

## **Go with Gwenda's! How a garage in Sheffield drove a generation of women on to better things.**

### **Liz Kettle, WEST (Women in Engineering, Science and Technology)**

1985. The year that the much-ridiculed Sinclair C5 three-wheeler was launched and then swiftly suspended. Ford unveiled the third generation of its top of the range Granada; and in Sunderland, Nissan was building Britain's biggest car factory.

About 100 miles away in South Yorkshire, three feisty women took the plunge and decided to set up their own garage.

### **Cars and girls**

Unemployment reached well over 3 million in 1984 and angry youth rioted in inner cities. Government training schemes were big, and two of the women – Roz Wollen and Annette Williams – had just passed TOPS motor vehicle training courses with flying colours. They were eager to get to work as mechanics and applied for loads of jobs, but with no success.

"We were so fired up! We'd just completed these intensive nine month courses at skill centres that were completely dominated by blokes, and we really wanted to get stuck in and work with bikes and cars. The problem was that because we were women, nobody would take us seriously," recalled Roz.

The third woman, their friend Ros Wall, wasn't a fan of formal training but was a skilled mechanic already. She learnt about the workings of bicycles, motorbikes and cars from her father when she was a girl, and then spent many happy hours stripping down bike engines with boyfriends.

They kept trying to get jobs. Roz and Annette went to Leeds to work voluntarily and gain experience at a radical female-run garage called Spanners. They learnt all sorts of skills from a notorious feminist legend called Connie O'Donovan. Roz also went to London to do two weeks' work experiences at the Big Ends women's garage down south.

The three women loved motorbikes. They met to talk engines and models, and in between discussions about the merits of Moto Guzzis and Triumphs, the idea of taking control of things and setting up their own garage took shape.

"We were getting more and more disillusioned. We would get together and moan about not being able to get jobs. We would have been fine learning skills from men, but we found it was only other women who would give us a chance. We tried to get apprenticeships, but these were set up for younger women and we were in our thirties," said Roz. "We knew we had to do something!"

### **Enterprising idea**

The 1980s was a fiercely political decade. While Margaret Thatcher ruled the roost, women camped out for peace at Greenham Common; Sue Lawley was ambushed by abseiling lesbians on prime time television; and women's groups and gay groups supported the long and bitter miners' strike. Sheffield's defiantly socialist council earned itself the nickname of the People's Republic of South Yorkshire.

And it was in this context that Gwenda's Garage was born. This was a time when the concept of positive action was bandied about, if not always acted on. But in Sheffield there were enterprise grants available, and Ros, Roz and Annette applied for one.

"There was lots of energy at that time. We were part of that feminist culture and we had the feeling that we could do anything! We loved bikes and cars, but we loved the idea of empowering women even more!" said Roz.

The three of them looked around for a suitable place to set up, and eventually they found a site that was owned by Sheffield Council, in an old-fashioned industrial area of the city by the River Don called Neepsend.

By this time, the women were looking at their business plan, and things were extremely tight. With typical Yorkshire gumption, they approached the Council and after endless meetings and forms, finally managed to negotiate six months' free rent.

"We were so chuffed. None of us had any money and now it really was going to happen," said Roz.

The premises needed a lot of work, but Ros, Roz and Annette were determined. They called on the help of other friends, electrician Mary Allebone and plumber Em Lawless. Together they converted the building into a working garage. They celebrated with cups of tea and alcohol when the three-phase electricity contained in metal conduits sailed through inspection and went live. And when their newly fitted (second hand) inspection ramp was in place, they stood looking at it as proudly as the directors of the soon-to-open Nissan plant in Sunderland.

Instead of cash payment, Mary and Em had their cars looked after. This make-do-and-mend, collective ethos ran through the whole enterprise. The business was set up as a legal partnership, but there was no one person in charge, and Ros, Roz and Annette all got paid the same rate.

### **Naming baby**

Then came the choice of name. They knew they wanted a woman's name, and ideally, someone inspirational from engineering or industry. Roz borrowed a copy of the Guinness Guide to Feminine Achievements from the library and they flicked through it until they came across the name that they would soon come to love: Gwenda Stewart.

