

WOMEN ON THE RAILWAY

Janet Cassidy looks at a new history of women on Britain's railways, *Railwaywomen*

When I joined the railway in 1986 there were very few women in the industry. It appeared harder for women to progress and be accepted into the higher grades. The reason I say 'appeared' is that after reading 'railwaywomen' by Helena Wojtezak, I now find that life was relatively easy.

The difference is between having a job where you were required to attend church on a Sunday, to today's culture, where you are expected to work a booked Sunday. Unions were opposed to female employee's and wages were 14 shillings a week, 70 pence to you youngsters.

Mind you, this was in the 1800's and we have come a long way since then. Large gender pay gaps were in existence everywhere and, unfortunately, still are for some industries.

In 1914 there were 178 railway companies. Imagine our unions of today negotiating with these?

Victorian women were barred from 'men's work' - a position which some men today would still support, given half a chance.

But we have moved on from the days when women were given specific jobs, to today when women occupy positions in all grades. From railwaymen receiving their wives' wages for any work they undertook, to women having the possibility of

earning more than the men, dependent on their grade.

The first report of a woman booking clerk was in 1858 in Edinburgh. It was reported that, although startling, it was commendable. It is also startling to read that London Underground reckoned they could save money by employing women in booking offices, and, after only two weeks, reconsidered this decision.

There is also a very interesting chapter on the introduction of trade unions, and how the NUR was formed in 1913, with startling revelations regarding inclusion or exclusion of women. There are also references to women in shipping, acting as booking clerks and stewardesses during the First World War.

This is a short review as it would take away from the whole content of the book. Helena has to be commended for the time she has taken, and the research she has done to make this a compelling read.

For those younger readers amongst us, it is worth remembering that one shilling is equivalent to five pence! I recommend this book to all, from the start I was unable to put it down, even though I am not an avid reader. A must read. ■

Janet Cassidy is an RMT member and the current chair of the Scottish TUC Women's Committee.



AUTHOR: Helena Wojtezak launching her new book at the RMT stall at TUC