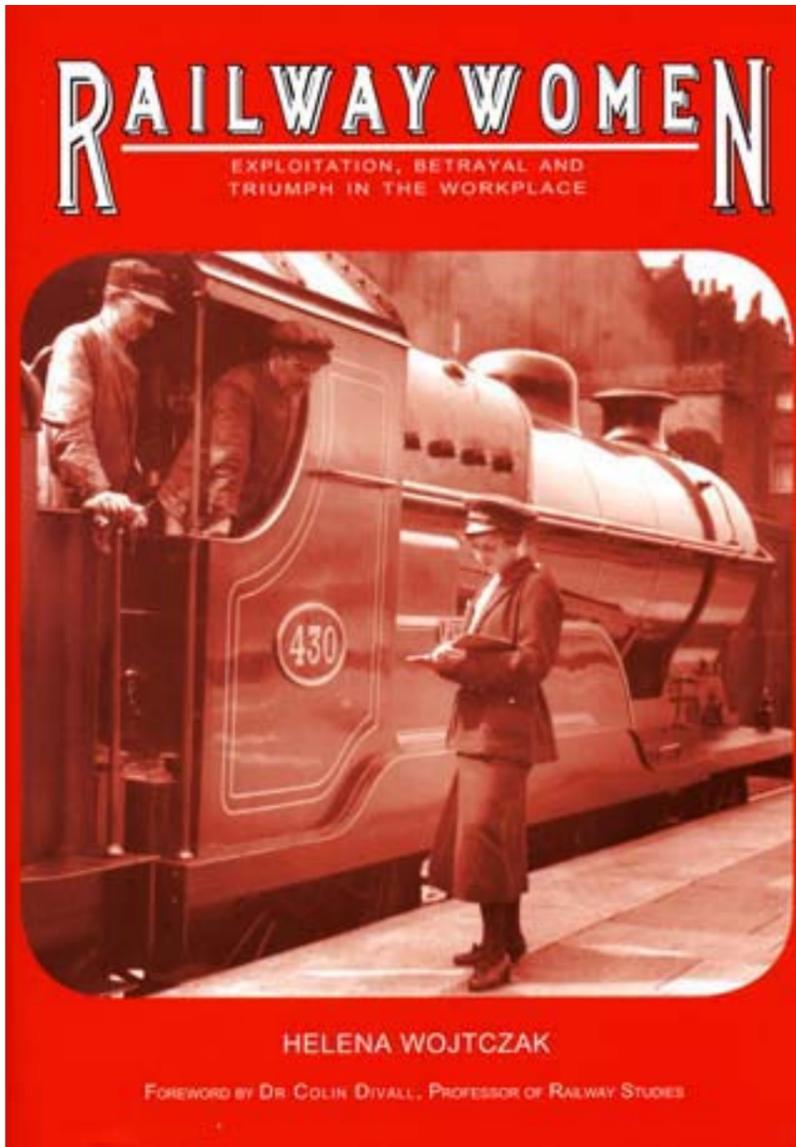


Trains, equality, jobs for women



COVER GIRL: Great Central Railway number taker at Marylebone around 1916, with Director class locomotive "Purdon Vicars" and the loco crew

Railwaywomen By Helena Wojtczak

Railwaywomen is the first book ever written about the place of women workers in the history of Britain's railways.

There have been several books on male labour on the railways, including those by Joby, McKenna, Bagwell, J.A.B. Hamilton and others, but for the most part they have ignored the women workers.

Women have worked on Britain's railways since the industry began. From the 1830s they were employed to clean offices and within 20 years they were engaged in operational and workshop jobs.

Among the earliest named women were a station mistress at Merry Lees (1832) and a level crossing keeper at Bexhill (1851).

These women, and others in similar roles, open a book that takes us through the roller coaster of women's struggle for equality in one of Britain's most important and famous workforces, a book that is brought right up to date by including interviews and events as recent as July 2005.

Railwaywomen is a landmark book, which has become, immediately upon publication, the standard reference work on the subject.

The book takes its place in the canon of women's history, labour history and the story of trades unionism in Britain.

Railwatch offer

Railwatch readers can obtain the book at a special price direct from the publisher. It

costs £20 plus £4.50 postage for a signed book inscribed by the author to your readers' wishes. Send your order to The Hastings Press, PO Box 96 Hastings TN34 1GQ

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AUTHOR: Helena in two pictures from 1995



WORKERS: "Fluffers" at Whitechapel on the District line in London, above, and crossing keeper Sandie Arscott, below, from the cover of the book



Three at the top



Heidi Mottram is managing director of train operator Northern Rail. She joined British Rail in the 1980s. She said: "I think the railway industry holds massive opportunities for women."

"In Northern for example, we have 60 women drivers and a number of driver team managers."



Leila Francis is route director for C2C which runs trains from London to Southend and is the best performing rail company in Britain.

She is responsible for 600 frontline and behind-the-scenes staff, working to keep C2C trains running to optimum performance.



Gwyneth Dunwoody is the longest serving woman MP having represented Crewe since 1974.

She has been a stalwart defender of passengers' interests and chairs the House of Commons transport committee. She has denied Government attempts to remove her.

Hurdles we face

By Allison Cosgrove

What inhibits women from travelling by train? There are three main factors: safety concerns, access and facilities – or lack of them. But these issues also concern men. Why are they more important for women?