Gwenda Stewart was also known by her married name Gwenda Hawkes, and she was quite a girl. She started her driving career with medals and being mentioned in dispatches for driving ambulances through dangerous territory during World War One. By 1921 she established the 1000-mile record on a Ner-A-Car motor-cycle and in 1922 took the Double-12-hour record at the Brooklands racetrack in Surrey, on a Trump-JAP.

In the early nineteen-thirties, Gwenda broke the one-mile speed record several times in France in a Derby-Miller car. She competed twice in the 24 Hours of Le Mans event, in a Derby with a Maserati engine, and also broke records in a 1,100cc Morgan three-wheeler.

Gwenda had worked in an armaments factory, sped down the Yukon River on a raft, and broken motor-car speed records to become the fastest ever female racing car driver at Brooklands. This was clearly the woman for the job!

The newly named Gwenda's Garage opened in May 1985. It offered all the usual things you'd expect to find at a garage: repairs, servicing, breakdown help, welding and chassis repair and body work.

### **Doctor doctor**

But Ros, Roz and Annette were as interested in empowering women as being mechanics. So Gwenda's also gave DIY car maintenance classes, advice on buying second hand cars, and information on adapting cars for disabled drivers.

And as part of their mission to empower and inform women, Ros, Roz and Annette also had a firm policy to take time to explain to customers exactly what was wrong with their car and why something wasn't working. They thought of themselves as being like doctors explaining a diagnosis to a patient. So they talked to their mainly female customers about big ends, clutches and spark plugs in a deliberate attempt to demystify what went on under the bonnet.

They had pop-up books alongside the Haynes manuals on the shelves for people to browse through, and even went out to local community centres to run training courses on car maintenance. When they saw the way that other women grew in confidence and enthusiasm when they showed them how to strip down an engine or change a tyre for the first time, Ros, Roz and Annette knew they were onto something special.

They were also learning all the time themselves, often through trial and error. Roz and Annette continued formal training, putting themselves through level 3 qualifications after a long day in the garage. They were the only women in their classes, and managed to keep to study despite a lot of stick and patronising from tutors and classmates. When Annette won a silver medal for the highest mark in Great Britain in the transmission diagnostic techniques module of her City & Guilds, Gwenda's sent a press release out to Radio Sheffield and local papers in triumph. Thanks to funding from the Co-operative Development Agency, they also learnt how to use Crypton tuning for diagnostic testing.

Gwenda's thrived. They did a lot of welding and body work, sometimes on the then popular three-wheeled Reliant Robin, which was tricky because they were made of fibre glass on a metal frame. Roz also recalls the fun they had servicing a Rolls Royce, although it turned out to belong to a wedding car business, rather than a member of aristocracy. This didn't stop Roz driving it around outside when they'd finished the service, waving her hand and pretending to be the queen in blue overalls.

Their customers were mainly women, but about a third was men too. Many people came to them via word of mouth, and being the only garage in the immediate area, they had a lot of local trade from the Neepsend industrial estate.

### **Go with Gwenda's!**

By this time both Spanners and Big Ends had closed, and Gwenda's Garage was the only women's garage in the north of England. They printed business cards and *Go with Gwenda's!* t-shirts, and were canny at gaining local press coverage.

Then one day a smart looking man rolled up in front of the garage driving a Morgan: one of the most iconic and revered of British-made cars. The Morgan was also Gwenda Stewart's favourite car. The man introduced himself as Dr Alderson, and he told the women that Gwenda was still alive, and had retired to a small Greek island. He had sent her a newspaper cutting about the small female-run garage in South Yorkshire.

