

# RAILWAY WORKER

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INTERVIEWEE:	STEVE GWINNETT
DATE OF BIRTH	1951. London Borough of Barnet.
PARENT'S OCCUPATION	Mother: Housewife; Father; Mechanic, well versed in mechanical and electrical engineering, and interested in optics, lenses and cameras.
Interview Location	ASLEF Building, 77 St John St, London EC1M 4NN
Interviewer:	Elena Paolini. Summariser: Stuart Feather.

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At age seven or eight-years-old Steve began train-spotting, a hobby inspired by railways, and by many boys of similar age having already taken it up.

Aged 12 he was at a station in Berkshire during a downpour. The signalman seeing his situation invited him into the signal box to dry out and warm up near the fire, and that was the magic moment that appealed to his interest in mechanical and electrical engineering. He found himself in a world of mechanical levers-and signals, and code-ringing bells. He questioned and absorbed the explanations of the helpful and increasingly impressed signalman, and was invited to try his hand at some of the work.

His interest and aptitude led that signalman to introduce him by phone to colleagues elsewhere and so he visited other signal-box men up and down the line, and in due course to others in different areas. In some five years of learning about different systems he ended, by his reckoning, to have visited over 300 signal boxes in this way, on several routes including many of those which controlled the King's Cross line at that time.

Then with his time at school coming to an end in 1969, the Youth Employment Scheme put him in touch with British Rail's London Midland Region at Euston Station. He was interviewed for a position and given the option of a job in either the civil engineers' (including the Permanent Way) or signal & telecommunications engineers' departments. He chose the latter but after a year realised that his interest in signalling and telecoms. was more in their operation and use than in their technical engineering.

So he then asked to transfer to the 'Traffic' (Operations) department. With his previous knowledge of signalling he knew what he was looking for, and before too long succeeded in getting a job in Euston power signal box as Train movements Recorder, Station Announcer, and operator of the passengers' trains indicator system.

After 2 years he gained promotion into the King's Cross Divisional Control (24/7 co-ordination) Office of BR's Eastern Region. Three years later his job was to be made redundant by progress with the King's Cross route's general modernisation and he was given the choice of a job as either station Yard Supervisor King's Cross, or as Finsbury Park Station Supervisor responsible for the 9 stations from Alexandra Palace to Moorgate, and he took the latter position reasoning that it would be good experience to deal with the public.

Two years later he was surprised to be promoted 2 grades at once by being appointed to the Shift Supervisory team at King's Cross's 1970s 'Power' signal box, serving in that role for 10 years, until 1989. Though he knew signalling like-the-back-of-his-hand he had never held the role of signaller, unlike the rest of the signal box staff, and this caused some resentment with several of the staff for a while, mostly those who had not previously known him, until they came to realise his knowledge and abilities.

Steve also said that over many previous decades there had been occasional habitual antipathy between some Signal-men, Control Office and locomotive footplate (Train Drivers and Firemen) staffs, but altogether the system worked well, and when serious problems arose in the smooth running of trains, it was rare that any of that animosity impacted on everyone doing their best to get services back to normal, even though staff in this new type of signal box were rather separated from the railway lines that they controlled, so signallers and drivers were no longer able to easily see each other and exchange acknowledging waves in passing.

His position in the Power signal box operations room was on the 'Back Desk' with a full view of the horseshoe-shaped signalling control panel's layout of all the tracks, junctions, signals, and train positions with identity numbers between King's Cross / Moorgate and Biggleswade / Royston; some 80 miles of railway route.

Steve explained that electrical signalling was first introduced at King's Cross in 1932 with a new single signal box at the north end of present-day Platforms 4 & 5, replacing 3 mechanical predecessors. This box operated until 1971, with each signal and set of points having to be operated individually by miniature lever electrically, with its current setting shown by coloured lights, while other lights on a diagram of the tracks indicated trains' positions. There were 232 levers operated by two or three signallers, and there was also one Supervisor, and one Telegraph boy (train recorder and message taker/sender) in attendance on each of the three shifts, and the box controlled about one mile of the railway's route from King's Cross station.

But that signalling was superseded by the 1977 completion of the new King's Cross Power Signal Box, which was where Steve worked from 1979.

Advances in types of safety interlocking and short & long distance control of signalling had enabled this new box to replace 57 older, mostly traditional mechanical type, boxes which dated from between the 1870s to the 1920s.

In operation, the setting of a complete signal route to the next signal for a train was achieved by the pressing of just two relevantly specific, geographically positioned buttons on the control panel. This checked for conflicts, absence of other trains in the route, positioned all necessary points, and changed the signal to 'Proceed'.

This was in contrast to the previous mechanical signal boxes in the new Power Box's area, where, similarly to the younger 1932 King's Cross box, every individual set of points, point-locking bolt, signal etc. had to be operated by its own large lever.

