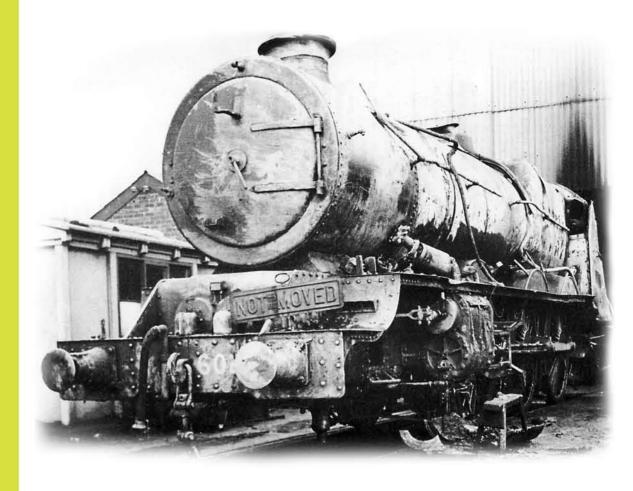
1940 RAILWAY DISASTER

NORTON FITZWARREN



At about 03.47 on the 4th November 1940 an express passenger train travelling on the Relief line at Norton Fitzwarren derailed at a set of catch points that protected the main line. The train was carrying about 900 passengers in 13 coaches and was travelling at about 40 mph when it derailed. 27 people were killed and 56 were seriously injured. Many of those on board were military personnel.

The driver of the train had mistaken the line he was on when he left Taunton and only realised his error just before the derailment when another train going in the same direction overtook him at Norton Fitzwarren. Although the driver immediately applied the brakes it was too late to prevent the accident.

The events leading up to the accident

The night of the 3rd November was very stormy and dark, with a gale blowing and heavy rain and mist at times. The weather was so bad that the Luftwaffe was unable to launch bombing raids against Britain – this was the first time in 57 days that London had not been bombed.

That night the 13 coach, 415 tonne 21.50 passenger train was hauled by a 4-6-0 'King' class locomotive: 6028 'King George VI', built in July 1930 at the Great Western Railway's Swindon Works. On board were 900 passengers, many of whom were servicemen. The train was scheduled to arrive in Penzance at 08.20 the next morning.

Three hours after the passenger train departed (at 00.50, now the 4th November), another 'King' class locomotive left Paddington for Penzance. This express train carried newspapers for a limited number of towns and cities on the route.

The passenger train was heavily delayed on its journey, but the newspaper train had made good progress and was running eight minutes early. This meant that the two trains were going to be in the Taunton area at about the same time.

The approach to Taunton comprised four tracks: the Up and Down main lines ('Up' to London, 'Down' towards Exeter) and the Up and Down relief lines. The four track layout ended at Norton Fitzwarren where the line continued as an Up and Down main line only.

At Norton Fitzwarren the end of the Down relief line was protected by signals and a set of trap points: any vehicle on the relief line that was heading towards the main line when it should not would be diverted off the tracks. When the signals were at 'stop' and the trap points were set to divert trains off the track, three explosive charges (known as detonators) were automatically placed on the track at 175 metres before the trap points. When a train ran over them they would explode and provide an audible warning to the driver who would then apply the brakes.

When the passenger train approached Taunton it was routed into the Relief line platform. This was normal practice, as it allowed trains that were not stopping at Taunton to pass through. Shortly after the train had stopped, the driver, Percy Stacey, had checked the signals. There were two signals that could apply to his train: one showing that it was to be routed on to the main line and another showing it would be routed along the relief line. Driver Stacey had worked this train several times before and had always been routed along the main line. When he checked the signals he noted that the signal for the main line had been cleared for his train.

At the same time, signaller Henry James Wadham in the West Station signal box at Taunton (just across the track from where the locomotive had stopped) had been told that the express newspaper train was running 8 minutes ahead of time. Signaller Wadham decided to route the newspaper train on the main line and send the passenger train along the relief line.

