

Asquith breaks the colour bar



In spring 1966 Asquith Xavier applied to become a guard at Euston station. He was 46 years old and had been a porter for ten years at Marylebone station. Before that he had been a police officer in Dominica in the West Indies. He had also been in the army.

Asquith was well spoken, always well dressed and a source of wise advice and support to his friends, colleagues and family.

In March he received a letter from the local staff committee at Euston. It said that he could not be a guard as Euston station did not accept “coloured men” in that post. The committee included members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR). This discrimination was legal in 1966.

There was a history of ‘colour bars’ in London stations. Asquith decided to challenge it and made the case public. He received death threats and the stress probably led to Asquith being hospitalized with a stomach ulcer in July.

The *Daily Mirror* on 16 July reported that he had been refused the job “because the station’s 1,200 railmen were against coloured men having permanent jobs there”.

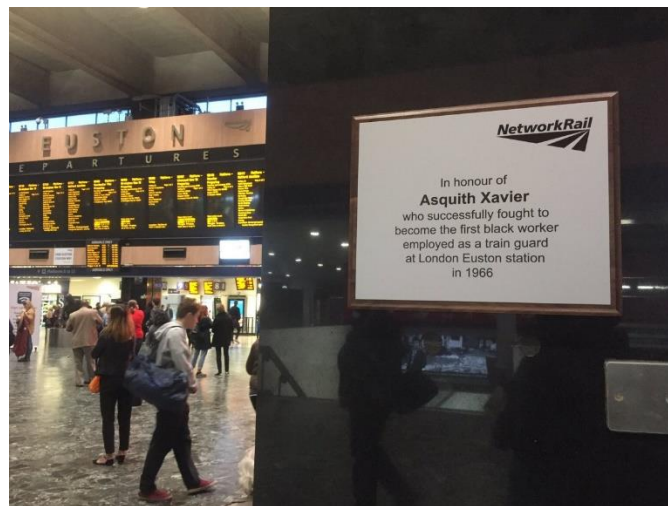
Asquith faced all this down to demand his right to work. He got journalists and members of parliament to support him. He didn’t give up.

In July the union and British Rail Board reached an agreement which enabled Asquith to start work on 15 August. He had to have a police escort to work.

He came to be highly respected in his new role, as he had been in his previous ones.

Tony Donaghey recalls Asquith looking out for him at Marylebone when Donaghey was a young man in his early career. Asquith educated him about discrimination. Tony eventually became President of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, previously the NUR.

In 1968 a new Race Relations Act made racial discrimination at work and in housing illegal. Asquith's stand had increased pressure for this change. His family remains very proud of his bravery. There is now a plaque in Asquith's memory at Euston Station.



“Asquith was a trailblazer at a time when he was excluded from access to work. His contribution to the struggle for equality, inclusion and justice is noteworthy as every ‘small victory’ was massive in breaking down the walls of racial prejudice, ignorance and intolerance.”

Lord Herman Ouseley

