

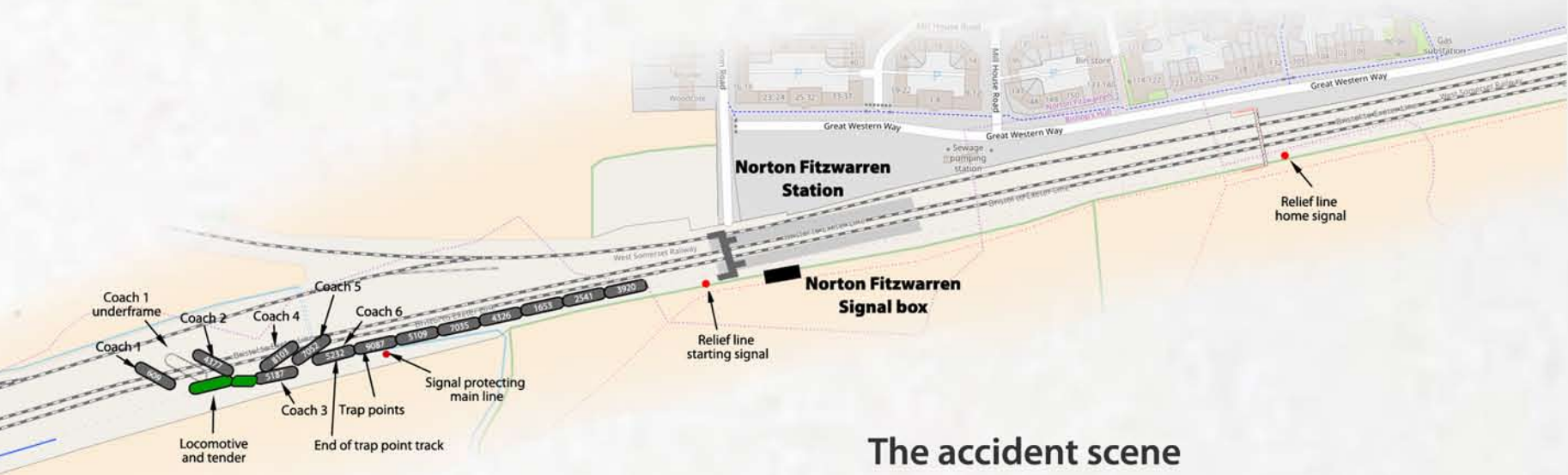
1940 RAILWAY DISASTER

NORTON FITZWARREN

Reporting

The night after the accident, the Nazi propagandist broadcaster William Joyce (known as Lord Haw-Haw) broadcast to Britain claiming that a German bomb was responsible for the accident. He also claimed that the train was a ‘troop train’. This was also untrue as it was a scheduled passenger train, rather than a special troop train – although most of the passengers were servicemen.

The accident was widely reported across the country, with the story making the front page newspapers in most towns and cities. There does not appear to have been any attempt to restrict reporting of the accident.



The accident scene

The inquest and public inquiry

A coroner’s inquest is held when the cause of death (or deaths) is unknown, or when violent or ‘unnatural’ deaths occur. In these cases coroners must investigate to find out, for the benefit of bereaved people and for official records, who has died and how, when, and where they died. It is not part of their remit to find out why the person died.

The inquest was opened by the West Somerset Coroner (Colonel Geoffrey P Clarke) on Tuesday 5th November at Shire Hall in Taunton and adjourned until Tuesday 19th November. The jury foreman was Mr GW Small. For the inquest the GWR built a model, 2.5 metres long, showing the track layout and signalling at Norton Fitzwarren. The jury also visited the crash site and heard from many witnesses, including the signallers and driver Stacey. The GWR admitted liability at an early stage.

The pathologist, Dr Godfrey Carter told the jury that the victims had suffered multiple injuries. In his opinion, death would have been instantaneous in many cases. In other cases, victims would have been unconscious before death.

As part of the inquest the GWR tested the signalling equipment and the Taunton District Signalling & Telegraph Superintendent, Arthur William Burt (of Taunton), explained that this was all found to be working correctly. He also confirmed that two of the three detonators on the Relief line had exploded correctly. During the inquest the GWR acknowledged that the Automatic Train Control system had been unreliable because of wartime cutbacks on maintenance and crews frequently received ‘false’ warnings (i.e. a siren sounded even though the signals were showing the line was clear).

