

AN ORAL HISTORY OF KINGS CROSS RAIL WORKERS

Interviewee: Carmel Fleming
Year of Birth: 1945
Place of Birth: Belfast
Father's Occupation: Barman/Seaman
Mother's Occupation: Minded house and children
Interview Location: ASLEF building, 77 St John St, London EC1M 4NN
Date of Interview: 12 October 2022
Interviewer: Lorraine Liu
Summariser: Anna Lerner

Carmel was a station announcer, switch board operator and telephonist at Kings Cross Station.

She came to London from Scotland with her husband. She joined the railway after her neighbour, a train driver, suggested applying; she rang up, was interviewed, and started in March. She started as a switch board operator, then a telephonist. She describes herself as left-handed and dyslexic. She worked at Kings Cross and Victoria Stations.

On announcements, she said people found Northern Irish and Scottish accents carried better over the Tannoy system. She trained on the job, sitting next to someone doing it already. Worst days were having to make announcements when there were train problems, such as at weekends during engineering works when terminations or bus replacement services had to be announced.

She enjoyed the Company (British Rail) and people she worked with and "got on with everyone". As a "married woman with children... [she] didn't have time to socialise", although might go for lunch.

She describes morning (7am-3pm), evening (3-11pm), and "middle turn" (10am-6pm) shifts, and how the nature of work depended on the shift. Mid turn shifts were office based and might involve printing cards for the operating board. Between 4-6pm she'd announce trains at local stations and platform alternations. At 6pm she'd jump on the train home. She describes how the operating board functioned by pushing cards into the slot.

Living in Hatfield, she wasn't in the Kings Cross area much, and would only go to the "top" if she was off duty or going shopping.

Generally, people "got on well" and were "friendly". There was the "odd person [you] didn't get on with", and slight friction. Most signal men were used to working in their own boxes, so didn't cope in the same room as other people, but some specifically didn't like working with women. This was "part of the course", not just at Kings Cross Station. She said sometimes they "took the micky" out of her accent, but there were no problems (as a female).

She describes nick names and how people got them, including Humpy John, Whispering Smith and Trotsky, but doesn't recall one for herself.

On hierarchy, she said “you accepted” supervisors and signal men were at the “top”, “we were at the “bottom of the pecking order”. “[We] came under the TSSA – clerical - Union” (Transport Salaried Staff’s Association). On career progression, rather than getting promoted, she said her job was upgraded.

There was no favourite part of her job, she liked it all, and did it without thinking.

On less pleasant aspects, she described dealing with a “bowler boy” commuter poking her with his umbrella. She told him if he did it again, she’d shove it where the sun didn’t shine, and her supervisor called the police on him.

Victoria Station was harder to work at than Kings Cross Station as different locations of platforms made platform changes difficult. She gave an example of “rough necks” jumping on Prince Charles’s (now King of England) train, due to a platform announcement mix up.

She retired on sick grounds, enjoyed her job, and got on well with people she worked with.

The main job perk was “travel facilities”. After 6 month’s working, people could apply for a travel pass. There would be “booze cruises” to the Channel Islands or Jersey. She could travel to her mother in Lancaster, and she recalls that when she died the Signal Room “boys” clubbed together to pay for travel to her funeral. At staff birthdays she’d be make “jelly cake”.

She had little interaction with the public, although between 4-6pm passengers may ask or “moan” about something.

Funny and eventful stories she recalls include a colleague who’d had a few “licks of the bottle” being found with his legs sticking out from under a door, doing her knitting between announcements, and a “run-in” at Christmas time with a drunk manager who told her she was sacked, when through no fault of her own the signal box was not working.

Aside from the board and the trains sometimes breaking down, she found her job pretty standard. During strikes, managers would drive the trains, and one time a manager drove it off the track. “[You] learnt to take things in your stride”.

She worked with a few other women that she names, who she said were generally announcers, and signal men operated the “long line”, until announcements were computerised. She hated doing the “long line”.

She mentions again she didn’t experience differential treatment as a woman. She said “language was the main thing” as signal men weren’t used to being around women.

She had little experience of the trade union at Kings Cross Station - she was “gobby” (implying she dealt with issues herself). However, she recalls her colleague seeing she hadn’t been paid overtime and taking this up for her with the Union, who helped get her back pay.

She said wasn’t impacted by privatisation during her time at Kings Cross station.

On reflecting on her time at Kings Cross Station, she said she “made a lot of friends” and still meets up at re-unions.

She explained the technicalities of the Solari board, how trains would be shown in chronological order with destination and platform, and each station would be called out, including interchanges. The information would come up as a long strip, so where changes were needed, lines rather than individual text would be changed.