

A passion for pest control

Traditionally, pest control is seen as a rough, tough and male dominated business. But are things changing? Associate Editor Helen Riby investigates the role of women in pest control.

Angela Chettle and Nicola Jaynes work at the sharp end as pest control technicians for Conquer Pest Control in Nottinghamshire. Angela used to work in farm management so she had had some involvement with pest control, but her passion for the business began after she had first hand experience of the job. A week on the road accompanying a qualified pest controller and she was hooked. That was four and a half years ago during which time she has not only qualified as a professional pest controller but is also the only female fumigator in the Midlands. Her enthusiasm is obvious, but what is it that makes the work so attractive? "It's the variety," she claims, "No two days are the same. I could be fumigating tobacco containers at the docks in the morning, solving an insect problem in a food factory in the afternoon or helping a little old lady get rid of an ant infestation."



Angela Chettle (left) and Nicola Jaynes at the sharp end.

Nicola has Angela to thank for her involvement in pest control. "She invited me out for a day about 15 months ago," explains Nicola. "Before I knew it I had been through the BPCA Warwick course and here I am." Again for Nicola it's the variety which she finds so attractive and dealing with different types of people – the general public to pub landlords to chicken farm managers. "You do get some strange looks which say 'what have they sent a woman for!' But when you get stuck in and sort out people's problems they generally accept you." Angela agrees: "When you're on some sites you do have to put up with a fair few comments but it's usually only banter."

Conquer Pest Control is owned by Jack Kent who has nothing but praise for his 'Angels of Death' or 'Lady Killers' as he describes them. Conquer employs eight professional pest controllers and they are all expected to tackle any job. "We're not a bait plonking business," he explains: "We offer a specialist service and that means being able to deal with wildlife management – squirrels, moles, foxes – as well as rodents and insects."

"I'm not worried about how many degrees or diplomas my recruits have. I'm looking for problem solvers, people with good observation skills. Of course they also need to be able to deal with the rough and tumble of the workplace and, let's face it some of the jobs we do are far from pleasant so it's not a suitable career for everyone," concludes Jack.

Women making their mark

There are times when it can be advantageous to have both men and women on the team. Some domestic customers prefer to invite a woman into their home and there are situations – all female student halls of residence for example – where it can be difficult for the men.



EHO Emma Swanston.

But it's not just in the private pest control sector that women are making their mark. Within Local Authorities Karen Hinksman at Sandwell and Val Trusty at Huntingdonshire are both well established. A more recent recruit is Emma Swanston who is a Principle Environmental Officer in Wolverhampton. Emma is responsible for five public health officers, four pest technicians and the animal welfare officer.

Born in Newcastle she has been working for Wolverhampton Council for nine years although for four years it was holiday/placement work whilst she completed her BSc in Environmental Health at Salford University. Emma's new role, which she took up two years ago, encompasses pest control, drainage issues, animal welfare and dealing with Section 215 of the Town & Country Planning Act. This Act gives Local Authorities powers to make owners keep land and buildings clean and tidy.

A conversation stopper at parties

"I find it fascinating," she says. "But a lot of people's reaction is, 'Oh God how do you do that disgusting job!' It's certainly a conversation stopper at parties," she admits. "When I first qualified, being young and female meant it was hard to make people take you seriously. You have to deal with a lot of conflict situations. Joe Public can get very upset when you are going onto their property to tell them things they really don't want to hear."

"You have to have your wits about you. We have training in managing aggressive behaviour and how to avoid compromising situations. For example if you go into someone's house never allow the occupier to get between you and the door. As a woman you do have to keep personal safety in mind and be rather more cautious than a man. On the other hand being female can sometimes actually help defuse a potential conflict situation."

Most of the time the public is fine – we suspect there will not have been many occasions where members of the public have rushed to help a man with a crow bar lifting a drain cover, but that's been Emma's experience!

Helen Ainsworth is now the Account Manager Professional Pest Control Products for Certis. The role means she is still very active at the sharp end and is rapidly developing a reputation as a technical expert. "I now



Helen Ainsworth of Certis.

find that I'm called in as a new set of eyes," she explains. "A new perspective can help because when you're familiar with a site it can be difficult to spot where the problems lie."

