

The steward in a dress on the 8.30

by MICHAEL DOVE

MR JIM COOKE had just boarded a morning train to London. Usually he just sits down and reads his newspaper, but that day he needed a cup of coffee.

He made his way to the buffet car and was politely and speedily served by the attendant, who was nicely made up and neatly turned out in a smart dark blue and red dress, the standard female steward uniform.

He started to walk away, then stopped and gave the attendant a closer look. The "female," he realised, was in fact a man.

Mr Cooke had stumbled across a sight which has apparently become a familiar one to some commuters using British Rail's South-Eastern region.

"I was amazed," he said. "The service was above average, if I may say so, but it is, to say the least, a trifle hard to take especially first thing in the morning.

"I could not believe British Rail would employ a man in drag, so I asked another steward about it. He said everyone had accepted the situation, but I am not certain that I do."

Another regular commuter, oil company executive Mr Lin Walton, who travels up each day from Haywards Heath, Sussex, told me: "Everyone is typically English about this, and as far as I know there have been no official complaints.

Amusing

"Personally I find it distasteful, although I suppose it has its amusing side."

"But I like to have a steward I can talk to over the bar. It is too embarrassing to try to chat to this one."

A third commuter, company treasurer Mr Kevin Simpson, of Seaford, said: "I find it strange, but I must say this person's service is fast and efficient."

The attendant is 43-year-old Mike Clark, who insists on being called Margaret.

He lives near Eastbourne with his wife Olive, a local government employee—who, he said, "understands and is right behind me."

He has been employed on buffet cars for over 14 years and his official position is now "chief stewardess."

I spoke to him as he served behind the counter of an Eastbourne to Victoria train. He was wearing make-up, an auburn wig, and a dress.

He told me: "It is nice of

people to praise my service. I pride myself on it.

"I started work on the railways just after 1970, but gradually I felt I could no longer wear male uniform. I asked to be allowed to wear female clothing and was given permission.

"A vacancy came up for the position of chief stewardess on this line, and I applied for and got the job.

"I have never had any complaints because of the way I dress. Very occasionally I get some cheek from customers, but I know how to deal with them."

Another steward told me: "When he started he was just plain Mike, but now we have to call him Margaret."

A spokesman for Travellers Fare, said: "We have had one or two comments but no complaints."