Even so, when a letter arrived at Gwenda's Garage from Gwenda, Ros, Roz and Annette were thrilled. Their heroine included a photo of herself in her heyday at the wheel of a beloved Morgan, and she wrote *"I am flattered by your choice of my name...as doubtless there are other women drivers you might have chosen."*

Ros, Roz and Annette immediately wrote back, stuffing a brand new Go with Gwenda's white t-shirt in the envelope with their reply. A few weeks later they got another letter from Gwenda, now in her nineties, but still sharp:

*"Thank you for the beautiful tee shirt, especially so for being cotton. I shall certainly wear it with pride, in summer. I am "as well as can be expected" as they say in English hospitals and am told by my friends that I am still "compos mentis" although no-one would tell me if I were not. I wish you continued success and admire your enterprise."*

### **Sparking change**

The working day started early and didn't finish until the jobs were done. Fired up by the garage's impact on local women, Ros took on setting up at motor vehicle workshop with Nottingham Women's Training Scheme; and Annette started running vehicle repairs training with women at Bradford College part-time. So over the next year or so, Roz was the only one of the original partners to stay working full-time. Two new women joined the team: Carolin Herwig and Karen Griffiths

Crunch time came in 1989. Gwenda's had outgrown the workshop, and the partners needed to seriously re-evaluate the business model. They talked about moving out to bigger premises, or adding car restoration work to the menu; or perhaps even installing some petrol pumps.

By now Ros had decided that she wanted to focus her career on teaching. Annette had been offered more work at Bradford College, and also got a part time job with a Morris Minor restoration co-op in Leeds. Roz wanted to carry on changing attitudes, but was toying with the idea of a mainstream mechanics job.

After a lot of soul searching, the three women agreed that they could reach more people through teaching and other jobs. Gwenda's had been an inspiring and important phase in their lives, but now it was time for something new. They sold Gwenda's Garage as a going concern in 1990. Sadly, Gwenda Stewart also died that year.

### **Driven women**

But the workaday garage in Neepsend was just the start of something. Ros, Roz and Annette all had the empowerment bug, and fixing engines was the catalyst that drove them on to bigger and better things.

Annette went on to develop a training programme called Let's TWIST (Train Women in Science and Technology) at Bradford College, in partnership with Ros Wall at the Nottingham Women's Training Scheme, and with Sheffield Hallam University. Let's TWIST was revolutionary in challenging the old sexist "dinosaur" attitudes of most male-dominated vocational training at that time, and had a significant impact in transferring good practice into mainstream education.

Ros Wall also started a brand new Women in the Built Environment course at Sheffield Hallam University. Ros and Annette then went on to found the UKRC, the high profile and national resource centre dedicated to increasing opportunities for women in science and engineering. The UKRC took over managing the WISE Campaign in 2011, and is still influencing organisations and reaching women nationally and internationally today.

Roz Wollen went on initially to become the AA's only female patrol person in the north of England. The AA was running its highly successful "I know a man who can" ad campaign, so the timing for Roz's job was spot on. Photos of her in the local papers wearing her regulation brown jumper and beret were a powerful way of breaking a solid gender stereotype. Roz followed this up with a teaching career at Sheffield College, and then went on to be pivotal in setting up the South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, finally managing the Women's Construction Centre in Sheffield.

## **Go WEST**

When Ros Wall died of cancer in 2010, Roz helped found a local bursary fund called WEST (Women in Engineering, Science and Technology) in her memory. WEST has given small grants to many young women starting careers in male-dominated jobs and trades, including, in 2014...a 16 year old young woman from Guiseley who wanted to become a motor mechanic and eventually start her own garage.

"Gwenda's really did make a difference. At that time it was the only women's only garage in England. We showed people that women can do things, that we can be mechanics and set up a business," said Roz. "That said, it's still very hard today for a woman to get a job in a garage."

For five years during a turbulent political and social decade, Gwenda's was a brilliant way station for three women who used spanners and elbow grease in a male-dominated trade as the starting point for empowering a generation of South Yorkshire women. Working at Gwenda's Garage gave Ros, Roz and Annette the experience and passion they needed to go off and teach, and through teaching and campaigning they reached thousands of other women.

"We did teach really useful vocational skills," remembers Roz, "but even more than that, we gave our students what we called the fourth dimension. And that's the confidence to do something that most women have been brought up to think they can't do - "men's" jobs in engineering and technology. That confidence and those skills then go on to empower them in all sorts of other areas of their lives."

The spirit of Gwenda's – and of Gwenda Stewart – lives on.

**For more information**

[www.westskills.org.uk](http://www.westskills.org.uk)

[www.wisecampaign.org.uk](http://www.wisecampaign.org.uk)