

Life in rail: The highs of working as a freight driver

March 3, 2020



The railways have transported vital goods since early in the 19th century, and as there's an increasing importance on reducing the UK's environmental impact, that dependence on rail will only get greater.

But whilst its demand continues to rise, one area which isn't increasing at the same level is the amount of women working in the industry - with recent stats from Women in Rail finding only 17% of the workforce in the industry women.

Heather Waugh is the only female freight train driver in Scotland. She's been working for the last year for Freightliner and has spoken to Rail Business Daily about life on the tracks and why it's a career she'd thoroughly recommend.

"There are few jobs that offer the salary that a train driver enjoys, without the requirement to take your work home with you," she said.

"It comes with many challenges and pressures obviously, but I recognised that it was a job I felt I would enjoy, and ScotRail was a company I had a lot of affection."

It was ScotRail that gave Heather her first steps into life as a train driver in 2006 – a career change after a decade as an operations and planning manager for Royal Mail.

She said: "Ironically, I had never considered working in the railway, but it has been a big part of my life as my dad was a guard/senior conductor based at Edinburgh Waverley for over 45 years, so train journeys were a common part of my childhood.

"I remember shouting 'hello mum' over the PA system on a trip to Newcastle in which my dad was the guard. And her red face. But most of all, I remember that my dad and his friends were known as 'the railway children' because of their lasting friendships, long after they all retired."

Sadly, her dad died two years before she joined ScotRail as a train driver.

Heather said: "We genuinely never spoke of me joining the railway. He was proud of what I'd achieved at Royal Mail as an operational manager and neither of us had any idea that one day I'd enter the industry he'd been part of for over 45 years. I do often wonder what he'd think.

"My oldest brother, Neil, has also spent most of his working life in the railway (over 35 years), as an engineering supervisor at Haymarket Depot. I know he is proud that I am in the railway, and even more so that I've made the move to driving locomotives.

"Ultimately though, it was my mum who used to take me around the country on the train exploring new places every week. That was what gave me a love of the railway and, even at a young age, an insight into how the 'railway family' looked after its own."

Becoming a train driver

After a decade at Royal Mail, Heather fancied a track change with her career and a chance to work on the railways.

She said: "I came in directly as a train driver so it is difficult to do and requires a degree of luck. By luck I mean that train companies receive so many applications that even those that meet the initial standard don't always get invited to the next stage.

"Often train driver vacancies are filled internally so, when an external advert does appear, there are always several thousand applications for every external train driver vacancy. And then there are so many stages and tests to get through, as you would expect.

"My friend at the time still complains to me now that she had to buy me a 'celebration' meal every time I passed a stage of the process and it cost her a fortune.

"It was hard and nerve-wracking, but the process itself is very structured and any safety critical, highly

paid job is going to require effort to get.

"It still amuses me when people outside the industry are so shocked at a female train driver. I've often been asked if I got in on one of 'those' positive discrimination schemes. To which I always answer 'yes, us women applicants just made tea and read magazines whilst the male applicants sat the safety exams'.

"The requirements to become a train driver are the same regardless of gender. Everyone who makes it through has done so on merit. It was a great feeling."

Changing track into freight

After 12 years as a passenger driver, Heather moved into freight, joining the Freightliner Group, a role she's been in for over a year.

"The short answer is that my friend and colleague from Bathgate Depot, Brian Moore, was moving to Liverpool with his wife and children successfully applied for a train driver position with Freightliner Ltd at Garston," she said.

"Many train drivers with TOCs have a false impression that freight has poor conditions, poor security, and less professionalism. So when I heard that my friend was moving to a freight company, I was concerned for him.

"He took time to dispel some of the myths and showed me the roster he'd be working to, which had an amazing work/life balance structure.

"I went home and looked Freightliner up and watched their beautiful and emotive promotion video and immediately felt that this was a company I'd be proud to work for.

"They offered all the conditions I received at ScotRail and there were the progression opportunities. There was a vacancy at their Mossend depot – only 2 miles from where I lived – and I applied that same evening.

"I became aware that Freightliner had never had a female train driver in Scotland before and, indeed, that there were currently no female freight train drivers at all in Scotland at that time. It concerned me.

"I had been through many years of being a female in male industries and, quite honestly, I didn't want to have to break down more barriers and prove myself all over again.

"If the depot had never had a female driver before, did I really want to be someone that others had to 'adapt' for? But area manager Scott Addie made me feel that, if I was successful, I'd have no problems settling in and feeling part of the team.

"Not only was I made to feel welcome from day 1, but the company made it clear to me that my experience and opinion as a female train driver was wanted and valued.

"An experienced freight driver could drive a 2,000 tonne train over long distances over different routes

given the training and mentoring provided. It's a real pleasure to work as a train driver and I am learning constantly.

"I have to say though it was a steep learning curve given the differing operating procedures we are required to learn, especially during shunting movements where the train is propelled, which is not normally carried out with passenger trains."

Click [here](#) to read what Heather thinks needs to change to attract more women to the career.

Picture credit: Heather Waugh