

# ONCE UPON A TIME -

## When Typists Were Just Female "Typewriters"

**I**F you walk into almost any Government department to-day you will hear the chatter of a hundred typewriters manipulated by a hundred girls. As you walk along the corridor they will flit past you with sheaves of papers in their hands. Their faces will smile at you from the enquiry desk. The brightness of their clothes will relieve the monotony of the piled-up files and the paper-strewn desks.

Yet fifty years ago the Government typist was a comparative rarity.

In England to-day there are 10,000 typists in the government service. Yet as late as 1914 there were only 600. In 1890 there were six. At the close of the last century the women thus employed were known as "female typewriters" and it was some time before it was realised that they were something more than machines.

In 1888 the head of the Inland Revenue Department wrote "these typewriting women can beat me two to one in writing, and that shows the amount of work we get from them. Besides being quick they are also intelligent—they can even turn a letter from the third into the first person. Moreover they are cheap and there is no superannuation."

The actual machine was still in its infancy and was regarded as an innovation not to be greatly encouraged. But we hear that "there is now a new typewriter which has capital letters, and we are getting them by degrees."

### Bold Foreign Office

In 1890 the Foreign Office took the bold step of employing one "lady typewriter," and the innovation worked, we are told, extremely well. Departments were, however, still fearful of the consequences of employing men and girls in the same room. In the Board of Agriculture the one woman typist was secluded in a dingy little room in the basement, and the chief clerk issued an imperative order that no member of the staff under the age of fifteen was to enter her room.

Another department, aghast at the idea of employing a woman, was brought to make the bold experiment by receiving a letter from a high official in a neighbouring department.

"We are delighted here with the typewriting . . . I had a separate room fitted up which would leave the ladies completely to themselves and free from any danger of interference. We have employed two young women at (I think) 23s. and 21s. a week, and they do their work excellently. They do as much as four copyists and give no trouble at all."

This letter encouraged the timid department to engage, in 1890, two "female typewriter copyists" in place of three men copyists (who had cost

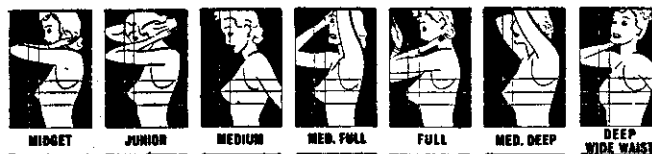
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