The inquest concluded on Tuesday the 19th November. In his final address to the jury the Coroner said “The engine driver had a difficult journey all the way from London owing to the bad weather, the mist and the blackout. I think he definitely made an error. Do you think there is some excuse for the error, or do you think he has been grossly negligent? If you have any doubt in your minds, you should obviously resolve it in his favour.” The Coroner commented that “if only someone had said to the driver at Taunton ‘You are on the Relief road tonight’, this accident might never have happened.”

The jury of nine men unanimously agreed that Driver Stacey had made an error of judgement, but that it was certainly not criminal. The jury seemed to take note of the Coroner’s earlier comment as the foreman said to the Coroner “It appears to the jury that some arrangement of communication should be made to the driver of any train entering this relief line contrary to the usual procedure.” The response to this from the GWR and the Railway Inspectorate was ‘that’s what the signals are for’!

A Board of Trade inquiry was opened on Friday 8th November in Exeter. The Board of Trade had the right to investigate serious railway accidents. Their powers included the right to interview railway employees and for them to produce all forms of documents to determine the cause of an accident. Findings from the inquiries were presented to Parliament. The Norton Fitzwarren inquiry was conducted by the Chief Inspecting Officer of the Railway Inspectorate, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alan Mount. Lieutenant-Colonel Mount’s report was released on Friday the 27th December.

His conclusion was:

“The accident was not due to enemy action or sabotage; nor were the permanent way (track), works, or signalling equipment concerned in any way. The sole cause was an unaccountable lapse on the part of driver P W Stacey, who is an experienced man... with an excellent record and 40 years’ service. He mistook the line on which he was running, and while disregarding the Relief line signals, he was observing those for the Main line, which were all clear for the newspaper train. He frankly admitted his responsibility, but his account of what happened, given in good faith, appears to have been affected by his experiences.”

“I am forced to the conclusion that his memory of the circumstances which led to his initial mistake on starting from Taunton was, in fact, unreliable, and that this error must have been the outcome of a failure to concentrate.”

“We find that the engine driver has been guilty of an error of judgement... It was certainly not criminal, especially in view of the abnormal weather and other conditions.”