Helen's experience of pest control is wide ranging. She decided this industry was for her when she was just 14 after attending a Careers Fair in Chester. Not wanting to do accountancy, law or medicine which was largely all that was on offer, she got talking to an EHO from Chester City Council and the rest, as they say, is history.

Need to be instinctively careful

Helen has worked as a technician and a biologist, initially controlling pests in the food sector. A spell working in the inner city dealing with cockroach and bed bug problems followed before joining Luxan, now Certis, in 2003. "I have never been threatened or felt concerned for my safety but I suppose you're instinctively careful. You can't be too friendly or that could be seen as flirting," she warns. "But it is not always plain sailing for the men. I've known male technicians working in all female factories who have been persecuted."

Discrimination can still be a problem. "Some ethnic minorities refuse to deal with a woman no matter how competent and qualified they are. However, more often it's a kind of self imposed discrimination where female pest controllers choose to leave the job very early on in their pregnancy, or even when they are looking to start a family," suggests Helen. "And you can't blame them; it's not a job that sits well with being pregnant. The result is that there is probably a lot of wasted talent out there; women who have now had their children and are looking for more flexible opportunities in pest control. The pest control business is one of peaks and troughs so perhaps what we need is a new agency type service."

If it is technical credibility you are looking for, then look no further than Ecolab's Technical Manager – Fiona Murphy. Fiona has been in the industry for over 30 years but, she admits, she only got into pest control by accident. A geology and biology graduate, Fiona's first choice would have been oil-rigs but they would not take her – not back in 1974 – so she joined the Co-op's pest control business – Pestoxin.



Fiona Murphy from Ecolab.

Within three months she had fallen in love with the job. "It's been a fabulous career, allowing me to put science into action," she enthuses.

"Of course, being a hired assassin wouldn't suit every girl," she says, "Pest control is still a white, male dominated industry but, if you last six months, you'll last a lifetime," she suggests. Over those 30 years some things have changed for the better. In the 1970s, and particularly in some companies, there was a certain amount of discrimination. "Today, if a woman wants to get on there's nothing stopping her," says Fiona.

Talking about women in influential positions, Martina Flynn Senior Product Manager at Sorex has just been elected Vice President of BPCA (see page 13 of this issue). That means she will take over the presidency in a couple of year's time.

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But she will not be the first woman in that job. That honour goes to our own editor of *Professional Pest Controller*, Frances McKim, who became the first female BPCA President (and we suspect the youngest) back in 1982/83. Frances admits she was more surprised than anyone to be elected, especially after a well-known member of the industry said: "Well you won't be President – you're female!" Amusingly, her appointment caused some media attention, including an interview with *The Times* who christened her 'Madam Cockroach.'



Frances McKim – first BPCA lady President.

Martina has been in pest control for 10 years but it was not pest control per se that attracted her to the job. "I applied because it was a marketing position, using my languages and in a leading company in its field," she explains. She now manages a team of six in the Product Management and Marketing Group and looks after the strategic direction, marketing and promotion of the company's rodent control products globally. "I think there has been a shift change in the level of respect for women in pest control over the last ten years and an increasing recognition of their competence," she says.

Of course there are many other roles that women have in pest control – women in research and development such as Dr Gai Murphy at Salford University and Sharon Hughes at

Sorex. And let's not forget all the women in support roles, answering calls, organising the pest control work schedules, sorting out the accounts and generally keeping the business afloat. These have been the traditional jobs for women in pest control and they are still vital today.

Finally, if it had not been for a woman in pest control then the current BPCA Chief Executive Officer, Oliver Madge, might never have come into the industry. His mother, Barbara Madge, ran her own successful PCO business, Rodestruct in South Wales and must have been one of the first women in such a position in the country.

Men still outnumber the women

To conclude, there does seem to be evidence of more women playing an active and increasingly influential role in the pest control industry. But go to any industry event and the men will still outnumber the women. Perhaps there is scope for a more formal approach to encourage more women into the industry and to make more of the skills and attributes of those who are already there. "That's something which we are currently debating within BPCA," says Martina. "Watch this space..."

ARE YOU A WOMAN IN PEST CONTROL?

We would like to hear from you. What job do you do? How did you get involved? What has your experience been? Has discrimination or being a female working alone ever been a problem? Write to Laura Marshall, BPCA, 1 Ground Floor, Gleneagles House, Vernon Gate, Derby DE1 1UP or send an email to laura@bpca.org.uk

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