

Kings Cross Railway Workers Oral History

Interviewee: Helen Zato
Date of birth: 1959
Place of birth: Ghana
Interview location: ASLEF, 77 St John Street, London, EC1M 4NN
Interview date: 19th October 2022
Interviewed by: Chris Burton
Summary by: Mark O'Loughlin

Helen came to the UK in 1985 with the help of her sister. She had previously worked as a teacher in Ghana. She started as a train cleaner at Liverpool Street in 1989 before seeing a job advertisement for a guard at Kings Cross. She didn't really want the job initially but after completing full driver training by accident, she decided that she wanted to stay working as a guard rather than become a driver.

Helen worked at British Rail and after privatisation GNER, Virgin now LNER. Helen was the first woman of colour to work on the line as a train manager. She has been there for more than 30 years. It has been challenging at times and she has experienced both verbal and physical abuse at work. On one occasion, a man spat in her face and on another Millwall fans were physically and verbally abusive towards her. But there are lots of good people too, she says, and she enjoys the challenging nature of her work. She loves the many different types of people she meets, and values giving good service.

Helen remembers how male colleagues would swear and apologise when they realised she was within earshot. It was difficult being a woman in that environment. She recalls having to ask the foreman for a key every time she needed the toilet which was locked, he said, because of the sex workers who worked in the Kings Cross area. She eventually persuaded the foreman to give her a key.

Helen didn't have a social life at work, she said, as she didn't smoke or drink and social events revolved around those activities. Everyone had a nickname and her nickname was 'African Queen.'

Safety was always the first priority at Kings Cross and when you are alone with 300 passengers, she says, there is no escape route.

The most unusual thing left on a train, she says, was a baby and the loveliest thing a passenger did was to give her flowers and chocolates after she noticed he was in distress and she performed first-aid on him.

Helen has witnessed and experienced first-hand the major changes in terms of technology and there has been more and more to learn with the introduction of new trains. She says that while previously you would have a rule book everything is on your mobile phone now.

Working on the railways still means a lot to Helen after more than 30 years.