Betty Chalmers grew up in a railway family in York. She joined the LNER in 1937 at the age of 16. She worked in the telegraph office at York. Betty recalls working during wartime, the bombing of York station in 1942 and being relocated to work in an underground shelter for the following two years.

Extract 1: How Betty started working in the telegraph office at York Station (5m 58s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:06:06 to 00:14:00, with edits

Betty: (…) In those days you tended to do as your father told you, so I did. And he came home one day and he said "I've got you an interview." So I turned up at the interview and they took me on, temporarily of course.

Interviewer: When would that have been?

B: 1937, I was 16. It was Mr. Menim [ph] was the man in the telegraph office, and that was on York Station then, over where, well, it's not there now, but there was a left luggage office on the station, there was staircase up to our office, and there were right along the top, and our entrance for the girls was in the station portico. In the corner there.

I: And you were interviewed there to start on there?

B: No, no. I was interviewed in the DSO [District Superintendent's Office]. Because it was under the District Superintendent's I believe. And I was interviewed over there.

I: What kind of interview did you get at that time?

B: A long time ago, I find it difficult to remember really … They asked me what I could do, and I couldn't type, I'd never learnt to type, so they said, "Well, if you work in teleprinters, you'll soon pick it up," and then, "we'll take you on for three months," because it's a summer, and that was more or less it. So I was always waiting for the chop, it never came. They were taking more girls on because the men in the telegraph office all did the telegraph, the Morse.

I: Single needle.

B: Single needle and the --

I: And the paddle.

B: The paddle, yes. They were teaching the girls slowly because the men did not like the teleprinters. And they weren't very keen on doing the switchboard either. They would do it in an emergency, but they weren't keen, but they were very very good at their job, we could never have done it. There was the odd girl.

I: The single needle?

B: Yes.

I: Did you start, did you learn at all?

B: They tried to teach me, yes, and I could send, but receiving was very very difficult.

I: Just a jumble of noise?

B: Just, yes, if they'd done it more slowly, I mean I still know the Morse code, if they'd done it more slowly I could have understood, but of course they didn't, and it was fascinating to see these men, a lot of them older, and they were talking to Joe next door about what happened on Saturday and they were taking it down from the telegraph at the same time.

I: They were good readers then?

B: Oh yes, yes, they were wonderful, and they got a little impatient with us!

I: And how many instruments would there have been in the office?

B: Oh, I should think there was about 18 to 20. This was the centre for the North Eastern Railway, LNER. It was the nerve centre. London, yes, was big, but York everything, came to York. We had, we had teleprinters. Two to London, Kings Cross, Liverpool Street, Edinburgh, Darlington, Newcastle, Derby, Sunderland, West Hartlepool, Hull, Leeds.

I: So you were really the centre... And, how did it work?

B: We worked shifts. It was open 24 hours. There were not so many ... at night we didn't start work we didn't work nights when we first went, you weren't allowed to work nights until you were 20, the girls, and they didn't do that until after the war, till the war started. In the evening there'd be about two men on, three men maybe. But we worked -- the day started at six o'clock when there was a shift of the men. They more or less worked three shifts, we worked 10.

I: 10?

B: Yes. There'd be a six to two shift, a seven to three shift, eight to four, eight to five with an hour's lunch, eight to six with two hour lunch, nine to five through, nine to six with one hour lunch, ten to seven with one hour lunch and the worst of all was ten to eight, when you went on at ten o'clock, you had lunch from two to four and you went back four to eight. Then you were to work a one to nine or a two to ten, they weren't so bad, you knew what you were doing. So, because telegrams came in, it started gently at eight o'clock, by the time it got to nine and then after nine onwards till one o'clock it was panic. All the offices were in and they did a lot of telephoning but the lines were not as, not as many lines as there were later and so they were all telegrams. The wagon offices were here and every night there were long telegrams with literally hundreds of wagon numbers on which we got in, coming in from the wagon works, and then that had to go down to London from ours you see.

I: What were they doing that for?

B: Well for the clearing house because you see wagons from other railways came up here and they knew where every wagon, every wagon number was. Then when the war came they also had the coaching stock, they came to York, so that had to be done. [note: The Railway Clearing House was essentially an organisation that operated across all railway companies to administer many aspects of railway traffic, particularly where there were common areas of interest. Its work included allocation of fares and pooled goods charges, establishing basic railway vehicle standards and ensuring 'Common User' goods wagon records were up to date, etc.]

