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WOMEN'S HERALD

THE sky, the sea, the hills and forests provide the workplace of the small but growing number of women who work in the great outdoors.

The most spectacular and familiar open air employment venue in the 1980s is the North Sea with its oilfields and ripe with opportunism, one might think, for well-qualified young professional men and women — geologists, geophysicists and engineers keen to work offshore.

Yet the sad truth is that under 0.5% of the workforce of 22,000 in the North Sea is female; the Norwegian offshore oil industry employs 3.8% women, the majority of whom work offshore in catering.

A report late last year for the Equal Opportunities Commission made by members of the sociology department at Aberdeen University, concluded that discrimination is blatantly practised against women at the sharp end of the oil industry.

For most women who work there, the avoidance of publicity has become almost universal. Anxious to do nothing to rock the boat, attract the label of pioneer women or risk adverse comment and reaction against them, silence has become their protective shroud, contriving to make them as invisible as oil rigs cloaked in fog.

Here we profile three women working in the oil industry and two others also working in a man's world.

VICKY HOLMES became the first woman diver in the North Sea at the end of last year, having started diving only four years earlier.

Now 36, her home life had previously been extremely busy with two little boys, the younger of whom was physically handicapped, partially sighted and had a hole in his heart. When he was two and a half years old he went into hospital for an operation. Tragically, he didn't survive.

The following year she gave birth to another son who is now six and a half, his older brother is 11½.

Her diving began some time after she and her husband were divorced. "I used to swim with some friends who dived, but it never interested me. One day I had diving gear on and a friend walked me off the beach (she lives on the south coast of England). I thought this is ridiculous, it's all far too heavy, but when I got under the water it was heaven. I loved it."

After scuba training and a variety of diving courses, a friend made her a gift of a Prodiver course, in commercial diving.

"Once I'd qualified I went up to Aberdeen job hunting, and when I came back I did another course to qualify me for inspection work which is mainly what is needed in the North Sea. Oil platforms have to be constantly monitored by divers for signs of wear and tear, fatigue, and corrosion.

"In November I got my first job; it was a nice one. It went well and the lads were great, no problems."

Self employed, divers wait for a call to a job from the company under whose "umbrella" they work, in Vicky Holmes's case Wharton Williams at Aberdeen. Crews are ferried out by helicopter or boat to their workplace.

Vicky Holmes lived on the support



Vicky Holmes, the first woman diver in the North Sea.

If her shift starts at midnight, Vicky Holmes rises at 11 for a light breakfast, dons her diving gear and goes out on deck to take over the shift. "We only do

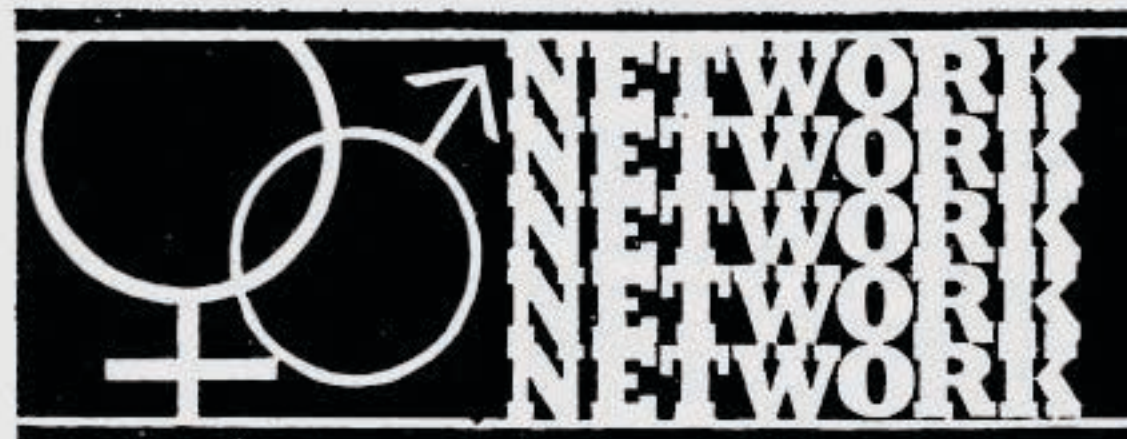


Jane McDonald receiving her BBC Young Handler's Trophy in the Series One Man and His Dog from Viv Billingham.

Helen Morton (third from right) BP civil engineer and colleagues working alongside the Magnus oil platform.



Making their mark in a man's world



By WENDY JACK

very much when I'm away, and they miss me. However, when I get home I can spend a lot of time with them."

A request to sum up her job's attractions elicits an immediate response. "Well paid, physical, mentally stimulating and demanding, these are the things that interest me about it, I'm looking forward to my next one, the season is just starting."

HELEN MORTON is a Cambridge civil engineering graduate who works for BP. She was deeply involved in their Magnus field project, initially with the building of the platforms at Nigg Bay and latterly working offshore when the structure was in situ.

Formerly working for two civil engineering companies, Helen Morton joined BP "to get more project management experience."

She spent a fair amount of time at

just going to take it in turns' and that was it. Having spent six months on the project probably helped influence them, the feeling perhaps that having been on it that long she can't miss out on this critical stage just because she's a woman."

"We flew by helicopter — in our survival kits, a journey of three or four hours. Magnus is the most northerly, the most hostile of the oilfields, and the platform sits in the deepest water, 600 feet.

"We were staying on the crane barge, a large Dutch semi-submersible floating crane with accommodation for 400 in two-man cabins. I had one to myself and went up three flights of stairs to the resident engineer's cabin to use his shower and toilet. I suppose I could have used the block but that's not really my style.

"I was always working from the



Wilma Harper, the first woman Forest Officer Grade 2.

part of an engineer's training. It's a pity that even for the male graduates it's difficult to get a trip offshore to see what it's all about."

pilot's seat for that of the pilot; not a few knowledgeable people reckon she should have little difficulty in achieving her goal.

BACK on terra firma, the Forestry Commission's first woman Forest Officer Grade 2 was WILMA HARPER who, since her appointment has been joined by a further five women at the same level. From a total of 26 such posts, it is an encouraging number.

Married and living in Edinburgh, Wilma Harper graduated from Edinburgh University with a mixed degree — a B.Sc. in ecological sciences specialising in forestry, plant ecology and soil science. Following that she did three years of research partly sponsored by the commission into the problems of restocking, replanting on peaty, waterlogged soil in the Borders, after which she joined the Forestry Commission.

Her job title, meaningless to lay people, is actually the first rung of the senior management ladder within the Forestry Commission. After she joined, she spent "three years in Perth district which covers Fife and Tayside areas, part of a district team working on the general management of forestry in that area and advising private woodland owners too. As a new entrant you don't have a lot of responsibility, there are people above you."

She then moved into the commission's headquarters in Edinburgh to work in their economics and planning department, working on forest economics. "I will probably be here for



Julie Young, the North Sea's first woman helicopter pilot.

Roy who is seven, has been in training for five years, and was the dog Jane won the BBC Trophy with, in the Young Handler's Competition in the



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