

## **International Women in Engineering Day 2025 – a blog from our Chair**

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### **My history in the Civil Engineering world, by Libby Sands**

Back in 1973 when I first joined North Riding County Council in the Highways and Byways Department, I was a Tracer, which meant that I drew up plans of housing developments that the County Council were adopting into their publicly maintained road network.

Of course there were very few, if any other females working on the ‘technical’ side of the departments work. After a while I realised that I wished to progress in the civil engineering world, so asked to be sent on a training course. As I had attended a Grammar School, girls had not been allowed to take part in technical drawing classes, so I needed to complete a General Engineering Course. Upon requesting such training the Officer was reluctant to use some of his budget on training a female (it would be a waste of money, as you won’t be able to do it, were the words used).



Never say to Libby that she can't do anything, especially at that time. So, I did the course, finished top of the class with a Distinction. Of course, I now wanted to complete the Ordinary National Certificate (ONC) in Civil Engineering. Same Training Officer, same sort of comments made. I did complete the course but only managed to finish in the top 10.

At work I had moved on from the Development Control Section into Traffic Section, working on Traffic Regulations etc. Some time later when I moved Sections again (I was under an Indenture Training System, where every year I was moved to a different Section to experience different Civil Engineering work) I was in the Highway Design Section. That was when I realised that I needed some further training. Different Training Officer, different sorts of comments. By now it was 1978, the Equal Opportunity Act had come into force, but to be honest it didn't make a lot of difference to me, as I was still the only female technical technician in the department.

I asked to attend the Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Civil Engineering course and was immediately accepted, BUT I was sent to Middlesbrough Polytechnic to join a class of young men who all worked for British Steel. Of course, they were very familiar with 'Structures' working on the design of them every day. I was at a loss. It was like the lecturer was talking double Dutch. At this time, in order to pass the HNC you had to pass every subject. I failed Structures. I attended the same course the following year, same result. So, unlike me, I gave up.

Several years later, I had moved from North Yorkshire County Council to Bedfordshire County Council. I was allowed to attend another HNC course in St Albans, where a lovely lecturer realised that I was having difficulties with structures and gave me extra tuition. To cut a long story short I passed, just! Then instantly forgot everything about them, except the triangle is the strongest shape.

As years passed, I moved from Bedfordshire County Council to Hertfordshire County Council, where in 1986 I started work in the Road Safety Section under Dick Rainbird. In 1988 I moved back to Bedfordshire County Council, where I stayed until April 1997, when I was TUPE'd to a firm of Consultants and I started work on the first of the then Highways Agency Super Maintenance Areas, known as Area 8.

By the time I left the Consultants I had completed over 30,000 Road Safety Audits, over 300 Crash Investigations. In 1995 I completed a MSc in Road Safety Engineering at Middlesex University at Bounds Green. In 2005 in the middle of a 'World Tour' introducing the new Highways Agency Standard for Road Safety Audit HD 19/03 to Scotland, Wales, London & the Midlands (ours was a small world!!), some of the speakers were discussing how some people were setting themselves up as Road Safety Auditors, but without any experience in crash investigation or real Road Safety



Audit training. In essence they were carrying out Design Checks, not what Road Safety Audits were at all. John Smart, from the then IHT suggested setting up a new Branch of IHT that would check the experience of auditors and offer them membership with recognised post nominals. SoRSA was then born, and it was launched in 2008 with it's first Conference held in the Copthorne Hotel, Birmingham. We soon outgrew the space they could offer us, so we moved to The Crowne Plaza Birmingham, only to find we began to clash with the tennis tournament, which then grew from a one-week event to two-weeks. Ever since we have been searching for a new home. Hopefully, we have found it in the Radisson Blu Hotel, Manchester Airport.

What I think I'm trying to say to the female members of SoRSA, is that **if you want to progress there is nothing stopping you, if you want it enough**. Ask me or other Committee Members questions about becoming a Committee Member of SoRSA. It is not an onerous task. The Committee meets 4, or 5 times a year in CIHT Headquarters in London or via a Teams Meeting. **You have the chance to change someone else's life by showing them what they could achieve.**

Good Luck.