Jury of the Coroner’s Innquest

People killed

NAME	AGE	KNOWN FACTS
Ronald Butcher	24	Of 19 Park Grove, Levenshulme. Ronald was an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Navy. Son of Charles Harold and Esther Bramwell Butcher, of Levenshulme, Manchester. B.A. (Oxon.). Scholar of Brasenose College. Buried in Plymouth (Weston Mill) cemetery.
Dennis Charles Hockley	40	Of 58 Mount Street Gardens, Devonport. Chief Stoker, Royal Navy. Originally from Aberdeen. Son of Charles and Emma Hockley, husband of Audrey Emma Hockley. Buried in Plymouth (Weston Mill) cemetery.
Sidney Simon Balbes	18	Of 114 Laureston Road, South Hackney, London E9. Hairdresser.
Alfred Douglas Loberg	21	Of 91 Downham Way, Bromley, Kent. Press tool maker. Alfred was going to Cornwall to visit his mother who had been evacuated there.
Valetort Roosevelt Ball	39	Of 33 Broadmead, Bellingham, Catford, London. Metropolitan Police officer (warrant number 118452), joined on 3 June 1929. Husband of Edith Ball. Valetort and two other Metropolitan Police officers were going to Cornwall to visit their wives, who had been evacuated there. Valetort’s wife was living at Lower Bejowan Farm, St Columb Minor.
James William Rivett	45	12 Tudor Road, Highams Park, Essex. Metropolitan Police officer (warrant number 110890), joined on 25 Oct 1920. Husband of Nellie Grace Rivett.
William John Lory	34	Of 38a Hazeldon Road, Brockley, London SE4. Metropolitan Police officer (warrant number 116650), joined on 8 August 1927. Husband of Gladys Edith Lory.
Frank Ralph Couper	30	Of Speedwell Road, St George, Bristol. Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy. Husband of Ethel Kathleen Couper, of Brislington, Bristol. Frank was a member of the St Ambrose Company of the Church Lads’ Brigade, transferring to the St James Sea Cadets when he received his commissioned rank. Here he developed his interest in seamanship and became a physical training instructor. Later he returned to St Ambrose to command the group. Buried in Bristol (Greenbank) cemetery.
Ernest Frederick Andrews	54	Of Kingsclere, Hurst, Reading. Chief Petty Officer, Royal Navy. Son of Henry and May Andrews, husband of Grace Lillian Edith Andrews, of Hurst. Buried in Hurst St Nicholas Churchyard, Berkshire.
Douglas Allenby Rose	23	Of 58 Bathurst Street, Swansea. Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy. Son of Charles Edmund and Teresa Rose, of Swansea. Buried in Sketty (Bethel) Welsh Congregational chapelyard, Glamorganshire.
Charles William Robinson	47	Leading Seaman, HMS Drake, Royal Navy. Son of Joseph and Caroline Robinson, husband of Edith Agnes Robinson, of Wembley, Middlesex. Buried in Plymouth (Weston Mill) cemetery.
Archibald Stewart Lewis	50	Of 6a Sinclair Gardens, London W14. Variety artiste. Husband of below.
Louise Lewis	54	Of 6a Sinclair Gardens, London W14. Had artificial left foot. Wife of above.
Dr John Gilchrist Coltart	43	Of ‘Tolgulla’, 5 Shortlands Road, Bromley, Kent. Senior doctor at Beckenham hospital. Husband of below.
Phylis Dora Coltart	39	Of ‘Tolgulla’, 5 Shortlands Road, Bromley, Kent. Wife of above. They were on their way to visit one of their two children who had been evacuated to the West Country.
John Edward Haseldine	23	Of 79 Oxford Street, Totterdown, Bristol. Electrical Artificer 4th Class, HMS Defiance, Royal Navy. Son of John and Elizabeth Ann Haseldine, of Totterdown, Bristol. Cremated at Bristol Arnos Vale crematorium.
William Henry Forward	20	Of 5 Hopps Road, Kingwood, Bristol. Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy. Son of Harry and Elizabeth Forward, of Kingwood. Buried in Kingwood (Holy Trinity) churchyard.
Cyril Jack Weatherhead	34	Of 2 Greenhill Street, Stratford-on-Avon. Petty Officer Motor Mechanic, HMS Drake, Royal Navy. Son of Walter Arthur and Lily Weatherhead, of Stratford-on-Avon, husband of Caroline Elizabeth Weatherhead, of Stratford-on-Avon. Buried in Stratford-upon-Avon churchyard.
Frederick Walter Brewer	45	Of 10 Hampton Place, Brighton. Professional name for F Elgar, show manager for Mr Maurice Winnick & his orchestra (performing at the Palace Theatre, Plymouth). Married to Irene Marie Josephine Brewer with 11 year old son.
Walter Seabridge	39	Of 55 Hodden Drive, Perivale, Middlesex. GWR locomotive fireman Husband of Marie Louise Seabridge.
Edward Stinson	22	Chesterfield Road, St Andrews, Bristol, writer, HMS Raleigh, Royal Navy. Son of George Horace and Amy Ellen Stinson, of Bristol. Buried in Bristol Canford cemetery.
Gordon Kerr Haining	27	Stoker 2 nd class, HMS Drake, Royal Navy. Son of Peter and Blanch Kerr Haining, of Castle Douglas. Buried in Haugh of Urr churchyard, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland.
Maud Elsie Florence Wills	20	Of White Lodge Hotel, Abbey Road, Torquay, insurance clerk. Maud had been on a trip to London to visit her fiancé. She was the daughter of Wilfred Percy Wills, a civil servant, of Hales Road, Cheltenham.
Charles Henry James	55	Of 84 Saxon Drive, Acton, London W3. GWR engineman (off duty), Old Oak Common. One of the last three bodies to be recovered on the evening of Tuesday 6 th November.
Charles Albert Davis	23	Of 39 Gypsy Lane, Headington, Oxford. Leading Supply Assistant, HMS Imogen, Royal Navy. Son of George Ernest and Letitia Elizabeth Davis, of Headington, Oxford. One of the last three bodies to be recovered on the evening of Tuesday 6 th November. Buried in Oxford Rose Hill cemetery.
John William Heath	24	Ordinary Seaman, HMS Drake, Royal Navy. One of the last three bodies to be recovered on the evening of Tuesday 6 th November. Buried in Bristol (Greenbank) cemetery.
Donald Charles Smith	23	Of Church Road, Northolt, Middlesex. Corporal, Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry. Son of Charles Torble Smith and Ella Smith, of Northolt. Died in Taunton Hospital on November 8 th . Buried at Northolt St Mary’s churchyard.