

AN ORAL HISTORY OF KINGS CROSS RAIL WORKERS

Interviewee: Rachel James
Year of Birth: 1961
Place of Birth: Birmingham
Father's Occupation: Worked for Car Industry
Mother's Occupation: Council Cleaner
Interview Location: ASLEF building, 77 St John St, London EC1M 4NN
Date of Interview: 19 October 2022
Interviewer: Scott Kier
Summariser: Anna Lerner

During her time at Kings Cross Station, Rachel worked in a variety of roles, including in the ticket office, the travel centre, the control room, as a supervisor, and for the Chief Executive's office. She was the first female and black supervisor at Kings Cross station. She talks about the move from British Rail to privatisation, the "good and bad", and the changes she saw.

Rachel got her first railway job through the Job Centre at the Telephone Enquiry Bureau at Birmingham New Street Station. She was interviewed Christmas Eve, and did her medical New Year's Eve. Part of the process involved pointing out places on a map. Although she didn't like telephones, she said she did as she needed the job. She remembers her first day at the Telephone Enquiry Centre, sitting next to an 'old lady' - in those days, she said, people worked into retirement. She was shown maps and timetables. Quietly spoken, she learnt to speak up. After 5 years, she moved to the Travel Centre, where she dealt with continental information, accounts, staff wages, ticket machines, and emptying toilet cash machines. Working without daylight, no windows, and reading small timetables, like 90% of the staff there, within eight months, she needed glasses. She learnt on the job, from others and from her mistakes.

She wanted to try working in the "big smoke" (London), and her aunt worked there. She applied for a temporary job; two people applied, and when she didn't hear back, she found out from her boss he'd binned her application as he didn't want to lose her. Next time she applied she bypassed her manager. She got her first London job at Paddington Station, at the Travel Centre and Information Office.

After 2 years she applied to Kings Cross Station; she was interviewed by Clive Paige and another manager. In those days, she said, interviews were often a formality, people were lined up for the job. While she didn't get the job, she was told she did well and to apply for others. She successfully applied for a C03 Grade "Purpose Relief" job, with more responsibilities. She wanted to work at Kings Cross Station so she could work and travel across the UK and Continent.

While she left for a temporary (maternity cover) C05 grade role at Waterloo Station, she declined a permanent role there because of the Underground commute and returned to Kings Cross Station. She worked in the "new office on the other side of the station", the "Control Office", dealing with operation sheets, freight trains, those needing special assistance and reservations. She remembers her manager, Tom, introducing her to her all-male workmates. There were no toilets or changing rooms for women, and they had to

redesign the area. Of the men, she said she was “treated like their own daughter” and there was a “nice family feeling”.

She recalls Kings Cross Station when she first started – renowned for “drugs and prostitutes”; “diesel trains”; and the time of the “Yorkshire Ripper” (murders). It was “dark” and “smoky”, with prostitutes travelling in at night to work and home in the morning. With electric trains, the environment was healthier.

She mentions the move from British Rail to privatisation, some staff struggling to adapt to different work, and many older workers taking early retirement or redundancy.

She describes the social aspects of work, in and out of worktime: social clubs, staff disappearing off to the ‘BRSA’ (British Railways Staff Association Club) – ‘at the time we could drink on the job’ - organised day trips to France for Duty Free shopping, and a colleague organising Railway trips abroad, often free, including a trip to Switzerland, the hotel owned by an ex-Railway person.

She describes her early years working at Kings Cross Station, at the Ticket Office (on “Basic Purpose Relief”), the NCR Ticket machine or “one armed bandit”, how old fashioned it was compared to Paddington, and there being different sections and windows for different types of tickets. As Basic Purpose Relief, she mainly worked in the Ticket Office, before switching to announcements. She recalls having to shout to be heard above the diesel trains, and how smelly and noisy it was. As a terminal station, she preferred it to Birmingham New Street as the trains went in and out from the same platforms.

Remembering the Kings Cross area, “it was “awful”. She recalls “prostitutes”, men “propositioning them”, and approaches being made towards her and her colleagues. It wasn’t uncommon for staff to be spat at, and when a colleague was spat at (by a well known sex worker), she got him to take a swab to the police. There were lots of “drunkards”, and the station was locked at night to keep people out. She felt safer inside the station than outside, so didn’t go out much apart from to get lunch.

She talks more about socialising between colleagues: “everyone went to the social club”, people would have “parties”, “they’d get changed in the shower rooms” and go clubbing and partying together. Other times they would cover a particular colleague’s shift and put in money for ingredients, and she would shop and cook breakfast for them in the mess rooms, the manager taking part. These were the “good days” of British Rail, when there were “proper cooking facilities”.

She describes her time in the Travel Centre, dealing with ticket sales, reservations, and sleeper trains, and how credit cards would be processed by taking carbon copies. She assisted all sorts of people and talks of her experiences of famous people including Prince Andrew, the racing driver Jackie Stewart, athlete Linford Christie, and Eastender’s character Nana Moon. Her negative experience of Linford Christie, in particular his racialised treatment of a Black worker, changed her opinion of him, and she refused to serve him.