Perhaps I should mention the first time I visited King's Cross station on my own, many years ago, arriving on a dark winter's evening.

I climbed up the steps from the Underground to be faced with a large drunk man urinating on the steps in front of me.

This was a frightening and intimidating experience, and did not make me think that the standards of passenger safety at King's Cross were high.

I had no idea where I could find any staff or police presence to have this person removed, and felt very unsafe for the period of time I had to wait within the station.

I am glad to say that passenger facilities at King's Cross have improved since then, and there is now a reasonably secure waiting area.

Fortunately I have not had a repeat of this experience, although I have been forced to sit in open waiting areas at stations with drunk men – a particular problem when travelling at night – and been approached or even threatened at stations when on my own if I refused to enter into conversation with passing drunks.

A secure well-lit waiting area is a priority for women, and one where a staff presence is nearby in case of any difficulty.

Lighting outwith the immediate station is important too, in taxi waiting areas and car parks, as is clear signage to these areas.

The increase in help points at more isolated unmanned rural stations is welcome. Even though the operator may be many miles away, the existence of the help point can give a sense of security to lone women travellers.

The other security issue



Allison Cosgrove

concerns trains themselves, especially overnight carriages on sleeper trains, where women-only carriages would be greatly welcomed.

Women can feel threatened and uncomfortable when surrounded by men while sleeping, and not everyone can afford the cost of a sleeper berth where separate areas for women do exist.

Access, or the lack of it, is a major consideration for parents and carers of young children.

Every time I am in Waverley station I see parents – men as well as women – struggling up and down stairs with prams and buggies.

Although there are lifts, they are not particularly easy to find or use, and some platforms require the use of two lifts. Older main line stations are frequently at fault in not having easy access. I appreciate that stations were built in the Victorian era when access was not considered, but nowadays surely this is of prime importance in encouraging parents to use rail travel.

It's encouraging to see the easy access provided to new stations.

Access to trains themselves can be difficult, with main line trains having very high steps making it hard to get a pram, buggy or wheelchair on board.

I would like to see each train having a particular door with an easy access ramp. All passengers requiring easier access would then know which carriage to go to.

Access to stations is also a consideration for those parents – mainly women – who

are at home with children and are less likely to have the use of a family car.

Stations are not always in convenient places, and there may be no link to a town or village centre.

If using a train means a long or inconvenient walk with a toddler and a pushchair to a station, and there is an alternative bus service which is easier to access, any parent is going to choose the easier option.

If we want families to use the railway, we have to provide the means to get there.

Last, facilities both on trains and in stations are of vital importance to women with children. It is astonishing that major stations only have one set of public toilets, and the chances of getting a small child from a faraway platform to these toilets without an accident occurring en route cannot be high.

Other stations have toilets up or down stairs and through turnstiles – an impossible task with a pushchair. Two or three toilet areas at each large station would make such a difference.

I would also like to see trains with on-board catering including baby food in their menu, and also selling disposable nappies.

Points to warm up bottles would also be appreciated, both on trains and in stations, and baby changing areas should be at every toilet facility. Larger toilet cubicles to allow babies in prams should also be considered.

Mothers do not want to abandon their babies in a waiting area, but often that is the only choice.

My own experience when travelling with small children has not always been good, and it required perseverance to keep using the train. But children generally enjoy train travel – it's fun, and they are much less likely to be travel sick than travelling by bus. It is such a pity that so many obstacles are placed in their way.

Men conspired to stop women having a fair chance

By Janice Uphill

Although this book from its title appears feminist, it is a comprehensive account of women employed on the railways from the early days.

It does not claim to be complete but it is very factual as the author has delved extensively into the main railway company archives, newspapers, union minutes, etc.

There is much about the "double think" from men opposed to women employees "because the work is too heavy for them" while ignoring the fact that women have worked as cleaners of trains for years, which is very heavy work.

While one has every sympathy with the understanding that after

the two world wars when women had worked successfully in diverse railway jobs, men should get theirs back, management in many cases was so quick to sack the women that many jobs were left unfilled!

Also no account was taken that many women were war widows or wives of war disabled men, and the only wage earners in the family. However, what also comes out very strongly is the terrible conditions all railway employees often worked in, including a very rigid patriarchal structure of promotion.

Because it was so rigid I am afraid the railways did not always move with the times. With education

and changing attitudes, particularly since the Second World War, many more women were qualified to do traditionally male oriented work, with degrees in mechanical engineering, for instance.

It is a shame, though, that the Sex Discrimination Act had to come in before women were given equality of work opportunities on the railways, and one hopes that both sexes are now recruited because it is felt they can do the job properly.

One thing that has changed for the better is that sanitary arrangements for employees have had to be improved and provided for both sexes, which can only be a good thing. Chapter nine describes

women working on the preserved railways, where for the first time they have been able to fire and drive steam locomotives.

The present reviewer has had extensive experience of this at the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre (she appears in the book), and can confirm that while there was some hostility and jealousy from both men and women in the beginning, on the whole women were accepted and nurtured on the footplate and in the guards van provided they were willing and able to do the whole job and not just the bits that they liked.

As most train crews are volunteers, there is no feeling that they are stealing jobs from the men.