

## **Kings Cross Railway Workers Oral History**

Interviewee: STEVE FOREY

Date of birth: 1954

Place of birth: West London

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

Interview date: 10th October 2022

Interviewed by: Scott Keir

Father's profession: Shipping agent, then postman

Mother's profession: Housewife

Steve was a trainspotter at 10 years old, but initially had no ambition to work on the railways. He found general work in the Heinz factory in Harlesden, then he heard of British Rail jobs at Willesden Junction, passed the aptitude test and started as a traction trainee in 1977.

He remembers his first day at Stonebridge Park: a great place to work, he felt privileged to be part of history and tradition. After 3 months he moved to main line depot as the job was better paid. King's Cross was a totally different environment, a big depot with 600 staff, full of history.

Steve developed skills as a driver and as a union rep. He also learned about other people's history through "uncle-nephew" relationship with other workers.

He became a driver in only 4 years, then after 6 months of training at Ilford training school he was proud to pass the tough oral exam first time. He was attracted to KX because it was a fairly militant depot with like-minded people.

12 platforms were in use, platform 1 was reserved to Royal Mail. The station was busy, big and grimy, but a marvel of Victorian architecture. There was a huge age range, more diversity, oral history tradition, history of people and trains (Flying Scotsman, Mallard). At KX you would get a political education.

The King's Cross area was pretty downmarket, especially at night. Young sex workers from up North came down for the night, crime and drunkenness were rife.

Work was different in the 1970s: that's when diesel engines were introduced with big steam boilers, and turntables to turn the engines around. The Deltic Loco had 2 huge noisy engines (no proper ear defenders were provided then, Steve probably got tinnitus because of it). He explains as he progressed through the links, a fair system all done on seniority.

The first black train driver at KX was Samuel Jackson in 1952 – racists asked firemen not to work with him, but the trade union rep stepped in. There were lots of black drivers in the 1970s. People tried to change the link system to prevent black drivers from progressing.

In KX the hierarchy was strict: firemen and guards had their own hierarchy, but drivers had almost a union of their own as, being skilled workers, they felt superior.

Management initially came from drivers' grades, but in the 70s and 80s they came from management schools with an agenda to increase hours and cut salaries (in 1911 you had to work 8 hours a day, but in 1982 with the new flexible rostering, you had to work up to 12 hours a day).

Social life was good: there was a pool table, the fruit machine was a money spinner, the money was used to run the Christmas party and panto at Golders Hill. Steve remembers days out to Calais with his colleagues to stock up on drinks.

He explains how work was scheduled: diagrams (daily work sheet) were issued by head office in York, but drivers at KX would often swap shifts around. The Unions did the rosters (30/40 weeks of work), to make turns (shifts) more sociable.

Steve's favourite perk of the job was unlimited free rail travel in Europe for the whole family.

The worst dangers of the job were suicides and accidents. It was a traumatic experience as drivers felt guilty even if it wasn't their fault. Once Steve had a dog dropped on his windscreen from a bridge, and kids throwing bricks.

The worst day for Steve was his last day, when he was fired in 1988. Previously he had to punish a driver who had left the toilet door open, he felt it was unfair, everybody walked out in solidarity and the driver was reinstated. Since that time he had become a thorn in the side of management. When he supported the nurses' strike, he was accused of inciting staff to break their contract and dismissed.

At KX Steve did a bit of freight work (e.g. drove bullion train to Leeds), but his work for the Union was almost full time and he loved it. His typical day consisted of a variety of jobs: call strikes, disciplinary cases, appeals and coroners court (suicide cases).

He had joined the Socialist party at 16 and the Unions in his first factory job. KX was a close shop then, so he joined the Union there when he started.

He talks about pay and conditions: although still a low paid job, pay conditions improved with time, but the flexible roster made things worse. Trains were made driver only, without guards, which made things more dangerous.

He describes the technological changes he has witnessed: British Rail wanted faster speeds without upgrading the tracks. Electrification meant cleaner railways, but planning was badly done. More comfy trains and cabs, better signalling, but all could have been done better.

The biggest changes he has seen in KX: after drivers' assistants were eliminated driving became a solitary job. The atmosphere at KX became less sociable, the camaraderie was lost.

With privatisation, different train companies operated from KX: before, the link system was clear and linear, now the career progression became frustrating.

Despite only working at KX for 11 years and having been fired in 1988, Steve still considers himself a railman. He remembers fondly driving the Deltic, his favourite engine, out of KX in all seasons: with its high-up windows, it offered a full vista and sense of speed.

Steve recalls in detail the 1982 strike against the introduction of flexible rostering: the picket line at KX, flying pickets to other depots (the "Sherpa squad"). When The Sun slagged off the striking drivers in the attempt to blacken their name, ASLEF decided unanimously to black the Sun (and then all Murdoch newspapers) and refused to carry the papers on the trains. Murdoch called for an injunction in the High Court and Steve read it to 400 people in the mess room, but they all voted to

keep the blacking. Eventually British Rail let the Union write an article to counteract, which was published in the Sun, and the strike was finally called off.

Steve also remembers the 1984-5 Miners' strike: a freightliner train from the North with a secret container full of coal was stopped at Finsbury park for one year, and it became a symbol of the strike.

Steve witnessed no gay discrimination at KX, but he remembers how the Union supported Trisha Roche, the first woman driver at King's Cross, against older male drivers' resistance and discrimination.

Finally, Steve describes what the Goods Yard was like: enormous, very busy, with lots of "roads" (tracks), potato and milk sheds. In 70s and 80s the goods traffic decreased drastically with the introduction of container trains and there was no need for the goods yard any longer.