

Walk past the Houses of Parliament and you might catch a glimpse of scarlet in one of the elaborate Gothic archways. That is Stella Devadason, Redcoat, dressed in a made-to-measure red jacket, black trousers and glossy top hat. She is part of a tradition stretching back to the 17th century that began on a day when Charles II arrived at the Palace of Westminster only to find there was no-one waiting to open his carriage doors. Incensed, he fetched one of his own red-coated soldiers to perform the duty, and a Redcoat has remained stationed at the Peers' Entrance ever since.

"I am here to assist peers and their guests, help them with their luggage and also keep an eye on the car park in Old Palace Yard," says Devadason, who became a Redcoat in 2009. As the first woman to take on the position, she laughs because people worried about her size, but confidence more than compensates for her diminutive stature.



Left: In her traditional red coat and top hat, Stella Devadason stands on guard, ready to salute the royal carriage (bottom) on State occasions



BRITAIN meets the first female Redcoat

Stella Devadason has joined the ranks of the ceremonial Redcoats at the Houses of Parliament and talks to Emmeline Ledgerwood about her historic role

"You have to be a bit mature for the role. I need to be polite but very firm," she says more than once, a mantra for when emotions run high over coveted parking spaces.

The most visible part of her job is during ceremonial events, the main one being the State Opening of Parliament when HM The Queen formally opens a new parliamentary session. As the pageantry of the Queen's procession passes through Old Palace Yard to the Sovereign's Entrance, Redcoat salutes the royal carriages from the Peers' Entrance. "For my first official duty my heart was in my mouth," she confesses, but now with two State Openings under her belt she is getting accustomed to being on show. "It's an absolutely magnificent occasion." She adores being part of British heritage and

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particularly enjoys taking visitors along the Line of Route, the official tour of the Houses of Parliament. "I absolutely love the tradition and want to know more and more," passing her enthusiasm onto whichever group she is leading, whether they are foreign schoolchildren, Miss World contestants or NASA astronauts.

She has worked at the House of Lords since 1999, when she broke another centuries-old tradition by becoming the first female doorkeeper. Joining an all-male team did not worry her as she has never been afraid of a challenge. She left her native Malaysia to study nursing in the UK and then serving for 22 years in the Royal Navy nursing service, during which she received the Associate Royal Red Cross medal and her long-service medal. Her naval

career stood her in good stead when it came to getting along with her new colleagues, many of whom had also been in the armed forces. "The same camaraderie was there, and the same humour – it just bounces off you."

As a doorkeeper she was part of a team that is responsible for helping in the smooth running and security of the Lords. "It is up to the doorkeepers to keep things in line. However you can't tell a peer what to do, you can only advise. For example they are not allowed to eat or drink in the Chamber, or to bring newspapers in." The first challenge was getting to know the names of more than 500 peers. "At the beginning I used to say my Lord, my Lady to the cleaners!"

Devadason has learnt to be prepared for unusual requests. "Peers will ask me to comb their hair or straighten their tie. When I first came, I was even asked to look after a dead fish. That's the beauty of the job, and you just do it." **B**

As well as during the summer recess, the Houses of Parliament are now open to the public by tour all year round on Saturdays. For details visit www.parliament.uk.