region.



LOCAL ACTION

■ ■ Hull Docks branch line

£13.1million is being spent to improve the infrastructure on the Hull Docks branch line. Once complete, this will increase capacity from 10 to 22 trains per day in each direction, with the line open for 16 hours a day.

■ ■ Annual general meeting and luncheon

The annual general meeting and luncheon of the Yorkshire branch was held at the Huddersfield Hotel on Saturday 10 March 2007. The guest speaker was the safety manager representing the Grand Central Railway Company. He outlined the proposals for the new rail service from Sunderland to London (King's Cross) via the East Coast main line.

Wessex

By John Friedberger
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■ ■ South West Trains

The main activity of the branch over the past year has concerned the new franchise for South West Trains which was awarded to Stagecoach for a further 10 years in February. Initially, most passengers were pleased as SWT improved performance and introduced new Desiro trains. However, the company since made several unpopular decisions, all without consulting Passenger Focus and other representative groups. The popular Wessex electric class 442 trains have been prematurely 'retired'. The Portsmouth line has had most trains replaced by suburban rolling stock with 2 x 3 seating. The Reading line has seen the unpopular and cramped class 458 trains returned to its services. Most recently, SWT has decided to increase mid-morning fares to London by around 20% from most stations.

■ ■ Promises

Passengers have been promised improvements in December, notably two trains per hour to Weymouth. And one particular success, due in large part to effective lobbying on the part of Nick Farthing, is the introduction of an hourly service from Salisbury to Southampton, Southampton Airport, Eastleigh and Romsey.

■ ■ New chairman

At the AGM on 31 March in Eastleigh, Alan Shotter retired, due to other commitments, and John Friedberger was elected chairman in his place.