I: So your telex messages were just a list of wagon numbers were they?

B: Yes, which were, you had to be very careful with those numbers, and then they got, that they always had an hour every day to London in the afternoon to do a lot more by phone. In, in that office we got a good working knowledge of the railway. And the geography. Because by then of course it was LNER and all the other railways that had made LNER, and you had, well there was always a man who gave you the telegrams at eight, but not always a man, but told you which, which machine to put them on, but you had to remember which ones GC went to, LM went to, L & Y went to and all those places.

I: So they still used the pre-1923 telegraphs?

B: Oh, yes, yes, for the smaller places they did. We also had a post office telegram, a tele, a post office teleprinter and people used to come to the door, to the top, and they could send a telegram to the Post Office.

I: The public?

B: Oh yes. Not many, but they did and we had one of those to the Post Office and that was LS for Leeds. The men had a … a telegraph to LM, which was Leeds Midland, and our machines were NS, Leeds New Street, that was LNER. So we got a fairly good basic, basis thing of of the office.

I: Now how many teleprinters did you have in the office?

B: … one, two, three, I would imagine there'd be … fifteen, sixteen.

I: Fifteen, yeah, so you had a lot of girls then.

B: We had a lot of girls and that's why we worked shifts. The eldest girl worked the King's Cross.

I: Were you on the same grade, or was there a senior?

B: Oh, we were all the same grade, it was just when you went in. Your name was on a list as how old, well not how old you were, but as you went in the senior, the senior ones on duty took the senior machines.

Extract 2: Betty talks about her experience on the switchboard (3m 06s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:15:55 to 00:20:04, with edits

Interviewer: You were actually on the switchboard as well then?

Betty: Oh yes. After you'd been in a little while you did everything. You were trained to do everything. You had to go on listening to, there were dual plugs and we had a supervisor, and I'm sure that everybody on the railway would know her name, Bessy Barratt [ph], she was much older, and she was wonderful, she got the MBE at the end of the war for all the things we'd helped her to do. But she was, very good, but she was really, what could I say...

I: Autocratic?

B: Autocratic, but she taught us how to do it and then we took charge ourselves and she would take, well whoever was senior would take the senior board, which, the Newcastle calls, and then it got round to the Darlington calls and then eventually you could do them all, but you had a section each you see and you knew, you had to know where to put them, we got calls in from the offices that had a red bulb, they were railway calls but if they were entitled to have an outside line they had a white light. I don't know whether they knew that, but we knew that.

I: Because everybody was not entitled to use the post-office telephone?

B: No. No, they, not, well there were only ten lines. So we knew --

I: You also had internal lines didn't you?

B: Oh, they were all internal lines, but they were wanting other places in the country. Oh yes, the passenger managers wouldn't have to ring us to get the engineers, they all had their own numbers. And they rang them, but if they wanted to go out of York then they had to come through the switchboard, and even for an internal call, a railway internal call. It was very interesting, and I loved that, I loved that particularly I liked the, I liked the switchboard. There was also a little job we got to do called 'telephones', because the signal boxes all had to come, we had to ring them when a train was leaving. We would get, from the station the boy would ring up what they called a TAS message which was 'train has started' and that had to take priority over everything else. They went on the teleprinter to the bigger stations, but for the little signal boxes, of which there are none now I don't think, like to Leeds there were Ulleskelf and Bolton Percy and you rang and you rang and an old man would say, "I'm just getting me tatties in Bill, hang on that lass at York wants us! [laughs] ... All right love, I'll tell Bill down the line it had left York!" I think they thought we were a joke, but this had to be done because there was no other way.

I: Is that true?

B: Yes, and I think the lines were bits of rope actually [laughs], to all these signal boxes.

I: So every train that left York, you had to tell the people down the lines that it had left.

B: It had left York, yes.

I: So it wasn't the signal man that did it, it was, they came to you and then you --

B: They came to us and then we sent them on to the signalmen so they knew and they could, they could come in from digging the garden and --

I: And did you get to know any of these signalman?

B: Not really because there were a lot of them and you weren't on that job all the time, or anything like all the time, but it was very interesting. You also had a tele, you also had a phone there to take incoming calls, from, that didn't, that maybe wanted somebody in the telegraph office, or some query about something so it was all very interesting.

