

THE DIRTIEST JOB ON THE RAILWAY

Train cleaning is not a job for the squeamish, as Paul Clifton found out when he joined a group of enthusiastic 'apprentices' at South West Trains' Fratton depot

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL CLIFTON

A woman in a dark grey trouser suit writes her name forcefully in green felt pen across the back of the first-class seat, in letters six inches high. K - I - M.

'I'm just doing some graffiti,' she says, stabbing the pen hard into the cloth to make the full stop bigger. Why? 'Because I like doing it.'

Kim doesn't appear to be a particularly talented graffiti artist. But she has two advantages over just about every other vandal who defaces the railway. She's not going to be arrested for damaging a railway carriage. And she can order someone else to clean it all off again. In fact, she scrawls and scribbles on trains nearly every day.

Kim Wilkinson works at South West Trains' Fratton depot in Portsmouth. She teaches train cleaners how to do their job. She has been doing it only for a few months, and practical exercises in getting rid of graffiti are part of her routine. It involves a lot of elbow grease and a dangerous-smelling bottle of colourless liquid labelled 'Super Graffiti Remover'. This is serious stuff. Rubbed into apparently permanent ink stains, it just wipes them away. Small wonder rubber gloves are essential.

'Follow the mark round with the spray; keep it really close to the cloth, because of the chemicals. And make sure there's lots of ventilation.' Kim instructs groups of about eight people at a time. Some are new recruits; others are quite senior managers.

SWT's policy is that everyone involved in train presentation, at whatever level, should attend the week-long course, to understand the work involved, and also the health and safety implications.



'How clean is your train?' South West Trains' Kim Wilkinson is a dab hand at removing graffiti.

Kim Wilkinson: 'Some people from the other depots have never been on a slam-door train. They're a lot harder to clean'

John Perry is one of Kim's trainees. He's a newly-promoted charge hand.

'Before I came here, I was a bit confused about what each of these cloths was for. One for panels, one for the toilet and a different one for the sink. They're all done by colour coding. Now we've sat in the classroom, discussed it, everyone knows which one is which.

'You get a big certificate – a merit, a distinction, and some other grade I've forgotten. You get a written letter from the head of presentation, which is nice, to recognise the effort. And everyone's learned to do the same standard, so no-one's a slacker.'



John joined SWT two years ago. Eventually he'd like to be a train driver. Short of the required qualifications, he saw cleaning as his way into the company.

'I want to go to the top. I want to progress through the company as far as I can go. And I've gone one step up the ladder already, so it's not impossible to move up here. I'm young, I've got my whole life ahead of me.'

The downside of the job is dealing with the nasties that customers leave behind. 'Like dirty nappies. Vomit. Diarrhoea... and people using the bin as a toilet,' says John. 'Basically, people being very disrespectful to the train. If this is what they do when they're in public, you think, what does their own home look like? It's unbelievable sometimes. You walk into a train, you never know what's going to be in store.'

'But we've got all the special kits; we don't have to touch it with our bare hands. That wouldn't be nice.'

His colleague Barry is finding his way round a slam-door carriage. He's probably nearly three times John's age.

'I used to be a lift engineer, doing repairs, installation and maintenance. But I'm getting a bit older now, and this is lighter sort of work. I wanted a change of career. Obviously you get the free rail travel as well – that's a big advantage.

Especially if you go abroad. The training's very good – a lot of classroom, a lot of practical, a lot of good information.'

How difficult can it be to clean a train? Do people really need a certificate to show they know how to use a cloth and a bit of polish? Don't we all do that at home?

'There is a hell of a lot to learn,' explains Kim Wilkinson. 'They have to know about the chemicals, and we talk about COSHH – Control of Substances Hazardous to Health. I teach them about health and safety at work, and chemical burns. One thing you find on the train is needles, so they have to know what to do with them. Bio hazards, like bodily fluids, and how to deal with them. And some people from the other depots have never been on a slam-door train. They're a lot harder to clean.'

And the cleaning certificate? 'It isn't a qualification as such. They get a certificate to say they've completed the course, but they have to work for it – we can fail people. Except, of course, we don't call it that! We'd say "scope for further improvement" or "started to develop their skills".'

And to emphasise the equality, Kim adds: 'We've got at least one manager with us this week – it's good that they have to do the same course that everyone else does.'

On the way up: John Perry wants to progress at SWT, and cleaning is his way on to the ladder.

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