



Women and Surveying

by Ruth Badley

Increasingly women are entering the geospatial sector, with many (though not all) holding higher degrees. As the industry becomes more diverse with new opportunities, **Ruth Badley** talks to three women of their experiences, including two who are running survey companies, in what is otherwise a male-dominated profession.

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Sue Stewart is a director of Laser Surveys, which operates from offices in Worcester and Hornchurch, Essex. The company supplies Ordnance Survey mapping and a range of products online as well as providing topographical surveys, floor plans, elevations and sections, laser scanning, 3D modelling, underground services surveys, ground penetrating radar surveys, drainage connectivity and CCTV drainage condition surveys, GPS surveys, re-bar surveys, precise level monitoring and verified photographs.

What is your background?

I have no formal training as a surveyor but have gained my surveying knowledge through 27 years of experience in dealing with client enquiries, project managing survey contracts and my interest in new survey technologies and maps. My responsibilities include the company's finance, HR, new business development, sales and marketing, quality, health and safety and environmental management.

What significant changes have you seen in the industry?

Advances in technology are bringing about unexpected changes. Laser scanning technology, for example, is making surveying a more attractive career option for women than it used to be – for very practical reasons. Fast data capture in the field, with the rest of the job being completed in the office, makes the job much more flexible and compatible with part-time working and family life. We work all over the UK and it used to be the case that if we had a big topographical and measured building survey to complete in another region, it could involve several days away from home. This simply wasn't practical for someone working full time with young children or for part-time working – the job can't be halted because the surveyor doesn't work on a Wednesday! Smarter, faster ways of working are making a real difference to groups of people that might previously have thought a job in survey was not suited to their situation.

Are you seeing an increase in applications from young women?

Women are still few and far between in the survey world, although I am pleased to say that we have one young female trainee who recently joined our Hornchurch Office and we are looking for another to join our Worcester Office.

What advice would you give a young person thinking of a career in surveying?

From my experience I have a few questions that I always ask myself when I consider taking someone on, so I hope that sharing these will help young people understand what an employer looks for in a trainee surveyor and some of the personal qualities and background experience that give a positive impression at interview. They are:

1. Has this person taken time out to research what a career in surveying would actually involve?
2. Has this person spent time looking at our company specifically and come armed with relevant questions about what he or she has read about us and the work we are doing?
3. Would this person be a confident presence on site? Does he or she have good communication skills and the ability to be appropriately assertive if required?
4. Does the applicant show a good level of enthusiasm and willingness to learn in order to progress?
5. Does he or she understand that the hours will often be long, there will be a lot of travelling and that he or she will be required to stay away from home for short periods of time? The rewards are that they will be surveying different and interesting places and learning about, and using the latest survey technologies.
6. Does the applicant appear to be helpful and responsible? Have they had any experience of volunteering or do they have a part-time job they can talk about with enthusiasm?
7. Is he or she someone who likes to participate as part of a team and to be challenged? Have they taken part in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme or similar?

ANNE KING, is managing director of Kingsland Surveyors Ltd, based in Surrey. Their services include topographical land surveys, measured building and architectural surveys, setting out, engineering surveys, rights of light surveys, photogrammetric measurement and 3D modelling.

How was the business started?

My late husband Geoff set it up in 1996. He had worked in the industry since leaving school but when faced with possible redundancy he took the bold step to set up his own survey company and recruited many of his surveyors from overseas as the business grew. A career in surveying was much more popular in countries such as Poland, Australia and New Zealand for both men and women, but less so in the UK. It

has to be said that some of our best surveyors have been women – they have shown themselves to be logical, practical, hardworking, multi-taskers and real team players. Geoff offered UK school leavers opportunities to join as junior trainee surveyors and provided sponsorship to attend college day release surveying courses but there was only interest from male applicants, although in terms of more senior office-based roles there were several very effective female members of staff.

How did you become involved?

When Geoff died suddenly and unexpectedly at the start of 2007, I took over the running of the business. The support and commitment I received from the staff and the key department managers helped me through that very difficult time, ensuring continuity so the successful business model Geoff had formulated could be taken forward in his memory. We were already committed to relocating to new offices and it was a major challenge to get the infrastructure of the business up and running so we could continue to keep everyone motivated and busy and especially so against the backdrop of a recession. I am not a “hands on” surveyor but then there are plenty of business owners that don’t work on the factory floor as such. Running a business is all about good organisation, communication, forward planning and ensuring the figures add up. On any given day I could be tendering for new work, programming and scheduling jobs, QA drawings, communicating with staff and clients, attending meetings and monitoring suppliers.

What is the biggest challenge in running a survey business?

Finding, recruiting and retaining good staff. We are planning to take on a couple of junior surveyors this year but training takes time and investment. Staff are key to any successful business and it is important to value and retain good employees. Our work requires surveyors that are team players, so hiring people with the right personality is also very important. The finished product is the survey drawing and our surveyors are key to providing our technicians with the right level of information needed to produce accurate, easy to interpret, attractive drawings. The construction industry is currently very buoyant and there are plenty of job opportunities in surveying, but it is my perception that there is a real shortage of good surveyors and applicants with the right skill-set coming forward.

Do you see this situation changing?

There are some positive signs and the recent strategic initiatives in education should encourage more young people into the industry. I really hope they have an impact because there aren’t many careers that can offer such an interesting variety of work and challenges. You get to work in many different

locations with opportunities to travel and work abroad and no two days are ever the same.

EMMA BLAKE joined Atlantic Geomatics (UK) Ltd, Cumbria as a CAD technician and survey assistant in January 2012.

What attracted you to a job in survey?

I studied architecture at university, and worked for 18 months in practice before returning to study for a graduate diploma. At the end of my studies I’d had enough of city life and wanted to move back home to Cumbria but I struggled to find work as an architect. Surveying requires some of the same knowledge, allows me to use the CAD skills I have developed and also to learn new ones, through assisting the surveyors in the field. It was quite challenging to get up to speed with using equipment like total stations and GPS and also the processing software but learning on the job is by far the best way.

What sort of projects do you work on?

I spend about 80% of my time in the office and 20% on site. I tend to work on short projects so there is a great variety, with something new every couple of weeks. Recent work includes an overhead wire survey near Preston, a river bank survey in the catchment area of the River Aire, for flood risk management purposes and an elevation of a hotel building near Keswick.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Working outdoors on a glorious day in a beautiful location is great. I get to see a great deal of the Lake District and there are also opportunities to travel further afield. I like the fact that I am involved in the whole process – from taking the measurements on site, through to the presentation and deliverable. Working outside is less good in the winter but I am a local farmer’s daughter so I am used to being outside in all weathers.

Does being from the locality have any other advantages?

Yes. It is quite often the case that we need access to farmland and coming from that background myself I can assist with that approach. I know that farmers really appreciate it when you take the time to explain what you are doing. I think those small things go a long way to give a good impression of the survey industry in rural areas. The other advantage for me in working locally is that I can still help out on my parent’s farm at evenings and weekends.

Where do you see your career developing?

I still enjoy the creative design side but now I have more technical experience maybe there is a role for me in the future as an architect’s technician or possibly in project management.



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Emma Blake: “I like the fact that I am involved in the whole process – from taking the measurements on site, through to the presentation and deliverable”.



• This article was commissioned by The Survey Association (TSA), the trade body for commercial survey companies in the UK. The author, Ruth Badley is a freelance journalist and PR consultant. She is based in Harrogate, North Yorkshire and works with a number of businesses and organisations in the geospatial sector.