Extract 3: Betty recalls the bombing of York station on 21 April 1942 and its aftermath (3m 24s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:20:30 to 00:24:50, with edits

Betty: Well, fortunately I wasn't on duty, but there were some, there was one girl on duty and three men and apparently the bomb hit the station. They'd already put a thick concrete thing on our glass roof, which was stupid of course, but they thought it was to save us, keep the light out as well. Two o'clock in the morning of course, they hit the station, because that was an important thing to do, and to my knowledge it's the only time that York station was closed for two days while they cleared the rubbish because it was terrible. So I cycled into work next morning dodging broken glass and carrying my bicycle, got to work, no office, completely destroyed. But they had taken the precaution, two or three years earlier of putting a duplicate switchboard in the shelter under the bar walls. They'd put a duplicate switchboard there which they switched over to every night and that's partly why we had to work nights, because we needed an extra one on the switchboard. So that was a Godsend because the other one was completely destroyed. And when I got to the office, well, when I got to the station amid the rubble, the boss was there and the girls were sorting out wet railway tickets. The water had come in over the booking office, and of course, there was nothing for us to do, nothing, and my mother was ill so he said, "Well, I think you'd better go home for a day or two," which I did, very good. And the board was kept going and they hastily got teleprinters from such places as West Hartlepool and Middlesborough, places that weren't as busy as us, and they managed to put them in the shelter. We were in a corridor.

Interviewer: What under the wall?

B: Yes, it was awful, and they were there for nearly two years until they cleared some of the muniment rooms in the new offices and that is I think where they are now. In the basement, facing the bar walls. There's a room, and I worked there for a little while, not too long because I left after I got married.

I: Right, so 1942, that was the bombing.

B: That was the bombing, April 21st.

I: And you were under the walls for two years.

B: Yes.

I: And how an earth did you manage?

B: With difficulty. The board was all right, the switchboard was all right. It was terribly hot in there because although the corridor was the length of this room to go in but the heat, the air conditioning was rough, so in the middle of winter you sort of, when you got there, got down to your bikini nearly [laughs], not quite in those days, but nevertheless it was happy. The control were in there, they made a lot of fuss of us girls and …

I: So the control moved in?

B: Oh, they were in I think, I can't just remember. I think there was a central control and a district control, the central control was obviously the main one, the district would be this area, the north-eastern area. Yes and the District Intelligence they were down there, so we just had to be in in the corridor, but that wasn't so, it was in the switchboard they, they were very good because we were on our own, they'd say, well you know, "Do you want something

to eat?" And we had a little kitchen and they would give us something or make us something, or the messenger would go over to the canteen if we wanted it and brought it over.

I: But you had no windows in that place?

B: No, it was terrible. No windows no windows and it was hot, it was, when you went in on a winter's morning about six o'clock, oh. You were so cold cycling down, but you know you got used to it, Frank, you got used to it. [laughs]

Extract 4: Betty explains the need for absolute secrecy during the Second World War (1m 50s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:25:20 to 00:27:35, with edits

Interviewer: What about this District Intelligence, what was that?

Betty: Well, it's a pity my father's not here. As far as I know they knew when ammunition trains were coming through, they knew when troop trains were coming through, they were arranging them, well, I mean that wasn't necessary, that wasn't needed outside, it was a secret because they were going through all night. A lot of troop trains, a lot of them used to go right up north, now what did they call that one that goes up to the, not the Dreadnought?

I: Scapa Flow?

B: They were going up to, yes, there was a train went right through and up there, taking sailors backwards and forwards, and of course there were ammunition trains and everybody had to know on the railway about those because they were dangerous, but nobody outside the railway should know, because of course it would have been dangerous, I mean 'walls have ears.'

I: You remember that phrase do you?

B: I remember 'Walls Have Ears.'

I: How did they pass that on, because I mean you were knowledgeable about a lot of things, what did it mean to you? … Were you conscious of having to keep things quiet?

B: Yes, I think so, I think everybody had because there were posters all over, 'Walls Have Ears,' or more dramatic things, you know, somebody being killed, 'Did you speak?' You know. Everybody was very conscious of it and people would say … I think we had to be. And there were always the stories of course of the paratroops coming down, you know, if… this was after Dunkirk. You know, they might be dressed as nuns, might the Germans! [laughs] There were …

I: Did you believe that?

B: Yes. We were only young and we were frightened. There were big road blocks built on main roads, big places, as big as this and then a gap and then half way. Like on Boroughbridge Road, you know, the buses used to have to come round.

I: Yes, concrete pillboxes.

