

# My First Day at Work

I leave home in a very nervous state. I've been awake half the night wondering what the day would bring? Would the men be nice? Would I be able to come home at dinner (lunch for southern cousins)? My Mother made the morning more anxious, "Have you got a clean handkerchief?" Have you cleaned your shoes?, 'Have you got your dinner money? (...interpretation time again...).

'Mam', I yell back, "Stop fussing I'll be alright if you'll just stop fussing, please. I'm not bothered at all about going to work. It's just you keep going on," which of course is a complete lie. I don't think I have ever felt so scared in my life.

I start my journey into the world. I had secured a job at Lowe's, a very posh department store a week before. I would be an apprentice carpet fitter, considered a very good trade in those days. I felt very fortunate to have landed a position in such a prestigious establishment.

As I near the emporium I start to wish I hadn't been so fortunate. I think a less posh place of work would have suited me better. I'm from a mining family, but from my earliest days it had been drilled into me, "You're not going down the pit". My Dad had been hurt in a pit fall and my Grandfather had lost a leg in similar circumstances. But if not there, where? The world certainly wasn't my oyster, I had done particularly poorly at school, spelling being my biggest drawback, (I am grateful on a daily basis for spell check ). In the mile or so walk from home to shop I convince myself once again that I am indeed fortuitous.

On reaching the Market Square, I look up at the imposing edifice that was Lowe's Victoria House, a cathedral to poshness. Even though I had caught the bus to school outside it every day for four years I never dared enter until I went for an interview. Mr Lowe said my well written letter had impressed him. I had enough nous not say my sister helped me. In truth she had written it and I merely copied the missive. My Mother, likewise had never entered the hallowed halls, nor I expect the vast majority of my extended family, far too grand for the likes of us! As I gaze up, summoning courage to enter, I start to worry again. But here goes.

At the interview I was told my start time would be eight in the morning, on the first day I would be met by Mr Marshall, Furnishing Workroom Manager, and he would introduce me to the staff. I enter the building just as the Parish Church clock chimes. A tall distinguished looking man approaches me, "Are you our new recruit"? he asks in a decidedly officer-type accent. "Yes, Sir" I mumble, trying to keep my voice as low as possible. It rises three octaves in a stressful situation. "No need for sir, you're not at school now". "Mr Marshall will do nicely" he says in a firm way. We take the lift to the top floor, I was relieved that we don't use the stairs as I imagine everybody is looking at me and wondering how I'll fit in worse still, if I'll fit in.

We reach the workroom and it's all very formal, as was everything at Lowe's. I shake hands with all the seven carpet fitters and the four lady seamstresses. The ladies are all lovely and do everything to make me feel at ease. One in particular seems to take a shine to me, Betty, who I discover lives near to me. We walk home together every day and she becomes a confidant and trusted adviser on workroom politics. We are great friends to this day, a few years later we are to share the same surname when she marries my cousin Jim. What a small world Wigan is! All the men seem very friendly and welcoming apart from one who seemed less than pleased to see me. I shan't name him in case he still roams the planet. I learn later that it was nothing personal, he drinks heavily every weekend and is in a foul mood on Monday mornings.

That first day seemed everlasting. My first duty was to go for toast at The UCP (United Cattle Products), they had a cafeteria at the back of the shop, a strange combination with tripe at the front and tea and toast at the rear. But that's how it was and I was to become a frequent customer, going for morning snacks for colleagues. On this first visit I got flummoxed and the biggest mix-up was with the fitter with the hangover who seemed in an even more aggressive mood as the day went on. He threatens to thump me if I ever get his order wrong again. "He's only joking he's as soft as my pocket underneath", says Betty trying to reassure me. I am not so certain. He has a mean look and I imagine that a smile has never visited his thin angry lips. I remember thinking I hope he doesn't frequent his local this week and that his disposition changes with sobriety. Whilst he appeared slightly more approachable later in the week, he was always disagreeable and once carried out his threat to punch me when I got his order wrong from the Millgate Chippy. I've never seen him since leaving Lowe's and I feel I would prefer a meeting with Lucifer than an encounter with him, please forgive the hyperbole .

On my first day I had decided to go home for lunch –see the poshness is rubbing off already. Mr Marshall greets me as I enter the shop bang on one o'clock. Mr Marshall tells me in no uncertain terms that a one o'clock start means just that, in the workroom not front of store, "Sorry sir, Mr Marshall", I utter in a pitch as high as a violin, nerves doing their best to make me look and sound ridiculous. "Don't let it happen again or you'll be looking for another job" he says in the brusque manner that was his way. I half expected him to follow it up with, "And, you'll leave without references", so Victorian did everything seem.

So much for the formality of the first day. My time at The Cathedral has stayed with me for the rest of my life, even down to handshakes and other formalities, nothing like a modern High-Five by way of greeting! Lord forbid, but it was this very attitude that later I came to accept and I actually came to like, and traces of this old fashioned way of doing things are with me to this day!