

Black History Month 2013 at the National Railway Museum

There are many influential black engineers and inventors associated with the railways, especially in North America. For instance, look up Elijah McCoy and his 57 US patents. But the railways also had an influence on the organisation of black workers to combat the prejudice and different working conditions they had in comparison to white workers. We've explored an American story and a British one for comparison.

The Pullman Company

This was established in 1862 by George Pullman in USA. It built sleeping, dining and parlour cars bringing comfort, luxury and unparalleled customer service to rail travel. Interest in the company soared after Abraham Lincoln's body was transported on one of his sleepers.

The Pullman name became a by-word for high standards. Carriages included carpets, upholstered chairs, card tables, libraries, fresh gourmet meals, chandeliers, heating and air conditioning, combined with excellent service to travellers.

But Pullmans had an impact on more than just carriage design and customer service...

The company was one of the largest employers of African American men in the USA during the 1920s and 1930s. They were employed as porters: in an era of significant racial prejudice, being a Pullman porter was one of the best jobs available for African American men at the time.

Porters took pride in their professionalism. At home, they were respected members of their communities. They travelled extensively and connected their communities to a wider world.

However working conditions were not as good as they may have appeared: pay was low, porters were dependent on tips for much of their income and so were at the whim of their white passengers; they spent unpaid time doing set up and clean up duties and they had to pay for their food, lodging and uniforms.

They could not be promoted to conductor, a job reserved for white men, despite often carrying out these duties. White passengers often referred to all the porters as 'George' after George Pullman, regardless of what their name was.

In response to these working conditions the 'Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' was formed in 1925 and became the first union organisation led by black people to receive official recognition from the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

This marked the beginning of a twelve-year struggle for dignity, better working conditions, and fair pay. Their eventual triumph marked the first time in American history that a black union forced a powerful corporation to the negotiating table. It was a significant step forward for black equality. Their motto was 'Fight or be slaves'.

British Railways

After the Second World War the British Government actively encouraged immigration from the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth in order to help meet the labour shortages caused by the war. Before this, there were relatively few black people living or working in the UK, with most of the hard labour being done by Irish “navvies”.

In 1948 the first wave of immigrants arrived in UK on SS Empire Windrush.

Many of the jobs these immigrants were recruited for had low wages and poor working conditions, the sorts of jobs that were unattractive to white British workers. British Railways were one of the companies employing such immigrants. They set up recruitment centres in places such as Euston where potential recruits could be interviewed, medically examined, and offered jobs and accommodation. Some of the accommodation was provided underground, for instance beneath Clapham Common station.

By 1956 British Railways were one of the largest employers of black people in UK. However, most of the jobs done by black workers were unskilled jobs, e.g. porters and permanent waymen. Very few were in skilled jobs.

Mr Harris, the Chief Recruiting Officer for British Railway claimed there was, “No colour bar on British Railways.”

That was the theory but in practice things were not quite so simple. There were examples of Jamaican men who were unskilled but who could read and write, and had good records being turned away from current porter vacancies with no reasonable explanation. Mr Davies, the Goods Agent at Smithfield Depot said, “General reluctance by men to work with these coloured chaps.”

The Head of the Railwayman’s Union said that there were “no prejudices here” but then also claimed that coloured men were slower at work, the language they spoke was “awkward” and that coloured men are apt to lose their tempers, in a way that white men won’t.

Potential points for discussion

If you were a porter working for Pullman’s company, how might you feel being called ‘George’ by the passengers if it wasn’t your name?

As a black immigrant to Britain in the 1950s how might you feel about being recruited for a job the white British were reluctant to do?

How do you think things have changed since the time of either of these stories? What has stayed the same?