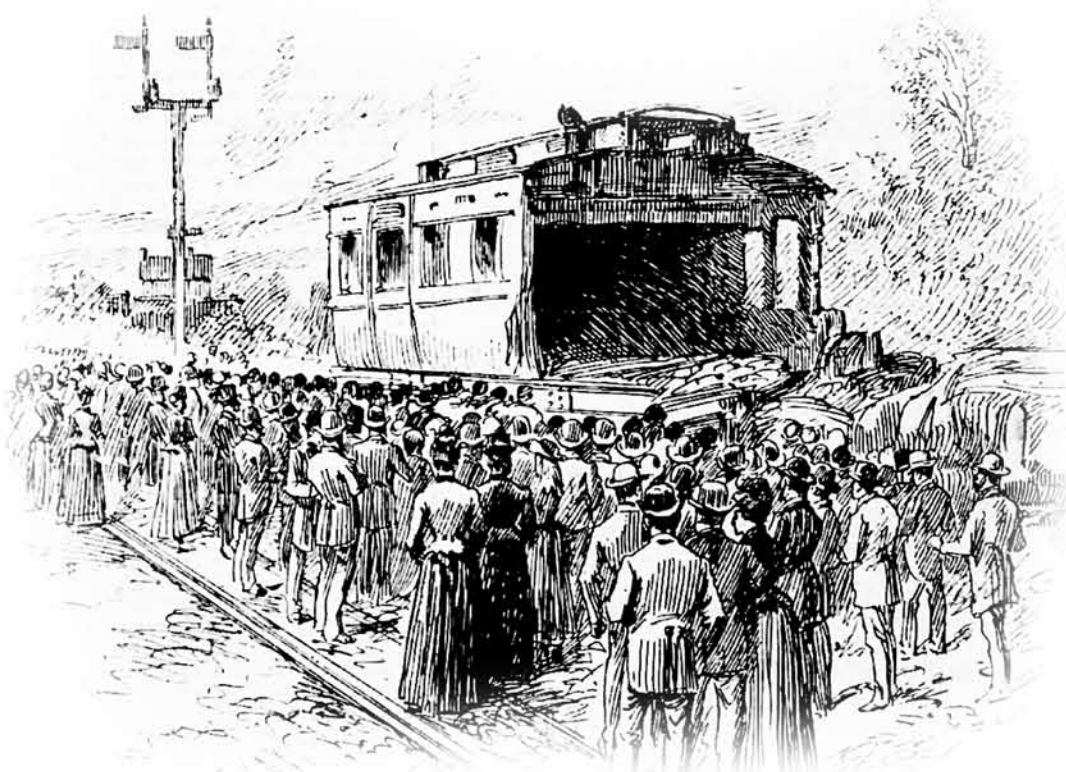


1890 RAILWAY DISASTER

NORTON FITZWARREN



At about 1 a.m on Tuesday 11th November 1890 a special train carrying 47 passengers from Plymouth to Paddington and travelling at about 50 miles per hour collided with a stationary goods train that had been shunted on to the same line. Ten passengers were killed, and eleven people (including the driver and fireman of the special train) were seriously injured.

The events leading up to the accident

At 7 p.m on Monday the 10th November 1890, the SS Norham Castle docked at Plymouth, having travelled from South Africa. It carried about 80 passengers, many of whom were British miners who had been working in the gold and diamond mines in South Africa. Many had returned to Britain for Christmas, bringing their new-found wealth with them, and planned to return to South Africa in the New Year. The ship also carried a large quantity of mail, which was immediately loaded on to a special train which departed for London at 9.43 p.m.

Because the crossing had been so rough, about half of the passengers decided to stay overnight in hotels in Plymouth. However there was a sufficient number of passengers for the Great Western Railway to run a special train to London. This left Plymouth at 11.03 p.m and comprised a locomotive, two passenger coaches and a brake van which was crammed with the passengers' luggage.

