

Annette Stukins, born 1960, Stevenage.

Parent: Mother worked in a shoe factory, making shoes, father was 10 years in the RAF, then the fire brigade, leaving because it was too dangerous with a young family, becoming an engineer at British Aerospace.

Introduction to the railways: Annette defended a member of staff at the barrier who was being abused about train delays. He suggested she apply for a job as she was good with people.

So a few months later, she wrote in and got a job working in the inquiry office, which she described as a nursery for the railways.

Learnt how to calculate fares, read timetables, talk on the phone.

Early days: First inquiry was how much to send a pigeon to Tipton. Accompanied/unaccompanied? Sent her into a panic. It got better. Mostly fare and timetable inquiries. But sometimes strange calls: someone rang about their council rent!

Job skills/training: 2 weeks training on route maps, then sat with an experienced colleague listening for 2 days. Worked in the inquiry bureau for 6 months, then moved to travel centre. Learnt about travel reservations, how to use ticket machines, use the till.

Social life: felt enveloped in a railway family, good social life, went to the railway club. KX only station worked at. It was 24/7/365 day operation apart from Christmas day. Could work 5.30am till midnight on different shifts. Difficult to meet friends outside railway because of shift work.

KX station: quite shabby, run down but amazing architecture. Had a bridge with an old clock on it, went in the revamp, wondered what happened to it.

KX environs: Liked the gas works and canisters, warehouses, cobbled streets, all the buildings used to be black from the steam trains, now clean. German Gymnasium remains. Much demolished.

Station always noisy, especially diesel trains, kept running in the station, gradually became quieter with electrification. Mail train, noisy trolleys rattling around.

Thousands of people passed through travel centre.

Vacancies: internal BR monthly list of vacancies, could work in hotels, sealink, abroad. Could move around the country. Opportunities shut down with privatisation.

Local area changed dramatically. Railway Tavern, known as the Engine House, had union meetings there. Shut in late 90s. Jewellers on the corner of York Way, cafe in the railway arches of St Pancras along with other small business....now main shopping concourse.

Railway club: Victorian building on side of station, behind Great Northern hotel. Bit of a dive but a watering hole for many. Closed in early 90s.

Job: inquiry bureau, then travel bureau, counter, immediate tickets, advanced, continental ferry.

How they worked in detailed description: on the phone and on paper. Reservations. Drawbacks if something went missing. British Rail passes. American tourists. 54 BR passes. Office ghost story!

Cashiers office, publicity for travel centres, weekend engineering works, reworked revised timetable for travel centre, assistant to travel centre manager, assistant to CEO on privatisation, for a year, then back to travel centre and then into HR. Became assistant branch secretary, then convenor. Studied for CIPD Chartered Institute for Personnel Development in 2 years at Middlesex Uni while still working. Gained post grad qualifications.

Hierarchy: if wanted quick promotion had to move. Dead men's shoes. Description of grades.

Dangers: office got held up at gunpoint, broke into cashiers office. Body clock out of sync with shift work. '87 fire on underground at KX.

July 2005 London bombings. Detailed description of that day. Joined in with assisting police etc. "The team were magnificent. Everyone pulled together".

Hatfield train crash. Lost driver and chef. Like losing a family member.

Harry Potter platform 9 and 3/4. People kept asking for platform. Realised had to do something. Someone came up with idea of cutting a shopping trolley in half and attaching it to the wall. Somewhere to send tourists!

Unfair treatment: v male oriented at first. V few women employed. Lots of discrimination, all done in jest, patronising. Men got best jobs. But became better as more women joined, force of numbers. Detailed anecdotes about discrimination.

First woman driver, only male facilities. Long way to ladies rest room.

Change of personnel: 84/85 lot of old supervisors left, more young people joined, more women went to branch meetings, big debate on how to tackle problems, end of 80s - equality better.

Strikes: most often about T&Cs not pay, eg taking away breaks, discriminatory practices, reducing breaks to 20". Management often refused to talk.

"Unions are you and I, ordinary people."

Became educated. First female branch secretary. Represented women at TUC conference 2002 but Twin Towers attack that day, so conference cut short.

Elected to RMT women's advisory committee. Got caught up with lots of other areas, black ethnic minorities, gay...had a hotline to national executive so could fast track issues for resolution. Assistant Gen Sec sat in on their meetings too.

Memorable issues: discrimination against pregnant women, uniforms, high heels and tights, childcare facilities, shift patterns, women not being promoted, women's facilities, no standards in interviews etc. Bosses failing to take women's issues seriously.

"Attitudes ran very deep".

Organised a women's conference in Birmingham. Had to do a physical recce. Footwork. No internet.

Looking back: "40 years of friendship. Huge part of my life. Totally amazing".

Privatisation: GNER...v lucky. Interested in customer service, company council, met several times a year with CEO and directors, backed up staff. Couldn't have got a better deal. Never had a strike ballot. 10-year tenure.

Railway never just a job. People care about it. Calls them railway family. Made friends, went on holiday.

Took redundancy in 2007. GNER lost the franchise. 28 years after joining, she got out. Wanted to leave on a high.