B: No, they were brick, they were brick. They could ask you for your identity card, they very rarely did

Extract 5: Betty met her future husband while working on the switchboard during the war (1m 15s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:27:40 to 00:30:10, with edits

Betty: (…) During my time on the switchboard it would, I was actually on, I was working in the office normally, but it was my turn on the switchboard and there was a group of Royal Engineers stationed in York. They had come back from France and they were a railway construction company, and some of them started ringing up the girls, realising there were girls on the switchboard, and I know a few of my friends did, and I used to say, "No, I'm not doing a thing like that." However, one night this Scotsman came on and he said, "I'm a Scotsman from Wales." I married that man three years later!

Interviewer: [laughs] A funny Scotsman from Wales. [laughs]

B: And of course, he was a railwayman. I went up to Perth after the war, and then he got itchy feet and wanted promotion, took his exams and came down to York.

I: That was how you started was it, a message on the switchboard?

B: Yeah, yeah… He was full of fun, you know. I never met him for two or three months, we just talked.

I: Seriously?

B: Yeah, well you got talking to all sorts of blokes, and one night I went to meet a friend Lee [?], and she said, "Oh that Peter's coming." I said, "Oh." Anyway, after that it was all right.

I: You met him. Well, you obviously weren't disappointed? [laughs]

B: Oh, no, the chemistry was right.

I: Why would they have been phoning the switchboard?

B: Don't ask me. They were ringing the girls up! [laughs]

Extract 6: Betty explains having to record all communications received on the telephone whilst office supplies were rationed (1m 48s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 01:07:25 to 01:10:45, with edits

Betty: It was a special thing to keep a record of them. You had papers on the go at… 236 York wanted Darlington 4 at, booked it at eleven o'clock, put on at twelve o'clock.

Interviewer: And all this had to be written down?

B: Oh yes, you had your earphone on one thing and your, you were married to a pencil, you had a pencil in your hand and you used that for dialling of course, but yes, you'd always have a pencil and a piece of paper there all the time. It was just automatic and you couldn't remember it all.

I: And those were the days when your pencils were like gold weren't they?

B: Yes, yes [laughs]. We had to have them, with a rubber on the end so you could dial, you know.

I: Yes. I can remember seeing the little holders because before you got a new pencil you had to hand in the --

B: The metal holder, the metal with a little bit at that end, a little bit at that end! [laughs]

I: Because they were quite tight weren't they?

B: Oh with rations, things were --

I: Materials and things like that.

B: Yes, I don't think the railway were tight themselves, it was just they couldn't get hold of them. And the paper, now this is interesting. On a teleprinter there's a big roll of paper almost like a kitchen roll, but thick, thick paper, and you tear them off, of course, when you, when you've done so much, some could be big, some could be little. They were kept of course, there was a copy, our copy, if anybody's sending to us the whole copy came off and it was rolled up. So what they started to do was [laughs], take that paper, put girls on pasting them together, okay. Not the little ones, the big ones, rolling them the other way and putting them through the machines again.

I: That was economy for you.

B: We didn't like that job. But that was easy, I mean you just sit and talk all the time, just pasting away and putting a bit on, usually the junior ones got to do that, then carefully roll it up again. It didn't always work quite as evenly because obviously they weren't rolled as tight as the original ones were! But.

I: That was a way to save paper…

Extract 7: Using railway passes during the war for a day-out in Scarborough (0m 45s)

Source of extract: File NAROH2000-40-01_AO_Chalmers Betty, from 00:35:20 to 00:36:20, with edits

Interviewer: Did you use your railway passes at that stage?

Betty: Oh yes. Well, I'd always had them, all my life, I have never known a time when I didn't have a railway pass.

I: So you've never had to buy a ticket?

B: Never had to buy a ticket.

I: So what did you do with your passes during the war?

B: Well, well if two or three of us were off we'd go to Scarborough for the day. You couldn't go on the beach, but --

I: You couldn't go on the beach?

B: Oh no, well there might have been an invasion and they all had wire netting, you know, and you couldn't go on the beach. But Scarborough was an OTU [Operational Training Unit; Note: the interviewee is likely referring to Scarborough being the site of Initial Training Wings (ITW) for the Royal Air Force from 1940], there were hundreds of airmen training to be pilots in Scarborough. And you might be lucky and get some fish and chips, you know. Oh we didn't know, we just saw them, we didn't, just go for a walk and got some sea air in the summer.

I: So this is with the girls in the office?

B: Oh yes, with the girls in the office