At about 6.40 p.m that evening a goods train had departed Bristol for Exeter. This train stopped at many of the intermediate stations to set down wagons and to pick up others. At Taunton an assisting locomotive was added to the front on the train. This was needed to help the train over Wellington Bank. This is a steady climb averaging 1 in 80 from just northeast of Wellington.

At that time the Great Western Railway still used Brunel's 'broad gauge' tracks on their main line routes, with the rails 7 feet and ¼ inches apart. Most other companies had adopted a narrower track gauge (now known as 'standard gauge') with rails 4 feet 8 ½ inches apart. Because of the problems this caused with transferring goods wagons and coaches from another company's railway to the Great Western, most routes had been converted to allow both types of trains to run. This was known as 'mixed gauge', and existed on the main lines from London to Exeter (which included Norton Fitzwarren). Beyond Exeter the main lines were broad gauge only.

Unusually, the assisting locomotive was broad gauge, the rest of the train being standard gauge. The train, now with its assisting locomotive, left Taunton with 39 wagons at half past midnight.

Six minutes later the goods train arrived at Norton Fitzwarren to take on and put off more wagons. The broad gauge pilot engine was uncoupled and the signaller, George Rice, set a route for it to wait out of the way on the start of the branch line to Barnstaple. This was so that the standard gauge engine could shunt the wagons in the sidings – although the main line was 'mixed gauge' (which allowed both broad gauge and standard gauge trains to run on them), the sidings were standard gauge only. Signaller Rice also knew he had to keep the main line clear because there was another down goods train due at 1.17 a.m and this was not scheduled to stop at Norton Fitzwarren.

At 1.05 a.m the guard of the Bristol goods train was told by signaller Rice to shunt his train clear of the down line, on to the up main line to allow the fast goods train to go through the station. The goods train now comprised the locomotive and tender, 38 wagons of goods and minerals, and a brake-van at the rear. Because the train was now standing on the 'wrong' line (the train was facing towards Exeter, but trains on that line would travelling towards London), the driver changed the headlamps to show a red light. This would act as a warning to any approaching trains. The guard, William Lowe, was outside the train writing down the numbers of the wagons they had just taken on.

The fast goods passed through Norton Fitzwarren on time. After it had passed, signaller Rice changed the signals so that the pilot engine could move back to the down main line. The driver observed the signals and moved his locomotive to the down line, stopping just outside the signal box. Driver Noble on the Bristol Goods locomotive saw the pilot engine moving back across and anticipated that signaller Rice would soon clear their signal and allow them to move the goods train back across to the down line. He blew his locomotive's whistle as a reminder to the signaller and told his fireman, Alfred Dowding, to change the locomotive headlamps to show green lights so that they were ready to move.

“Here is a train a-coming on our line and he is never going to stop!”
Alfred Dowding, fireman on the Down Goods

While this was taking place, at 1.23 a.m, the up boat train was offered to signaller Rice by the preceding signal box at Victory Sidings.

Rice had forgotten that the Bristol goods train was still on the up main line, accepted the boat train and cleared his signals for it. As fireman Dowding was changing over the headlamps he noticed a train approaching in the distance and he hurried back to tell his driver. Driver Noble told him to quickly change the headlamps back to show a red light. In his hurry he fumbled the glass lens and didn't manage to do it in time.

At 1.24 a.m, with full steam on at a speed estimated at 50 mph, the boat train passed the signal box at Norton Fitzwarren and ran into the goods train just beyond the end of the station platform. Driver Noble and fireman Dowding on the Bristol goods train managed to jump clear before the accident, but were unable to give any signal in the short time they had. The guard of the boat train, Thomas Gooding, did not recall any braking before the impact. Gooding was thrown to the floor, but was uninjured.

