

## **The Train at Platform 5: An Oral History of Kings Cross Rail Workers** **Chris Luesley**

### Interviewee

Name: Chris Luesley  
Year of birth: 1962  
Place of birth: Whitechapel,  
London

### Interview

Interviewer: Rozanne Gomes  
Summariser: Lorraine Lui  
Date: 10 October 2022  
Place: ASLEF (77 St John Street, Clerkenwell, London EC1M 4NN)

Chris Luesley was interested in trains as a child, and in 1978, at the age of 16, became a traction trainee at Kings Cross. Before passing out as **driver**, he was **secondman** for 6 years, where he learned driving in an 'apprenticeship' by watching the drivers and being gradually given the chance to try.

In his early years, **Kings Cross** was a down-and-out 'inner city' area, where he described 'taking your life into your own hands' when walking between the Station and Goods Yard and often being accosted. He had fonder memories inside the Station of the hustle and bustle and socialising with other staff. He described a typical **workday**, including getting up at 3 am, working with the steam boilers, coupling, shunting, etc. His favourite job was driving, particularly the Deltic Class 55 at night.

He said he got on very well with **fellow drivers**. Social activities included dinner dances and boat parties organised by ASLEF. Drivers would help each other out, such as the time he took the wrong train when distracted by a 'dodgy' woman requesting to enter the driver's cabin to avoid the ticket inspector, such that another driver could not get off work. He was given the nickname 'Hang Loosely'.

He said he had **good times**, being paid to do a job he really enjoyed. He told stories like the man who, every autumn, would hand him a bag of produce from his track-side allotment if his train stopped for signals. When he was secondman, drivers sometimes covered for him so he could 'sneak off' at Finsbury Park depot to watch football, being an Arsenal fan. His favourite moments were giving safety talks in schools about playing on tracks to children aged 7 to 16 in the 1990s.

He also spoke of sad moments and **hazards**. As secondman, his 'head has to be switched on' when walking down the side of trains to check axles that had seized up, given the dangers of being run over. The worst days were when he went into work to hear of the passing of a colleague. He vividly remembered an 'emotional day' in April 1984, when a 46-year-old woman stepped in front of his train and died, describing how such suicides deeply affected him and some drivers.

In his early years, he heard Afro-Caribbean drivers speak of the **racism** faced, though the situation was somewhat better than the decade before. He has been active on the labour **union** and said he would never forget how it helped him with its hardship fund during the 1982 strikes. He was unsure if **privatisation** was in general a good thing, since it benefited the drivers in terms of pay, but harmed the industry by causing fragmentation. He mentioned two main **technological advancements** he experienced: the Train Protection & Warning System that prevented potentially catastrophic incidents with automatic brakes activation (though some drivers thought it took the skills out of driving and were displeased), and the GSM-R radio which enabled instant communication between drivers and signallers.

44 years after starting work at Kings Cross, he was still working part time. He said this career has given him a good lifestyle and social life, having met many good people on the railway. He said the **Deltic**, a 'unique engine' which was 'an art to drive', played an important role in his early career. He described his excitement – like 'going out on a first date' – when he as secondman was given the chance to drive 'this huge throbbing beast'. As a child growing up in Finsbury Park, he would not sleep until he had heard the Deltic roar past his window at 10:35 pm, and he was amazed when, on one of his first jobs as secondman, he found himself on this very train speeding past his home. Looking back, he counted himself 'very, very fortunate' to have been able to drive the Deltic.