

Former rail worker reminisces with Transport for Wales for Black History Month

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A 91-year-old Cardiff man who came to Wales as part of the Windrush generation has revealed a fascinating insight into his 31 years working on the railway.

As part of Black History Month, Transport for Wales interviewed Percival Hanniford about his life and career on the railway.

Having been born in Jamaica, Mr Hanniford first heard radio adverts calling for people to move to Britain for work as a young man who had recently started a family.

Two of his wife's brothers had already moved to Birmingham and Cardiff respectively and when he lost his job in Kingston, he took the plunge and came to the UK, eventually settling in Cardiff.

"It was quite a shock as it was so cold when I arrived and I didn't like it," said Mr Hanniford.

"It wasn't easy to find a job but my brother in law told me to buy the Echo newspaper for three pence and I

saw the job of Guard, which I thought must be a soldier."

Mr Hanniford was put through his paces learning routes, signals and railway regulations over an intensive two-week period before being sent out by British Rail to cities all over the UK.

He was given a pack containing his railway appendix, red and green flags, a lamp and detonators in case of any blockages on the line.

"The snow when I started in 1962 was so bad that the River Taff froze solid and you could walk on it," he said.

"British Rail shut down and you couldn't even see the line anymore and where engines stopped they were left for two days.

"I loved the steam trains because they were warm and you could get in with the driver and feel the heat from the fire, but diesels weren't the same and only had a little heater. You'd go up to the cab and the driver would say 'you're not coming in here boyo.'"

Initially Mr Hanniford and his wife had to leave their four children in Jamaica until they earned enough to move them over in stages.

He says despite it initially being hard to find a job, he never encountered any racism during his career on the railway, working with people from various different nations who had moved to Britain to cover the labour shortage caused by the second world war.

One memorable incident he recalls is when a pair of stowaways they discovered in the back of a train one morning.

"We just heard this voice shouting 'let me out, let me out' and lots of banging," explained Mr Hanniford.

"It turned out it was two men who had jumped on the goods train at Bridgend and were hoping for a free ride to London, so they got quite a shock to find themselves in Cardiff!"

His career spanned the move from steam to diesel, the widespread closures of the mines in south Wales and ended as privatisation was coming into effect in the 1990s. He moved from being a guard to shunter and then head shunter, working at Cardiff's Newtown depot. He helped prepare trains to travel across Britain and Europe carrying goods including meats, livestock and coal.

Mr Hanniford also spent many years as a chargeman and supervisor chargeman working with freight.

During his time on the railway, Percival Hanniford made lifelong friends, some of whom he still sees to this day. And some of the current Transport for Wales workforce, including Director of Operations Martyn Brennan and Head of Drivers Julian Thomas still have fond memories of working with Mr Hanniford in the 1980s and 90s.

"I had a really good career and British Rail was a great opportunity for me," said Mr Hanniford.

"We always had to put safety first because you weren't just responsible for yourself, you were responsible for all your colleagues and everyone else on the train."

The interview was conducted by Gareth Derry of the Transport for Wales Safety Operations Team.

A former driver himself, Gareth described the discussion as "a great privilege".

He said: "It was really fascinating to discover that, in a time where we often hear about the fight for racial equality, his experience on the railway was different. The acceptance and mutual support for all colleagues that was abundant in his reminiscences shows the strength and unity in the railway at the time and are qualities that endured both through his career and into retirement.

"It was also interesting, given my role as a safety practitioner, to hear how important that the core principle of taking responsibility for your own safety and understanding how it impacts on those around you was back then. It's certainly advice that, despite many advancements in safety systems and technology, still is of fundamental importance to this day.

"This was an opportunity I could not say no to. Black History Month is a fantastic way to learn about the immense contribution made by so many generations of people coming to this country to build a new life. It is the chance to understand what it was like through their own eyes and discover the sacrifices people made to shape a new future."

Photo credit: Transport for Wales

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