From the Travel Centre, she successfully applied for a job in the Control Room. Her job including train announcements and lost property. She talks about the lost property she dealt with - including a wedding dress, a jeweller’s suitcase of jewellery... and a baby (each retrieved).

She recalls no two days as the same - from responding to Prince Michael of Kent needing a porter to setting off the fire alarm making toast. During train disruptions, she'd pitch in to help colleagues, e.g., cleaning train passenger tables to ensure a quicker turn around: "[We did what we could to help speed things up".

She recalls the Kings Cross (Underground) Fire in November 1987. It was six months after she had first started at Kings Cross Station, working at the Ticket Office. "The smoke was so thick you couldn't see your hands". She remembers evacuating to the Northern hotel, witnessing body bags being bought out, and how she and her colleagues couldn't return home until they had gone back to the office to "book out" their tills.

She recalls the Kings Cross Bombings (of 2007). Based at the Information Kiosk, she was initially told there was an "information blip" (causing disruptions) only to be informed later about the bombings. The Travel Centre acted as a triage centre for the wounded. She recalls a colleague's wife in hospital and how passengers she'd got to recognise "never came back". Having travelled into work from Croydon herself, she found out the bombers had been two trains behind her.

She recalls a train accident where a driver and chef she knew both died, and the Hatfield Disaster.

She talks about how her shift work preferences changed over time - from being single, offering to cover late shifts for colleagues with families, to preferring nights when she became a parent.

She talks about first getting a supervisor role, and being congratulated by the Black cleaners, telling them: "If I can do it, you can do it". She was the first female and Black supervisor in the station, and it opened doors for others. She later saw cleaners move onto supervisor jobs. She recalls dealing with a colleague found with alcohol on his breath, calling in the "med" people (to test for alcohol), and his losing his job.

She recalls working for the Chief Executive, Christopher Garrett, on the reception desk for six months, including photocopying and shredding confidential documents, booking appointments and signing people in and out. It was a Monday to Friday, 9-5 job. She returned to work on the platform, preferring the pay.

On nicknames, there were three Rachels, who were distinguished by the jobs they did; "Grumpy" who was always miserable and disliked women staff and; "lady's man" who'd chat up customers and staff,

Perks of the job include free train tickets, Christmas dos (financed by managers), day trips, and being able to bring her son along to dos. For her 25th work anniversary she remembers being given a plaque, being put up in a hotel in Peterborough, which she took her partner along to, and being treated to lunch, meeting colleagues from different locations.

She talks about being awarded Employer of the Month for GNER.

On unfair treatment: She explains how she was fostered by an English family (which may have impacted on her experiences and outlook). "If I did have issues [I'd] make a point of putting it to the back of my mind". She did experience a passenger who didn't want to deal

with her (because she was Black), and heard a few things from others, but little personal experience herself.

On the Union: they helped her out a few times, and she got involved herself, coming from a “militant [Union] family. She was on the Black and Ethnic Union Organising Committee, the Women’s Committee (and....?).

She recalls having the first female manager and being sent with other females on a week-long Outward-Bound course.

On privatisation, she describes it as “good and bad”. There were changes in shift patterns, the working environment, and loss of staff who couldn’t cope with the changes. She recalls taking time off when she pregnant (having hidden her bump with a waistcoat) and when her father died, returning with a baby. Other staff had left and not returned. Privatisation brought in a lot of younger people, who “didn’t have opportunities” under British Rail, as well as more females, including female drivers. She recalls how difficult it had been for females to become drivers. A colleague had been asked in an interview if she was “planning to start a family” and was expected to sign an agreement. She was helped by the Union. Another female driver hadn’t been given flexibility to accommodate childcare needs, so left the job. She said it was now “easier for females”. She also speaks about youth training schemes, such as the Princes Trust, and the workplace accommodating people who wouldn’t have been included before, like people with Autism. “The new railway helped where the old railway wouldn’t have”.

On her time at Kings Cross Station: She keeps in touch with people she worked with, unlike at Paddington Station. She is part of a Kings Cross Facebook group, and keeps in touch with Railway colleagues via What’s App. She talks about the harder aspects of the job, including Night Shifts where passengers spat at staff, a colleague losing his job after lashing out, and a colleague being punched by a passenger when he couldn’t provide information.

She describes her time at Kings Cross Station as “great”, the “best days” of her life, being part of a “Railway family”, and a “big happy family”.

On hierarchy, she’d say: “you might be the cleaner but you’re an important person... who else will do the job...” . She wasn’t afraid to speak up if a manager wasn’t doing their role, or she felt colleagues wasn’t being represented. E.g. She challenged a photo shoot for new uniforms when she saw Black people were only shown in uniforms for lower grade jobs like cleaners, insisting they re-do it to reflect Black people in higher grade positions.