

Howard James Kay

Born 1963 in Leeds, aged 59.

Mother was a school secretary, then moved to Leeds University's typing pool.

Father worked as a milkman, then as an industrial roofer.

Howard applied for a plasterer's apprenticeship but wasn't successful. His career's officer suggested the railways and 1979 was a fortunate time as they were recruiting on the footplate for staff to become drivers. Hadn't recruited in a long time.

He moved from being 'on the social' to the railway. "I'm getting paid for something I'm interested in".

Skills - it was part formal, part informal. He went to Doncaster driving school for 6 months to train but drivers also taught him informally and gave him a go at driving under supervision.

He worked in a variety of roles, mainly freight to begin with, moved to a depot outside Wakefield, and then back to Leeds working for GNER.

He decided to move south to be with his new wife so transferred to a job at King's Cross in 2004, still with the same company.

KX was a friendly place, "I didn't come as a stranger". He knew people from Leeds and other places from his previous jobs.

The station looked tired but the architecture was beautiful. Listed building. Sympathetically refurbished. Complements St Pancras.

Outside the station was rough, dirty, with prostitution. With the 2012 Olympics, there was an active campaign to drive out prostitution to improve the area's image. (Plus Eurostar moving to St P?)
However, rough sleepers were there for a reason.

Jobs - drove Class 91 - a proper loco, HST and now the zoomers, ergonomics good but the seats hard.

Railway was based on seniority. 23 July 1979...your role was defined. It's all changed now. Come off the street and train to be a driver.

Value of being a train driver, don't take work home, unique day, nothing to catch up on, self supervisory, mobile office, quite content.

But used to enjoy training people and the conversations. Now don't interact with anyone in the cab, change ends, have a break, come back, find haven't conversed with anyone.

A good day - work an afternoon shift, "I'm a PM person," take a zoomer to Leeds, come back in a Class 91, take it to Bounds Green depot - satisfying day. Enjoy driving trains, it's a privilege, no regrets, like the people in the mess rooms too.

Hierarchy at KX. "Drivers often perceived as demi gods". When he was introduced as a new driver to the staff he felt embarrassed about the way they did it. "We've got 2 new drivers".

Management were all ex-drivers. Should know all the tribulations of being a driver. All good people. Line manager - should be able to have a relationship with them.

Social life. Prior to drugs and alcohol testing. "I didn't drink alcohol while driving but some saw it as part of the extension of their social life.

But legislation ended drinking at work.

(Possibly the Transport and Works Act 1992. Think his dates are wrong. There are numerous pieces of legislation relating to this, some as far back as 50 years ago.)

Nicknames- Smasher Harris, Stretch, was of its time, a bit cringey now.

Perks - wages were not great, could do overtime, night rates, if got job done early cd go home early, buffet cars might have sandwiches brought into the mess. He was working with good people.

Favourite moments - saw celebrities in passing, Leslie Ash, Chris Kamara v chatty. "But taking control of a locomotive, even for 30 seconds, at 16 years old, life doesn't get any better".

Funny story - driver doing his timesheets, had his feet up inside an HST cab, when the train started moving, there's no safety system. It crashed into their little locomotive and hit its buffers, ending up with 2 holes in the HST cab. He got his brush out and started brushing off the debris. "Do you think they'll notice?"

Relationship with passengers - can have as little or as much to do with them. Little input with them. "Trouble with passenger trains, it's got passengers on them."

Least liked about the job. Privatisation. Interested in all the work. Ended up on local commuter trains so moved to freight.

Dangers - v dangerous if not well trained. Hoping you don't have to deal with something like Hatfield. 25,000 volts overhead - it will kill you. Malicious threats - people chucking stones, v dangerous at high speed.

Worst day - had a fatality in the '80s, a young woman suffering from post-natal depression, she crossed herself as she jumped in front of the train. Nowadays you'd be taken off the train but then it was 'Are you ok? Good to go?'

Union - it was a closed shop, enrolled into a pension scheme, joined ASLEF. He became active, working his way up through KX district 5, on the company council and is currently on the national executive committee of the union. 95 per cent of drivers are in ASLEF. Heavily unionised industry, made all the better.

