

Kings Cross Railway Workers Oral History

Interviewee: Gary Cannell
Date of birth: 1953
Place of birth: Enfield
Interview location: ASLEF, 77 St John Street, London, EC1M 4NN
Date of interview: 12th October 2022
Interviewed by: Anna Lerner
Summary by: Mark O'Loughlin

Gary Cannell worked at Kings Cross Railway Station between 1971 and 1997. He worked his way through the ranks, starting as Cleaner, spending 7 years as Second Man - and after passing driver examinations, was appointed as a regular driver in 1978.

Kings Cross was a high prestige depot with famous trains and runs such as the Flying Scotsman, Talisman and Aberdonian. It had the 'longest runs in the country' and the work was varied and well paid. Much of the training was informal and knowledge was gained by working with older, experienced drivers.

Gary drove a variety of trains during his career, including freight and charter trains, gold bullion trains (accompanied by police helicopter), football match specials as well as those with Royal passengers (including Charles and Diana).

At its peak, 400 train crews worked at Kings Cross. The area surrounding the station was quite dilapidated and famous for its 'ladies of the night.' It was a great place to work, with plenty of opportunities to socialise at the BRSA Club or one of the many local pubs or the staff-only bar underneath Euston Station.

Black humour was important and everyone had a nickname. Gary's was Gladys and others included The Pink Panther, Hinge & Bracket and Fingers.

The railway could also be a dangerous place to work and Gary recalls how a train he was driving was derailed when a car went under his train at a level crossing. Sharing experiences of fatalities and accidents with other drivers was an important support mechanism.

Gary also recalls the first women working at Kings Cross and how they were initially not accepted by some of the older drivers. Tricia Roche was his Second Man.

There was a major dispute in 1982 and Gary was glad to be part of the ASLEF Union, which did a lot to help protect the rights of workers at Kings Cross and oppose the big changes the Management wanted to introduce.

Gary left Kings Cross in 1997, following privatisation when Kings Cross was 'carved up', and the work became less fun and less varied. It went from double to single manning in the cab and the job became more lonely. Simultaneously, there was increased monitoring and scrutiny.

He still remembers his time at Kings Cross with fondness and believes that he was lucky to have the best years.