The completion of the new signal box's control area was achieved when the one mile long layout of tracks and points between King's Cross's platform ends and Copenhagen Tunnel (the second one encountered after leaving the station) was completely reconfigured and new signalling replaced that of 1932.

There were normally 5 signalmen operating the new box's control panel, and along with two supervisors, two announcers, and others, each shift's staff totalled 11 or 12.

Steve didn't opt for much social-life which was just as well as he had to work to the common pattern of weekly rotating 8-hour shifts which formed the necessary round-the-clock staffing. The usual unfortunate effects of working unsocial hours meant missing out on some family birthday and other events.

Such was Steve's acquired knowledge of the signal box's area, he could visualise the whole layout as represented on the control panel with his eyes closed, so that when problems arose by location name, he knew exactly where to look to see and assess what was happening, and had a mental picture of what that place really looked like.

1976 had seen the introduction of the first electric trains to the area, on the King's Cross/Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City/Hertford North routes. The new electrification infrastructure of overhead power line wires and electric conductor rails for these trains necessitated the introduction of an important new control point ; the Electric Control Room located at the main train depot at Hornsey, to govern the associated power supplies to the tracks and overhead wires in King's Cross signal box's area, and to deal with electrical emergencies.

The electrification brought new duties to Steve and the other signal box supervisors and signalmen, in having to apply well-established formal isolation safety processes with 100% accuracy to prevent electric trains entering sections of track which, either weren't physically obstructed but for which the electric power was off, or where engineering staff were to work on the electrification system's equipment.

The incidence of carrying out these duties increased when electrification of the signal box's lines was extended in the late 1980s for electric trains to run longer distances; beyond Royston to Cambridge and, as part of the scheme to electrify the main line to Scotland, from Hitchin to Sandy and on to Peterborough.

By the late 1970s the railway's landline telecommunications network was quite comprehensive, and was the second largest system in the U.K. after that of the Post Office/British Telecom. But it was not until the early to mid 1980s that the design and installation of direct, discrete signalman-driver radio systems was finalised, and started being brought into use, with King's Cross signal box one of the very first to have one such system, known as Cab Secure Radio, so this was an additional system that Steve, along with all the signalling and supervisory staff, had to be trained on.

Before that, whilst there were direct phone links between Operations Control Offices, Electric (overhead and electric rail) Control Rooms and signal boxes, there were no direct train radio systems. So if a train was stopped by signals, the driver had to get down onto

the track and make contact with the signalman on the signal's direct telephone to get information and/or instructions.

Steve's strangest days when working in the box were two occasions when unusually excessive wet weather caused operational problems at Kings Cross.

Well known to Kings Cross staff, there is a dip in the line inside the three bores of Gasworks Tunnel immediately before the line climbs steeply to Holloway. This was caused by creation of the tunnels having to involve them passing under the Regent's Canal above. Very occasionally in a heavy storm, rainwater would overwhelm the then drainage systems and water would then run down into the tunnel and collect in the dip, disrupting the 'track clear of trains' detection circuits in the rails, preventing the signalling system from being operated, and then rising to levels where trains were prohibited from passing through. Such occasions made the necessary reorganising of trains a nightmare until the water subsided : But there were no more such days once subsequent improvement work in and outside the tunnel was undertaken.

A thorough knowledge of rules and regulations on the running of trains was vital to Steve's work, and he brought in for us to see, his various generations of rules and regulations books, with the earlier ones which dated from the 1960s containing changes to the content which he'd had to carefully paste into the book at the margins to cover-up the superseded text.

He also brought in his collection of photographs of King's Cross with A4 'Pacific' steam engines and views of the progress in changing the track layout in 1977. He also brought with him an early railways antique device, an electric telegraph instrument used for communicating messages between telegraph offices, signal boxes and stations up and down the line using Morse code, by means of someone with a message to send moving a pivoted handle to left and right, causing a needle at each place to swing, tapping two metal sounders of different-tones and so equating to the 'dots' and 'dashes' of Morse code. Although this sort of system pre-dated the introduction of telephones to railway signal boxes, it remained in use between the old traditional type signal boxes on the main line from King's Cross until their demise under the route's 1970s modernisation, and Steve, having learned the system when in his teens, is still capable of using it.

Steve, as one would expect of a one-time engineer, is very precise and sober in his speech.

In his early days with British Rail, he was urged to, and did, join a Trade Union, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) aka Tessa, which mostly took a non-combative stance.

Moving on from Kings Cross in 1989, Steve's career progressed through another 8 posts, firstly a similar shift management role in London Liverpool Street's newly-opened computerised signalling control centre, and with the last being that of a Project Operations Interface Specialist, from which he retired, 43 years after he started work on the railway.

He summed up his working life as "Forty-plus years well spent."

*(FOOTNOTE: The 1970s Power Signal Box where Steve had worked was closed when its last operational part was taken out of use in April 2021 with the track layout at Kings Cross being totally changed again, and completion of the transfer of control of its whole 80-mile area's signalling to the ROC (Rail Operating Centre) at York.)*