



## **Women in Rail Trustee Story Spotlight – Heather Waugh**



### **Permission to Shine and be Yourself, Driving Change with a Can of Irn-Bru**

If you'd told me 20 years ago that one day I'd be a trustee for Women in Rail, I probably would have laughed, shaken my head, and gone back to my cab. I started out just wanting to do my job well, keep my head down, and, if I'm honest, not stand out too much. Having first worked for ScotRail, and then being Scotland's only female freight train driver meant I was already under a spotlight, and blending in felt safer.

But in 2019, something shifted. I was invited to the Women in Rail Awards and, for the first time in my career, I wasn't the minority. I was in a room buzzing with unapologetic, confident women who weren't trying to "fit in", they were standing out, and proudly so. That night I walked away with something powerful, permission to be myself.

Since then, I've realised visibility matters, not to prove we are the same, but to show that our differences are valuable. I've used my role as a driver as a platform to share real stories, speak on panels, visit schools, and even set up the Railway Family Fundraiser to bring us all together. Because for me, equality, diversity and inclusion isn't about leaving people out, it's about all of us.

When I heard I had been named the Everywoman Women of the Year in June, I honestly couldn't believe it. I felt humbled, a little overwhelmed, and more than a little reflective. Standing there, I thought about every woman I've worked alongside in rail, the ones keeping the wheels turning on the frontline, the ones quietly solving problems behind the scenes, and the ones leading with vision. This award wasn't just about me, it was proof that women are essential in every role, at every level.

Winning it made me realise I have a responsibility to use my voice. I want to amplify the contributions of women across the industry, to celebrate their expertise, and to show that stepping forward, speaking up, and standing out isn't just allowed, it's necessary. If my story inspires even one woman to recognise her value, take a seat at the table, or lead with confidence, then this honour has done exactly what it was meant to do.

### **Why I Became a Trustee**

When the opportunity came to apply for a trustee role with Women in Rail, I knew it was time to step up again. My focus is clear, the frontline. Around 17% of the rail workforce are women, but in frontline roles, that number dips even lower. Yet these are women with the grit, the talent, the lived experience and, too often, they are invisible.

I want to change that. My trustee role is about finding ways to reach those colleagues, encourage them to engage, and break down the barriers that stop them from being seen. Things like shift work, lack of time, or even the fear of being singled out can keep frontline women from connecting with networks like Women in Rail. We need to normalise support, celebrate their stories, and make sure no one feels they are standing alone.

Of course, juggling this role with my day job isn't always easy. I can't exactly stop a train to join a meeting. My job means no phones, no laptops, no emails mid-shift. So, everything I do for Women in Rail has to happen in my own time, on rest days, annual leave, or in the late hours when most people are sleeping. It's tiring, yes, but every time I speak up, I see someone else find their voice. That makes it worth every bit of effort.

### **Our Industry**

I've spent two decades in this industry, and I still love it. Rail is full of passionate, committed people who keep the country moving day and night. But we can't keep overlooking the huge potential sitting right there on the frontline. Some colleagues, like me, are happy in their operational roles, but that doesn't mean we don't have ideas, energy, or leadership to offer. Others might want to climb into management but don't see the path. Either way, we need to open more doors.

So that's why for me it's important to champion women and "don't shrink yourself to fit in". I did it for years without even realising, and it held me back more than any barrier in the industry. Find your voice, even if it feels scary. Use it, because you never know who's listening and drawing strength from you.

And remember, there's no one "right" way to be a woman in rail. Whether you're in a high-vis jacket at 3am, in a boardroom at 9am, or anywhere in between, your story matters.

### **Key Messages & Support for the Frontline, what you will see me championing for us all:**

- **Visibility counts.** You can't be what you can't see.
- **Frontline voices matter.** They hold insight, talent, and leadership that the industry cannot afford to waste.
- **EDI** is for everyone. Nobody should feel left out by inclusion.
- **Support each other.** When one woman steps up, it gives courage to others.

## **Wellbeing is living well**

For me, wellbeing is about living well, not just working well. It's about feeling supported, valued, and able to bring your whole self to work, not just opening doors or creating opportunities, it's about making sure people can thrive once they're through them. That means recognising the pressures we face, whether on the frontlines or in leadership, and creating an environment where women feel supported, confident, and able to succeed.

When wellbeing is prioritised, women can bring their full skills, ideas, and energy to the job without being held back by unnecessary stress, inflexible schedules, or a lack of support. It's about more than mental and physical health, it's about creating a rail industry where women feel valued, empowered, and ready to lead.

In an industry like rail, where the pace is fast and the responsibility is high, recognising wellbeing isn't optional, it's essential. When we prioritise it, people are healthier, more confident, and better able to thrive both on and off the rails.

I've seen firsthand how stress, long hours, and challenging conditions can affect people's health, performance, and confidence. That's why I make it a priority to recognise and support wellbeing in every aspect of my work. I believe we all perform better when we feel looked after. It's about more than safety, it's about valuing people as people, not just employees.

In my role, I have a platform to highlight the importance of mental and physical wellbeing across the industry. I want women, men, and everyone in rail to know that taking care of yourself isn't a weakness, it's a strength. By prioritising wellbeing, we create a workforce that is healthier, happier, and more resilient, and ultimately, that benefits everyone who relies on our trains running safely and efficiently.

## **We are all role models**

When I think about women who inspire me, a few frontline names immediately come to mind. Bessie Matthews, with her unstoppable energy and pink hair blazing down the tracks, shows that you can bring personality, passion, and professionalism to the rails all at once. Steph Hitchen, whose leadership and advocacy for diversity have opened doors for so many of us, reminds me that change often comes from having the courage to speak up. And Helen Gander, with her calm, steady approach and dedication to mentoring others, is a living example of how supporting your colleagues can ripple across the whole industry.

What strikes me is that none of this is new, women have been driving trains, breaking barriers, and quietly challenging expectations for more than a century.

From the early trailblazers in the 19th and 20th centuries, who literally fought to get their hands on the controls, to today's drivers shaping the future of rail, there's a rich history of women refusing to sit on the sidelines.

I love thinking about the contrast, a hundred years ago, a woman might have had to convince a sceptical station master that she could even reach the throttle, whereas today, Bessie is making it look effortless, tweeting about it, and even writing a children's book about rail safety. And somewhere along the line, Steph and Helen are ensuring the next generation has fewer hurdles and more cheerleaders along the way.

It makes me laugh to imagine the amazing women before us, rolling their eyes at some of our modern-day “challenges”, and also smile, because the spirit is the same. The courage, determination, and humour of women in rail past and present are what keep me motivated to stand up, speak out, and make space for more women to follow. That’s the magic of this industry, it’s a family.

So here I am, a train driver, still loving my job, and now a trustee, determined to make sure frontline women aren’t just seen, but celebrated. I’ve learned that giving yourself permission to shine isn’t about being perfect, it’s about showing up just as you are. And I promise, I’ll keep doing my bit as me, even if it means planning strategy sessions in my pyjamas after a night shift, fuelled by Irn Bru and sheer stubbornness. Because being yourself is the real power, if we can’t be ourselves, laugh, learn and even cry while changing the world on the rails, what’s the point!

## *Heather*

For more information on Women in Rail, please visit: [www.womeninrail.org](http://www.womeninrail.org) or contact [wr@womeninrail.org](mailto:wr@womeninrail.org)