

RAILWAY WORKER

INTERVIEWEE: PATRICIA IMELDA ROCHE (TRICIA)
DATE OF BIRTH: 1958
PARENT'S OCCUPATION: Mother: Nurse. Father: Forge Hand.
Interview Location ASLEF Building, 77 St John St, London EC1M 4NN
Interviewer Scott Keir. Summariser; Stuart Feather.

One morning before Patricia left for her job at the Board of Trade, she heard an early morning radio newscast mention that the first women train-driver appointed by a railway company had passed her final examinations. She knew straight-away that she wanted to be a train-driver too.

A friend of hers knew a woman who worked as a booking-clerk, who knew Steve Forey, who told her where to apply. Patricia wrote to British Rail at King's Cross and signed her letter P Roche. BR replied by offering her an interview and addressed the letter to Patrick Roche.

At the interview she was actively discouraged from going any further and it was made very clear that as a woman she would be on her own. Appointed to Traction, Patricia began to see how difficult it was going to be without any support. She had not left a mid-level Civil Service job she had enjoyed doing – for this – and made a pact with herself that she would stick it out for three weeks, which then became six weeks, and so on.

Tricia was eventually told to go to the Finchley Yard where an Inspector would check to see whether she could couple and uncouple a train, and connect and disconnect the steam pipe.

The chain link was heavy, but made easier by the trick of swinging it and using the momentum to lift it onto the hook. The steam pipe was also heavy and difficult, because it required accurate precision in connection and disconnection. She found the test a strain and was immediately discouraged from going any further with her ambition by the Inspector who failed her, and the Supervisor confirmed she'd been taken off the course.

Tricia went to ASLEF to explain that she was not being given any guidance, just discouragement. She in turn was told by them that they'd heard rumours about things being made difficult for her, Andy Johnson from the union and some men from Maintenance went out under the cover of darkness to teach her the easiest ways of doing that difficult job.

With ASLEF support, which included their officials being witnesses to her second test which Tricia passed, she was reappointed to training as though nothing had happened.

When Tricia entered the mess room at King's Cross for the first time, she noticed with some concern how segregated it was. This was the situation in 1979; Black drivers and guards around one table. East African Asians around another. White drivers and white guards around others. Separate tables for Pakistanis and Indians. No one spoke to her at all. She found a table for herself only to be ignored. On the third day she was told she was sitting at a table belonging to others. Is that why no one had spoken to her?

John Gunter was the first driver who did talk to her, He welcomed her on behalf of everybody. She soon realised there were a lot of men who wouldn't talk to her, and others

who'd decided not to work with her. Tricia estimated eighty-five per cent of drivers would work with her, pass on their knowledge in the traditional way and she in turn, passed her test to become a second driver.

She found out who wouldn't work with her, but wasn't bothered. "I was 20/21-years-old, so it was all an adventure."

In 1981 the Daily Mail did an article on women train-drivers, and through that she met other women drivers and made three good friends, but others left because of their isolation. Management didn't care. The women through misogyny were in real danger from some men. She joined King's Cross with its strong NUM and ASLEF unions and felt supported by them. Her father was a shop steward at Ford's Dagenham and he would always back her up.

Tricia made friends with women working in the offices, second drivers and their wives. Four to five years later there were still no women drivers. The ceiling for women seemed to be set at second drivers; the driver's assistant. She told the train crew manager if she passed, she would make him famous. But there was some consolation, one woman who was also a second driver came up to her and said, "I'm only here because of you."

Tricia didn't own a car, relying on public transport to get her to work, as did most drivers and guards in those days.

King's Cross was a traditional terminus with a lot of staff and many drivers and guards. The station believed their drivers were the best drivers in England. The unions were strong and we had pride in them, with Inspectors so firm there was a ninety percent fail rate for drivers on their first test. They had three goes; most passed the second time.

When King's Cross drivers go to another depot they would stand up to the local Engine-shed manager telling them which engine to take and where to take it. Having already looked the loco over the driver would say "No. The fitter needs to repair this or that, and that needs adjusting." Different standards applied to King's Cross men.

Tricia passed her finals in driving the first time. She made sure she would. From taking out library books she learnt how engines worked. She asked questions if she didn't understand, unlike men she discovered, who only pretended to understand. She knew every part of the loco, its purpose and how it functioned.

A typical day? Night trains; come to work, make the tea. When I was a second driver, have a driver who was chatty and said – you can take the train out tonight. Then you tick out of your mind 'the road', the bridges, tunnels, stations, and stopping nicely, not in a heap. Suburban lines were hard work, but just taking a train out at night ... Night shifts were exciting because of the variety. It was a real drinking culture, drinking and working. With changing shift patterns there was no time for socialising.

Nicknames? I was called Red Knickers 'cos they thought I was a communist. I let them think what they liked. I called one Bungalow: nothing upstairs. One driver was called Angry Silence: wouldn't talk to second-drivers. Nick names were rife. Perks? Ireland was £1.50 each way, I used to go a lot to see my family there.

Once I was working King's Cross to Moorgate and I noticed some man came up and peer into the cab at King's Cross. A few days after, the Railway Manager at Moorgate told me that a man had insisted on making a formal complaint that the driver of his train had allowed his girlfriend to drive it.

What I dreaded was the football specials, but then who didn't? The shift work was hard and tiring. Some weeks there was no time off and that was exhausting. Shift work's not good for your health.

Dangers and hazards? Stuff outside of one's control. Keeping your awareness. Being very careful. It's a high-risk environment. I would be aware that being a woman I was doing things correctly because as a woman, one mistake ... I came in one day and didn't see a notice and there was a strange atmosphere, and I didn't know a colleague had died, and I just had to tell the supervisor that I've just got to go home.

One day I saw all this graffiti at the Finsbury Park messroom about me. I thought, that's it, and went off to go home, but the bus never came, so in the end I thought, sod it, I'm not taking that shit anymore and became more aggressive in the messroom.

I went on a six-month training course by the union and I learnt a lot, and was invited to join the Aslef committee, and what I learnt was so useful for other jobs. The 1982 strike picket always managed to get into the works and talk to the black legs. Miners strikes and Steel workers.

I went to Fleet Street to picket. We asked the Father of the Chapel at the Daily Mail to not send newspapers by road [when the strikers on the railway refused to handle them]. I didn't expect to receive such abuse from a fellow Trade Unionists. The miners strike; we did everything we could!

Privatisation [in 1993] caused train driver's wages to rise – I didn't see that coming. There were a lot of changes. When privatisation came, they offered us voluntary redundancies, so I took it and left the industry.

I did know a journalist who wanted a story for her 'Day in the life of' series, and we were chased by journalist Karen Harrison in 1981. We became close friends and talked about our situation, and she was important to me.