

This is not just an automaton; it's an M&S automaton

By Esmerelda Weatherwax

When I was in my early teens, at an East London girls' grammar school and studying hard, my mother began to realise that I had potential for a decent job, something a little 'better' than shop floor or factory (my father had been aware of this for years and had been quietly encouraging me with trips to museums and corners of historic London).

She didn't consider me to have the physical stamina for nursing, that old established route into a profession for the bright working-class girl. I was too short for the police, the companion route for the bright working-class boy, now opening to girls.

But one spring I was bridesmaid at a cousin's wedding. Mum was VERY impressed by the bride's recommendation of her place of work, the well established and respected chain store Marks and Spencers. The uniform was smart (I could soon be knocked into shape with sufficient nagging), the staff benefits and pay excellent (M&S were [pioneers of staff screening](#) for various diseases), the company even provided subsidised hair-dressing to ensure the well grooming of the assistants. And what was most impressive of all to my mother was that Marks and Spencers only took on *ladies* as trainees, the crème de la crème of England's school leavers. Ordinarily decent girls might get taken on by British Home Stores; the hoi polloi went to Woolworths.

See below, a 1970 cohort I might have joined



and the 1980s cohort that came afterwards.



Tidy hair and tidy teeth; they did get a good training and to be manageress of Lingerie or Household was not to be sneered at. Retail still offers good opportunities for the right young man or woman, but I wasn't that young woman and I took a different path.

M&S however has changed. Where customer service, courtesy, quality and efficiency were standard (until quite recently) this is what surprised me on my last visit to collect an order. The counter manned by a pleasant team (of modern diversity, but old-fashioned courtesy) went a few weeks ago to be replaced by Marvin the Paranoid Android's silent and taciturn cousin.



It didn't even have a merry bleep for me.