About 10 minutes later, at 03.44 the passenger train departed. As the train moved off driver Stacey noted a green signal, which he assumed was the one he'd seen earlier and meant his train was going on to the main line. He increased speed and was soon travelling at about 40-45 mph.

About a minute later, the newspaper train passed through Taunton Platform 5 (today's Platform 3) at about 50-55 mph.

On board the passenger train, driver Stacey was looking out for signals. On the main line from Taunton through to Norton Fitzwarren the signals were on the right hand side of the track. This was not normal practice on the Great Western – signals were normally on the left hand side. Because he believed that he was on the main line, driver Stacey was looking for signals on his side of the locomotive, rather than those for the relief line which were on the left. The signals Stacey saw were all green (as the route was cleared for the newspaper train) and so nothing alerted him to the imminent danger – his train was running out of track.

As the train approached Norton Fitzwarren station, driver Stacey leaned out of his cab so that he could better see the signals ahead at Victory Crossing. Just as he did this the newspaper train was almost alongside Stacey's. Seeing this train, and the platform on his side of the train (if he was on the main line it would have been on the fireman's side) he realised that he was on the relief line, not the main line. He immediately shut off steam and applied the brakes, but at 40 mph and with 415 tonnes behind him it was already too late. The train continued on over the detonators (two of the three exploded), past the signals showing 'stop' aspects and derailed at the trap points protecting the main line.

Signaller William John Coles at Norton Fitzwarren expected the passenger train to draw up slowly and stop just outside his signal box. The two signals ahead, protecting entry to the main line, were both set at 'stop' and the three detonators were in place on the track. He was horrified to see the passenger train pass his signal box at high speed, but there was nothing he could do.



The accident scene

The locomotive and tender were diverted off the tracks and travelled along across the ground, coming to rest on its side 40 metres beyond the last rail of the trap points.

The momentum of the train carried the first two coaches past the locomotive (to its right) coming to rest roughly parallel to each other and diagonally across the Up and Down lines. The third coach was telescoped against the locomotive tender, and the fourth was thrown out to the right. The fifth coach was telescoped for about half its length into the third and the sixth coach was derailed and damaged at the leading end.

The rest of the train remained on the track and sustained little damage. Of the 900 passengers on board 27 were killed and 56 seriously injured.

The locomotive fireman, Walter Seabridge, had been trapped and buried under tonnes of coal. Driver Stacey was able to scramble out of the locomotive and walked forward towards Victory signal box to tell the signaller there to protect the crash site from trains approaching on the Up line.

Signaller Coles at Norton Fitzwarren immediately sent an 'Obstruction: danger' message to the signal boxes at Victory and Silk Mill to make sure the line was protected against other trains entering and colliding with the crashed train.

After the crash, there was no panic. Passengers, mostly servicemen, helped the injured from the wreckage. Many said that they thought the train had been bombed, so violent was the crash. The coaches were of a modern design, steel underframes and steel-clad wooden-framed bodies. The wooden frames splintered on impact, particularly the third and fifth coaches which had collapsed ('telescoped') for part of their length.

The landlord and landlady of the Railway Inn (Fred S V Bailey and his wife Edith), were woken by people banging on their door calling for help. Edith organised a human chain across the railway to get injured passengers safety across to the Inn. The Baileys gave all their sheets to be used as makeshift bandages. Fred's mother made tea for the injured and helped bandage the wounded, as did their son (Frederick George, 19). He had won a St John's Ambulance award in the Boys' Brigade, but probably never expected to have to apply his skills on such a scale.

Until ambulances arrived, makeshift stretchers were made from wrecked carriage seats and doors. Injured passengers were taken to the Railway Inn and placed in the skittle alley until they could be moved to Taunton Hospital. Minor injuries were attended to in the village hall. Women from the village worked through the early hours to provide tea for the rescuers.

One railwayman described how an 11 year old boy insisted on going back to the train to get the family luggage after he had been carried out from a wrecked coach.



