Mind the gap: uncovering missing stories from



Joanna Jarvis , Imogen Watmore, Ashlynn Hudson-Welburn and Harvey Barker holding Pride banner in front of HST loco in Great Hall, National Railway Museum, (NRM) York. © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

People, Pride and Progress is recording the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers to explore unheard perspectives on railway heritage.

LGBTQ+ people have been involved in the railway industry since it began 200 years ago. But from a search of the 200 tonnes of archives held by the National Railway Museum, you'd never know.

Due to the risk of prosecution and discrimination, many LGBTQ+ individuals did not document their experiences. Besides some police records, there is almost nothing in the museum's collections to tell their story.

With our funding, People, Pride and Progress is changing that. But how can you explore heritage from a new perspective when records haven't been kept?

Seeing history through a new lens

For Ashlynn Hudson-Welburn, Archivist at the National Railway Museum, oral history is the best way to start filling this gap in the archive. She says: "Most of the history only survives in the memories of the people who've lived it. So talking

to people one-on-one is key.”

The project aims to record 70 interviews with past and current LGBTQ+ railway workers. The oral histories will trace participants’ lives from childhood through to their time in the industry.

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Recording an oral history. © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

However, engaging people who may have never shared their experiences can be challenging. Older members of the community, whose memories are at the greatest risk of being lost, can be particularly reluctant to come forward.

Ashlynn says: “You have to be really hands-on with finding people. When you have a community who are used to being attacked you have to build a level of trust.”

Everyday stories

Uncovering hidden histories can mean changing people’s assumptions about what’s worth preserving.

Some overlooked stories seem like obvious inclusions, for example Ron Whalley, whose innovations in the 1960s and 1970s allowed trains to go faster, essentially saving the railways. But everyday experiences are just as valuable.

Ashlynn says: “People assume we are looking for exceptional stories. But that’s not what we’re doing. Something might seem boring to you, because it’s just your life. But if in 100 years time your story’s not there, if we only have the exceptional, we won’t know what it was really like.”

Connecting to collections

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A trail will highlight LGBTQ+ history in the museum's galleries.

“There are lots of ways to approach reinterpreting a gallery,” Ashlynn says. “You might have objects that existed specifically to support a community, like a pride flag.

“But when you talk to people you find that there are less obvious ways of relating to an item. Maybe an object isn’t an ‘LGBTQ+ thing’ in itself, but it was made by someone in the community. Maybe it has symbolism for a community or became associated with them later.”

Engaging new audiences

“We hope the trail will be a meaningful, impactful way to engage wider audiences in the railway industry and its heritage.

“Being able to look back and understand how people like yourself, people with similar characteristics or identities, navigated the world to where it is today, can be really inspiring.

“If we want to bring more people into the industry, it’s important to share these stories. It increases acceptance both in the industry and outside it to see that actually, yes, despite all the homophobia, there was a huge presence of LGBTQ+ people in rail.”

Read more LGBTQ+ stories

Discover some of the other projects we've supported to celebrate LGBTQ+ heritage.



Alison Kay, National Railway Museum's Archives Manager and Ashlynn Welburn, Oral History Project Archivist at Eurostar. Photo: JK Doran



stories of LGBTQ+ railway workers

Ribbon Weaver at Wyedean Weaving Company. Credit: Tim Smith.



Richard Kennedy was a founding member of Cara-Friend. Credit: Timothy O’Connell.

Founding Cara-Friend: Preserving At Risk LGBTQIA+ Heritage