

# Giant mural unveiled by Avanti West Coast celebrating pioneering female train driver

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An 8 x 5 metre mural celebrating the woman who led the charge for female train drivers has been created as part of new campaign by Avanti West Coast to encourage more women to follow in her footsteps.

The artwork to be displayed at Euston Station features trailblazer Karen Harrison, who in 1979 overcame prejudice to be one of the first female train drivers in the UK.

Not only did she pave the way for other women by fighting against sustained harassment, she also campaigned for minorities in the rail industry.

Designed by renowned street artist, Akse, the mural intends to help tackle the stereotype that train driving is a job for men. A major part of the campaign will see Avanti West Coast pledge to increase the percentage of female recruits to 50% by 2030, by breaking down the barriers for women entering the rail industry, including changing the way the business recruits to make it more female friendly.

As Karen passed away in 2011, her family gave Avanti West Coast their blessing to create the giant mural, believing that she would be an advocate of the campaign to get more women driving trains.

In the 1997 BBC Documentary, 'People's Century' Karen Harrison was quoted saying: "I was the first woman to get a driver's job, so it was quite an unusual thing. (At the time) it was open warfare, people wouldn't work with me, people put notes up about me, my locker was defaced. Graphic pornography went up in the mess rooms, not just the usual bosoms and bums but the kind of stuff that gynaecologists have to read. I've never wanted to be pushed out. I knew if I'd left the railway, I'd have let these people win and what was happening was wrong and it wasn't fair. It's now put me in a position where when it happens to other women, I now know how to help them." \*

Despite Avanti West Coast already being ahead of the industry average with 13% female drivers\*\*, the reminder of Karen's achievements seeks to inspire the next generation and is the first part of a long-term drive by Avanti West Coast to increase the number of female drivers on the West Coast Main Line.

In 2022, female applicants made up 18% of driver applications at Avanti West Coast, compared to 12.5% in 2020.

This year will be Avanti West Coast's biggest ever driver recruitment push. The aim is to increase female applications to 20% with the hopes of getting 100-120 successful applicants across the gender split, to enrol as trainee drivers. The campaign is part of Avanti West Coast's regular driver recruitment to replace drivers retiring or leaving the industry.

Akse has been painting murals since 1992 and the Manchester based artist likes to bring inspiration to local communities with the subjects he paints.

Speaking about the campaign, Akse said: "I'm incredibly proud to be involved in highlighting Karen's achievements on the railway. This mural will be seen by thousands of passengers each day and I hope her image continues to inspire, encourage, and educate the next generation.

"Painting such a pioneering character is a true honour and it's been amazing to hear stories from her family about how she adapted and overcame barriers on a daily basis. I hope her image will live long in the memories of the public, and that what she accomplished will never be forgotten."

In addition to the mural, Avanti West Coast believes that better awareness and education around the role is fundamental to improving the recruitment process for trainee drivers, and particularly women. In many cases, people don't realise that they have the skills or personality traits required to become a train driver; or they need confidence that the role is right for them.

Although there are already female train drivers at Avanti West Coast, the business has found that the women who apply for the roles are often from within the business and that external candidates tend to be predominantly male. The business has adapted its approach this recruitment round by extending the job advert from a 24-hour period to a one-week period giving everyone more time to learn about the role. It follows recent recruitment campaigns at Avanti West Coast which have shown that women take longer to apply for roles than men. Women prefer to have more information about the job and time to consider prior to the application process.

Avanti West Coast has also developed the rail industry's first ever social recruitment chatbot – designed to

help potential trainee drivers and to encourage them to apply. The social recruitment chatbot guides people through a series of questions which informs applicants whether they may or may not be suitable for the role, ahead of any formal application. It's a chance for people to learn about the skills required for the role and really understand it, before the job application officially opens a month later on 28 February.

Huw Merriman, Rail Minister said: "Diversity and inclusion are at the heart of every successful industry, which is why we're so committed to creating a railway that's reflective of our great nation.

"Avanti West Coast's campaign will go a long way in helping to achieve this and I'm confident Karen Harrison's mural will act as a reminder of the vitally important work she and others across the industry have done to pave the way for women."

Barry Milsom, Exec Director of Operations and Safety spokesperson said: "We are really proud that Avanti West Coast is spearheading this campaign to encourage more women to become train drivers. We know that having a diverse workforce is the key to success. By changing our recruitment process as well as shining a light on how Karen Harrison fought to be one of the first women to be accepted on to the driver programme, we hope to inspire many others to emulate her. Unlike many trailblazers, Karen's story isn't widely known or recognised. This mural aims to change that - painting Karen as a true female pioneer who broke down barriers for hundreds who have followed in her footsteps, showing that this is a role suitable for all."

Marie Harrison, sister of Karen Harrison said: "My sister Karen was a trailblazer in the rail industry, in the trade union movement and beyond. She applied her determination and formidable intelligence to achieve her goals and her family is enormously proud that this legacy continues to have an impact today.

"Akse's mural captures that independence of spirit and fierce determination not only to secure her own place in the rail industry, but to ensure that other women could follow her path. We hope that she continues to inspire women to consider train driving, the job that she loved and fought for so passionately."

Rebecca Smith, Trainee Driver, Avanti West Coast, Wolverhampton Depot said: "My dad is a train driver and was a huge inspiration behind my decision to join the industry. The thing that appealed to me most about being a train driver is that no week or shift is the same.

"We've come so far since Karen Harrison was a driver, but we've still got a long way to go and I'm excited to see more women choose this as a career. Anybody can do this job if they have the skills!"

Mick Whelan, General Secretary, ASLEF said: "Karen was a pioneer - a passionate feminist, and trade union activist, who blazed a path for other women to join the railway at the pointy end of the train. Train drivers should, we think, represent the communities we serve and that's why we need more women in the driver's cab."

You can see Karen's mural at London Euston Station from 26 January 2023 - 23 February 2023. To find out more head to the Avanti West Coast website for information on being a driver, and if you want to see if you have what it takes to be an Avanti West Coast train driver, try our first ever social recruitment chatbot.

\* BBC Documentary, People's Century, 1997 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s\\_Century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Century)

\*\*The 2019 ASLEF Diversity report showed that just 6.5 percent of train drivers in the UK were women

*Photo credit: Avanti West Coast*