The accident scene

Both locomotives were very badly damaged. The tender of the Bristol goods locomotive was squeezed out between the locomotive and the first wagon and tipped over on its side, blocking the down line. The front passenger carriage telescoped, the first compartments completely smashed and leaving the carriage roof hanging over the cab of the locomotive. Amazingly, driver John Scott and fireman John Thomas both survived, although both were badly hurt.

The people in the front compartments of the first carriage were less fortunate. The ten dead all came from the front three compartments of this carriage. The second carriage was forced part way into the first carriage, but no-one there suffered any serious injuries. The brake van was relatively undamaged.

On the Bristol goods train, three wagons of the goods train were destroyed, and nine others were damaged. One rail was bent and one longitudinal sleeper was damaged in the track (known as the 'permanent way').

The first on the scene was William Bond, an agricultural dealer who lived on Station Road. He had heard the goods train arrive and was kept awake by the sounds of it shunting the wagons in the nearby sidings. He had expected to hear it depart, but instead heard a "terrific crash". He leapt out of bed and looked out of his bedroom. He heard the cries of the injured passengers and immediately went to the station and ran up the line. It was raining heavily and he could see very little because of the steam and smoke. He ran back to the station and awoke William Kemp, the station master at Norton Fitzwarren. Kemp immediately telegraphed Paddington, Taunton and Exeter to ask for assistance.

Very few of the villagers were woken by the sound of the collision, many of them not realising there had been an accident until the following day. This meant that there was little assistance for the injured passengers until railway staff and the doctors they had managed to summon had arrived from Taunton.

On receiving the telegram at Taunton, a light engine was organised and several staff travelled to Norton. They arrived at about 2.15 a.m. The rescuers had to work by the light of naphtha (paraffin) lamps and torches. This party included George Widowson (station staff), Thomas Shattock (railway police inspector) and several Permanent Way men.

At the same time, George Rice was relieved from duty by John Mapledoram, a GWR ticket checker at Norton Fitzwarren, who had travelled in from his home in Bishop's Hull. Mapledoram then continued in the signalbox to allow special trains to bring in railway staff to deal with the people and the debris of the accident.

Rain was now falling heavily and it was very dark. Despite the rain, fire broke out in the remains of the first coach, which was piled on top of the locomotive. A GWR lad porter, Albert William Widdicombe (age 16), had been summoned from his home in Norton at 2.20 a.m and carried water from the station water pump to throw onto the carriages to prevent fire from taking hold. Rescue of people in the first coach, which was resting on top of the locomotive, was hampered by there not being any ladders on site. The first injured passengers were released from the wreckage by about 3.15 a.m.

Some of the injured were taken to the station master's house and were presumably treated by Mary (the station master's wife) and their children Herbert (13), Florence (10) and Alice (8). Others were taken to the Railway Inn near the station (also known as the 'Refreshment Rooms'). The dead were placed in a shed next to the Inn.

GWR employee George Widowson, Police Sergeant Hayes (Taunton Constabulary) and Inspector Reeves of the GWR searched the bodies to make the initial identification. The last body was retrieved from the wreckage at about 6 a.m.

In the dawn light the full extent of the disaster could be seen: the wreckage of the locomotives, coaches and wagons and scattered all around were items of luggage, pieces of carriage seating and racks. Many of these items were bloodstained according to newspaper reports. The men in the first compartment had been playing cards at the time of the crash. All the men were killed and their playing cards were strewn across the track.

The seriously injured passengers were taken in John White's buses to the Great Western Railway Hotel in Taunton. The hotel was used because Taunton's hospital was already full with ordinary patients. The hotel was run by Henry and Elizabeth Gill. A staff of nurses from the Jubilee Nursing Institute were quickly in attendance to help the injured. The surviving passengers remained at the Norton Fitzwarren refreshment rooms until about 8.30 a.m when they were taken to London aboard a special train.

The wreckage had been cleared from the down line by 11 a.m, allowing trains to start running again. The eight seriously injured passengers were taken to Taunton aboard another special train at about this time.

