



Railway fatality at Wilstrop

On Monday 16th August 1875 the train left Harrogate station at 12.15 on route to York.

It was a short one consisting of half a dozen carriages proceeded safely as far as Hammerton, at which station speed was slackened in order for the pilot to get off at Skip Bridge, which spans the river Nidd between Hammerton and Marston stations.

A new bridge was being erected at this spot and during the progress of the works the traffic was worked on the up line only, between Wilstrop siding and Hammerton station.

On reaching the bridge the train was not going at a greater rate than six or eight miles per hour, and the engine, van and adjoining carriage safely passed over the single line and up to the points just

beyond the siding. Not so the three remaining carriages which were turned by the points on to the down line.

The train going so slowly, and the couplers not breaking, the last carriage was violently overturned and fell onto the edge of the platform. The driver promptly stopped the train before the carriage had dragged many yards.

The overturned vehicle was a composite one, with first and second class compartments, in one of which were three ladies: Miss Whittaker, of Breekamore, Ripon; Miss Annie Whyte, who had been visiting Miss Whittaker; and Miss Mary Harrison, of Arlington House, Knaresborough.

Assistance was speedily rendered by the workmen at the bridge, which is but a few hundred yards distant, and on the carriage being removed, Miss Whittaker was found laid in a state of unconsciousness. She was rescued from the overturned carriage in about seven minutes after the occurrence of the accident, and in Mr Hill, surgeon, of Hammerton, was speedily on the spot. Every assistance was rendered the lady, who was shortly afterwards removed to Wilstrop Hall, where Mr Harrison afforded every facility which the occasion required.

The three carriages forming the fore part of the train were detached to York, whence a break down gang was promptly despatched.

Miss Whittaker died at Wilstrop Hall, on Tuesday evening, about ten o` clock, having never recovered consciousness.

The inquest was opened by Mr J P Wood, coroner, on Thursday 19th August at Wilstrop Hall, the residence of Mr John Harrison as to the death of Fanny Elizabeth Whitaker.

Mr Alfred Hill surgeon at Green Hammerton stated that in his opinion the deceased died of a fracture of the base of the skull and compression caused by effusion of blood and serum on the brain. He believed the the fracture was likely to be caused by the deceased being pitched out of the railway carriage and falling on the ground. There had been no post mortem examination, the injury to the head being clearly the cause of death. She had also been attended by several other medical men.

Following evidence from numerous other witnesses the coroner adjourned the inquest until the following Thursday to allow further investigation into the accident.

The inquest resumed the following Thursday with William Johnson, of Starbeck, district inspector of permanent way for the North Eastern Railway. He advised that the line between Hammerton and Marston was under his charge and the part of it at Wilstrop siding and the points were in excellent order on the 16th August, the day of the accident.

The rails had been put in about three weeks before the day of the accident and had been used regularly from the 9th till the 16th. The line and points had been reinspected on the 12th and 13th August and were found to be in good order.

On the morning following the accident he had examined the rails and found a check rail had been taken away from the near the crossing of a "shunt point" by the accident.

He believed the trailing of the carriage had removed the rail. The wheel of the carriage appears to have caught the end of the rail, and torn it off, breaking the chairs at the same time. The carriage

would not be going in a straight direction, but crossways, and two wheels must have been on one set of rails, and two on the other.

He said that “ he could not conceive any other way in which the accident could have happened, except by some person opening the points by pulling the lever. The facing points at this place are not providing by a locking bar.

Mr Dale also giving evidence advised that his district extends to over one hundred miles, and all the locking bars are those in permanent use and not at temporary crossings. He did not know of a locking bar being put down at a temporary crossing by the company, nor did he ever hear of the Board of Trade requiring it.

However the advantage of a locking bar was that it prevents the signalman moving the points by touching the the lever whilst the train is on the points.

Without a locking bar the points could not be moved unless the signalman put his home signal at danger. To do that he would have to push the lever. After the home signal had been put at danger it is impossible for the points to have been opened without the signalman or some other person pulling the lever to open them.

Robert Collinson the signalman reported “ I was signalman at Wilstrop siding at the time of the accident. I lowered the signals to “All right” on the approach of the train in question from Harrogate. As she passed my distance signal I put it to danger. Whether the whole of the train got clearly by the home signal I cannot say. I also placed the signal to danger by shoving over the lever. Immediately, as I put the lever over to danger the point lever flew over and caught my trousers and tore them with an inch of brass plate which has the number and word points on it. As the engine passed me I

gave the wave of the hand as an “all right signal.” That was when the pilot got off the engine. I then pushed over the home signal, and the point lever flew over, as I have stated. When the point lever flew over I immediately looked at the train and saw it going in all directions nealy, except the right one, as far as I can see. I don’t know that I have anything more to say except that I will answer any questions. I assisted all I could to get the carraige up after it overturned.”

The coroner summarised the case and instructed the jury the legal bearing against the signalman and that if the death of the deceased had resulted from his gross carelessness in the discharge of his duties it was their duty to return a verdict of manslaughter, and, if otherwise, an open verdict. The coroner left it to the jury to decide on their verdict.

After a consultation for a quarter of an hour Mr Harrison the forman of the jury announced that the jury were of the opinion that there had been great neglect of duty on the part of Robert Collinson, the signalman, and therefore returned a verdict of manslaughter against him. They also strongly recommended that there should be locking bars placed in connection with the points at Wilstrop siding, which might be the means of preventing any further accident.

On hearing the verdict of the jury, Collinson, who is a young man about twenty one years of age, was greatly affected. He was the duly charged with the manslaughter of Fanny Elizabeth Whitaker and taken into custody by Mr Supt. Kane. Bail however, was offered. Collinson himself in £80 and two sureeties of £40 each.

The trial at York castle on Friday March 17th 1876 heard the evidence and in the judges summing up referred particularly to the

rule which forbade the prisoner to touch the levers until a train had passed, and to the importance of the statement made by the stoker, who saw the prisoner move a lever.

The Jury, after an absence of an hour, returned a verdict of Not Guilty and the prisoner was discharged.



The photograph above is the memorial to Fanny Elizabeth Whittaker in Ripon Cathedral.

Information from the British Newspaper Archives.

Paul Evans 12th May 2015

