

Kings Cross Railway Workers Oral History

Interviewee: PETER SMITH (PJ)

Date of birth: 1935

Place of birth: Muswell Hill

Interview location: ASLEF, 77 St John Street, London, EC1M 4NN

Interview date: 20th October 2022

Interviewed by: Robin Bray

Father's profession: Railway driver

Mother's profession: Housewife

PJ was going to be either a railway man or a car mechanic, but when his father took him to the depot where he worked PJ was taken in, so the choice was made for him. He started at 15 as a cleaner, became a fireman at 16 at a diesel storage depot in Hornsey, then moved to King's Cross with the rest of his colleagues.

His work at King's Cross was varied, involving both passenger and freight. With Hornsey being a very small depot, workers there reached seniority very quickly, but in King's Cross they went back (at KX men in the 50s were still firing as no jobs were available for their higher grade).

When diesel engines were introduced, it was a steep learning curve for everybody and meant going back to the classroom.

PJ describes a typical day doing freight work.

Relationships at KX were mostly good, people got on with one another. Social life was good, lots of camaraderie. There were social outings, the "railway club", children's parties and panto at Christmas at Golden Hill, followed by a meal.

For PJ, the main perk of the job was free travel.

The moments he remembers most fondly were the 1982 strike ending up in the High Court, the flying pickets and striking in support of the nurses in the spirit of solidarity.

He occasionally drove trains to Newcastle and Doncaster overnight (he relays a funny New Year's Eve story where his train failed and he had to jump on someone else's train, the only person being driven back to London.)

The main hazard of the job were accidents and suicides, which he experienced firsthand. One of his worst days at work was when a lady jumped in front of his train and he came into contact with her parents at the coroner's court hearing.

PJ feels that people were generally accepted at King's Cross, but the Union had to step in when a black driver and Trisha Roche (the first woman driver at KX) were given a hard time.

He himself was active in the Union: from 1950, he was the health and safety rep.

He thinks that privatisation was one of the worst things that happened to his profession. They cut driving staff (only one driver even for the long distance Newcastle run, with more responsibility), abolition of Sunday rates and Bank Holiday pay, 7-day working week, but on the plus side this pushed the wages up.

Throughout his career he saw many major technological advances: he started working on steam engines, which were basic, and later had to learn how to operate diesels and electrics, but it came naturally to him. The 89 engine was his favourite.

He describes in detail operating different types of trains, from steam engines to electrics.

He feels that that the atmosphere has changed at KX, it was fun before but camaraderie is gone now.

He worked on the railways for 50 years, his whole professional life.