**IN THE DRIVING SEAT**

*In this article Lucy McDonald looks into the world of women lorry drivers.*

Think of long-distance lorry driving and the images that spring to mind are of burger

stands in lay-bys, Yorkie bars and hairy male drivers. But next time you are on the

motorway, take a second look at who is behind the wheel of that juggernaut in the slow

lane. You may be surprised.

Once a rare sight on British roads, women lorry drivers are increasing in number. Better

technology has made the driving easier and, along with female-friendly policies from

companies, is helping to erode what was once the sole preserve of men.

According to industry experts, demand for qualified drivers currently outstrips supply

and there is a deficit of up to 80,000. Although drivers say that the recession means

there is less work, attracting more women to the job could solve a potential long-term

recruitment problem. And more professional women are finding the prospect of life on

the road appealing.

Kaz Horrocks is a long-distance lorry driver. “I was bored in my old job,” she says, “and

I enjoy the solitude of driving. Every day is different—sometimes I see amazing sunsets

and lambs playing in the fields. I love it when you see the year’s first hawthorn blossom

and know that spring is near.”

Neither hawthorn nor lambs are in evidence when I meet Kaz at six o’clock one dismal

June morning in a lorry park. About 100 lorries have overnighted here. They are in

lines, slumbering giants on the asphalt, their cab curtains drawn tightly as the drivers

sleep inside.

As much as 99 per cent of Britain’s freight is delivered by road, so next time you are

stuck behind a lorry remember that without this workforce there would be no food on

the table. This morning Kaz is taking me to deliver frozen meat. Inside her 40-tonne

lorry, the cab is almost militarily neat with bunk beds, lots of ingenious storage and a

kettle.

We sail around the M25 with a mighty view for miles ahead. “Chelsea tractors” have

nothing on us—the windscreen is almost cinematic in its scope. Radio 2 is burbling in

the background as we glide along. I am just a tourist, of course—for full-time female

truckers the reality of work has its downsides, too. Until recently many truck stops had

only male loos, and sleeping overnight in the cab alone would deter many women.

“I’ve never felt unsafe, though,” says Kaz. “There is a certain amount of curiosity from

the men about why I’m driving a truck instead of working at a desk but, apart from the

occasional snide remark, most of the guys are really friendly.”

The lifestyle is solitary by nature, but even more so for women. “There is a male

camaraderie that I am excluded from,” Kaz says. “It takes a particular kind of woman to

drive a truck. It isn’t something that a supermodel is going to do—you have to be a

tough cookie.”

Personally, I enjoy the open road. I feel free when I’m alone in the car, driving far away

with nothing for company but my CD collection and talk radio. The journey appeals

more than the destination: no bickering children or phone calls, nothing that must be

dealt with. And how much more glorious that detachment would feel if you were 6 ft

above other road users . . .

The only way to test this happy vision against the other realities that Kaz describes—

traffic jams, tight deadlines, aggressive drivers and machismo—is to hit the road myself,

although as someone who failed her driving test four times years ago I approach the

challenge of HGV training with no little trepidation.

The HGV training normally takes five days, but my instructor has just a morning to

show me the rudiments. I climb the ladder into a shiny 17-tonne lorry and feel a shiver

as I turn on the ignition. The roar as its engine awakens sends vibrations through my

whole body. The lorry is 27 ft (8.2 m) long and 12 ft 6 in (3.8 m) high. My little car

would fit quite comfortably in its cabin—possibly twice over. It has 350 horsepower (I

am not really sure what this means but it certainly sounds impressive). There are eight

gears and no dual control, which does not seem to worry my instructor in the slightest,

even when I reveal my chequered driving-test record.

I thrust the giant gearstick into first and ease my foot tentatively off the clutch. In

principle it is just like in a car, but in practice the difficulty of everything required—

effort, concentration, even aim—has been multiplied many times. I start moving and,

for the first time in 20 years, remember why I never go on rollercoasters. The

excitement is tremendous but so is the fear of something so powerful. I am not only in

the grip of a monster but, supposedly, in control of it.

Within 30 minutes I am soaring around the training ground, doing nifty turns and even

managing to reverse into a tight parking space. “Despite all the jokes, women are far

better drivers than men,” my instructor says. “That’s why they are cheaper to insure.

It’s because they can multi-task. I know it’s a cliché but it’s true. They are better

pupils, too—they don’t think they know it all as soon as they sit behind the wheel.”

The national pass rate for the HGV test is 34 per cent, and although there are no gender specific statistics available he reckons that the pass rate for women is more like 70 per

cent. Improved technology, in particular power steering, has made it easier for women

to drive such large vehicles.

Yet the driving itself is only one battle in the war to win female hearts and minds—and

the easiest. The industry has been male-dominated for so long that life on the road can

still be difficult for women, even though equal opportunities legislation has helped.

Adapted from an article by Lucy McDonald in *The Times*