Strikes - '82, '94 and 2022.

'82 - flexible rostering dispute, didn't want to negotiate, had been trying for 6 to 8 months before the dispute. Flexible rostering was imposed on them and set the seal for what came in the '90s. Increased the pay but sold out on the terms and conditions. It's why drivers are classed as well paid. There's now a market rate for drivers - because of privatisation ie the company that pays the most get the drivers and therefore drives up fares.

'94 - strike for 3 days on east coast mainline.

Tech changes - east coast drivers got mileage, cd get 12 hours additional pay on the Newcastle run. Now get a basic salary. A driver used to be able to double his salary every year but none of that extra pay was pensionable. So on retirement drivers saw a big reduction in their money.

Privatisation - became ringfenced into work you didn't want to do. Freight - if it failed you were out of a job. Eg mining and steel. Passenger trains were less precarious. In British Rail, there were no market forces. If someone wanted to move jobs, you could if there was a vacancy elsewhere. (Reference monthly job ads...by woman interviewee in travel centre).

Now tend to move where salaries are favourable, has helped pay negotiations? Biggest change, there's now only 1 driver, previously 2 drivers and guards. Now there's a lot of automation, black box on every train plus driver monitoring with cab cam.

"Looking back means everything. Even now I get a buzz driving trains. Trade unions have been a bonus. I'd live it all again. It's been brilliant."

Why KX? Worked for GNER. KX was a GNER depot. Repeat of earlier story. Cd have come in 80s but chose not to. House prices in London an issue, most chose to go back home.

What did you wear to work? Had a uniform but it was like wearing sackcloth. Uniform of the driver's assistant was inferior to the driver's. Cd wear jeans, Dr Martens and a driver's shirt, light blue smock, Aslef diary, pen, a mug, no bag and a lamp.

Now need to wear a uniform.

How did other union branches view KX? District 5 was the biggest branch. Euston and St Pancras were a different region? (Branch?) KX was also seen as militant. But legislation restricted things.

In the steam days, top shed on the hill, drivers were seen as the arrogant elite.

Social side - had a regular football team, there were angling and golf trips, the MIC or mutual improvement class was created as didn't get any formal education. When he presented to be a driver, he learnt it on his own, in his own time, with the aid of fellow drivers. "How did they get away with that as an industry?"

MIC was set up by loco drivers. Based on a pub quizz. People were divided into teams and competed against each other, testing themselves on information they needed to know to pass out as a driver. No formal process. Got 3 attempts to pass. If you failed, you were off the footplate grades.

Tricks of the trade. Have to be comfortable with what I'm doing. Don't like arriving late. Need to be alert always, know where you are, drive in a smooth way.

"I drive the train, I don't let the train drive me." Comment on re-setting a facility before it bleeps.

Sublime moments, going to Doncaster non stop, Retford, the G force, 120mph, 2 miles a minute.

Sense of community. Had no family on the railway, but at age 16, was driving with drivers who were 65, that mix and continuity, what they went through, days of steam, it was a hard physical job. X ref driver aged 84 who heaved 9 tons of coal on one trip.

The MIC exists to this day. Was set up in the 1960s as no formal classroom. Training became formal in 1970. MP12. Driver programme. (Didn't explain what mp12 stood for)

Take you out in pairs with an inspector. Brutal 3 days. Everything had to be correct. Signed to say you were competent. As it became formal, the eastern region used to go to Doncaster for training and KX to Ilford. Till the 70s had been little recruitment. Railway was in decline. Need to recruit to run it.

Current strike

Pandemic - no furlough, frontline workers. No payrise since 2019. KX never closed down. RPI 12 per cent. CPI 10 per cent. Taking a massive chunk of salaries.

Trains now back to 80 per cent occupancy rates prior to pandemic. Train companies don't want to talk.

Department of Transport has issued a management contract guaranteeing an income whether or not there is a strike.

DfT has to agree remuneration to staff. Extension of Tory gvt.

Unions have always compromised. V few national strikes during his working life. DfT trying to play unions off against different companies.

RMT have live redundancies, shutting ticket offices. Network Rail and train companies.