



**A SALUTE TO THE WORKFORCE WHO HAVE BUILT
THE FIRST TYPE 26, CITY CLASS FRIGATE**

HMS GLASGOW

Pride of the city

BAE Systems and the STEM Returners programme are helping to create greater diversity in the industry

Fully onboard for broader horizons

THERE were only four female students out of 100 on Gemma Pearson's university course – and that is something the mechanical engineer hopes will change for future generations.

“Things are getting better since I graduated eight years ago but this is still a very male-dominated industry,” she explains. “We need to show the younger generation, males and females, that they can be anything they want to be.”

“And it's good for young girls to see women in roles like mine, because then it's easier for them to imagine doing those jobs.”

Pearson joined BAE Systems through the STEM Returners programme in 2019. Co-supported by the Institute of Marine Engineering, Science and Technology and the Women's Engineering Society, this aims to plug the skills gap facing the sector and redress the gender imbalance. It helps employers recruit and retain the best available talent, and allows experienced and highly qualified engineers to restart or reshape their careers. Around 46 per cent of the intake across all returners' programmes are women, compared to the estimated 10 to 12 per cent of female engineers in the UK workforce.

BAE Systems ran a pilot STEM returners programme in 2018 and again in 2019, and all participants have been retained in permanent positions with the company.

Pearson explains: “I left university and went straight into having a family, so when my youngest turned one I was ready to go back to work. My partner, Andrew, was already working for BAE Systems, and he told me about the STEM Returners programme.”

“The interview was a fantastic experience as I got the chance to spend a full day on-site, see the Type 26 design phases and meet some of the team.”

“I got the job and after the three months was up I was kept on. I was paired with a female engineer and everyone was very welcoming. I'm part of the Type 26 auxiliaries team, which is responsible for checking design systems and specifications on the ship – for example, all the fresh water systems, the ‘plumbing’, really, on board. Most people think of the incredi-



Gemma Pearson joined BAE Systems through the STEM Returners programme

bly advanced technology used for things like radar and weapons systems on a ship like this, but you also have to consider how you get fresh water on board for the crew to drink.

“One of my other responsibilities is the salvage system, which is used to empty the ship of water should there be a flood.”

Pearson, who grew up in Falkirk, was all set on a career in accountancy until a high school project changed her mind.

“I loved numbers, was doing Advanced Highers in accounting and maths, was going to study maths in Aberdeen and then a

physics teacher invited me to join a STEM project building a 3D printer,” she explains.

“I really enjoyed it and it made me realise I wanted to do something with my hands, something that involved problem-solving and was more than just numbers.”

“So about a week before the deadline, I changed everything – course, university, city – and applied to do mechanical engineering at Heriot-Watt in Edinburgh.”

“It was a bit daunting at first, but as soon as I got there, I knew I'd made the right choice. Since then, things have fallen into place.”

Now juggling her role on the Type 26 programme at BAE Systems in Govan with life as a busy mother, she is hoping to move up to senior engineer in the near future.

“It is a juggling act, there is no doubt about that but the company is supportive and there is a lot of flexibility,” she says. “There are fantastic learning and training opportunities available at all levels. Things like the STEM Returners programme mean you really don't have to choose between having a young family and having a career, you can get support to make it work.”

She adds, with a laugh: “And it is a great moment, to see HMS Glasgow built – every time we pass with the boys, we're really proud to tell them that's the ship



I would love to be a role model. It's a passion to have more diversity in the industry

mummy and daddy helped to build.”

Pearson is part of the Gender Equality Network (GEN) and before Covid, visited schools as a STEM ambassador.

“It's incredibly important to encourage girls to take STEM subjects,” she says. “I'm fortunate here at BAE Systems to be able to look up to women – our chief engineer for Type 26; our combat systems director; in my immediate circle my technical authority for mechanical engineering; and when I started, our Type 26 programme director.”

“They have all been incredibly inspiring women and great role models for me.”

“I would love to be a role model for young women looking to come into engineering because it's such a great career.”

“It's a real passion of mine to have more diversity in the industry.” ■

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