

1890 RAILWAY DISASTER

NORTON FITZWARREN

The aftermath

Dr Crompton, a German surgeon returning from Cape Town, attended the injured. Three doctors from Taunton (Samuel Farrant, A D Wilcocks and George H How) were also at the scene.

A local undertaker enshrouded the bodies and placed them in coffins. These were not screwed down as the bodies needed to be identified.

“I saw a great heap of engines and carriages piled one on top of the other. People were crying, groaning and shouting for help. It was a most heartrending and sickening scene.”

Police sergeant Hayes, Taunton Constabulary

Shortly after the accident the signaller, George Rice, was suspended from duty. At 13.00 on Tuesday 11th November Rice was arrested by PC Redwood of the Taunton Constabulary. On the day after the accident he was brought before Mr H J Badcock, magistrate, and charged with neglecting his duty as a pointsman. He was released on bail of £50 (about £4,000 today) and ordered to return before the magistrate on Saturday 15th November. Bail was paid by two gentlemen from Taunton, William Chapman and Charles Goodland, who each paid £25.

The damaged locomotive was cleared from the line just before midnight on Weds 12th.

Large crowds from Taunton and surrounding areas visited the scene on the days after the accident. This included a photographer, whose images were used by the London Illustrated News to create the engravings used with their news story.

Members of the crowds hunted for souvenirs of the accident, picking up playing cards that were being used by the men in the first compartment. At one point eight women were seen picking through the wreckage, in the hunt for 'souvenirs'. The Taunton Courier noted on the 19th November that this group were "...prodding here and there with their umbrellas, and overturning splinters and cushions. Suddenly one of them would find a piece of bloodstained piece of wood, and with a cry of delight would declaim her success. Immediately she was surrounded by her companions, who would carefully examine the 'relic' and then return it to the finder. She would eye it with delight and after her morbid taste had been appeased by the inspection she would carefully deposit it in her handkerchief and proceed with her search for further mementos. The conduct of the crowds who surrounded the coach house of the Norton Refreshment Rooms during the day was also very disgraceful, and their morbid eagerness to get a glimpse of the dead bodies within was painful to witness. The way in which the spectators swarmed around the stretchers on which the wounded were being carried was a disgrace to a civilised country."

When the survivors arrived at Paddington, the public had to be kept behind barricades. The survivors on this train included a Dr Crompton who told the GWR that he had lost a considerable amount of gold at the accident scene. He had been carrying it in his pockets. He estimated the value at £54/- (approx. £4,500 today).

Other passengers managed to reclaim some of their property:

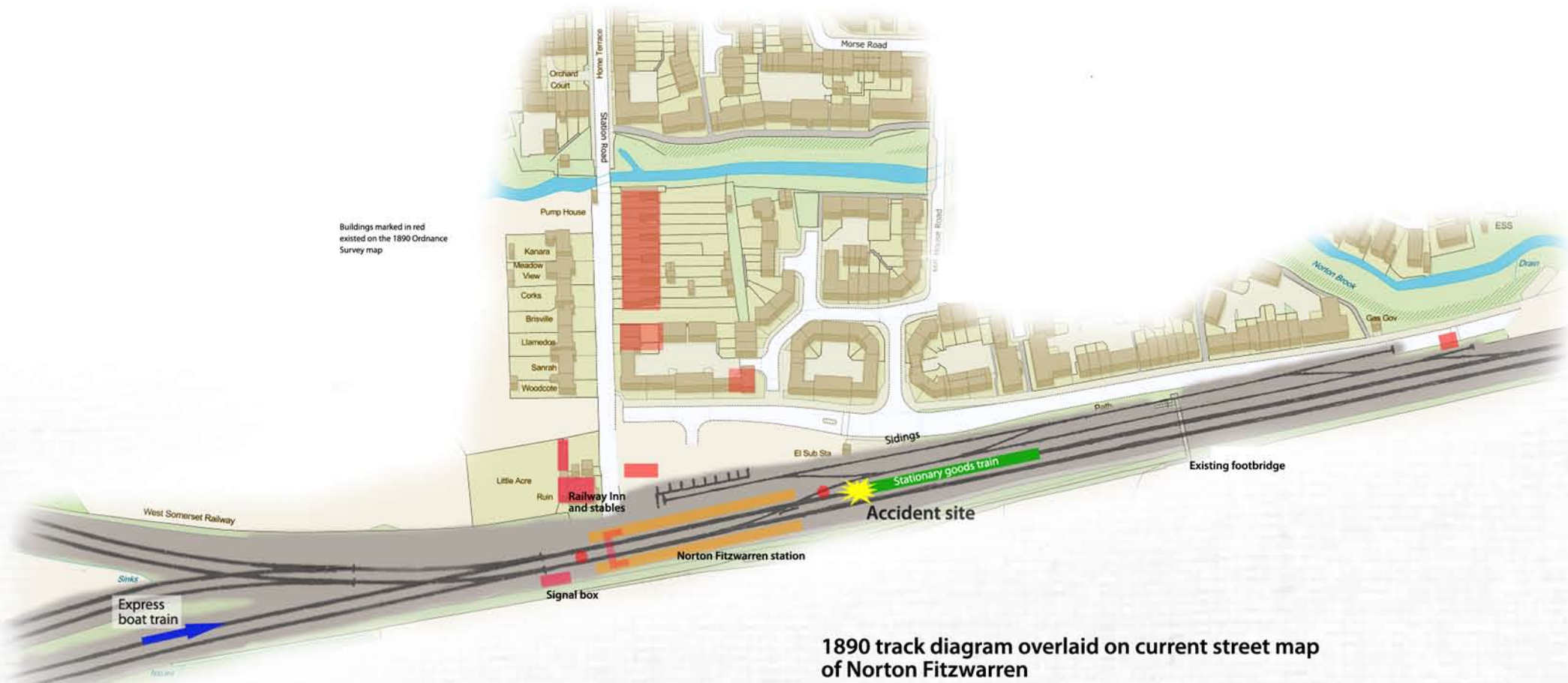
- A stuffed African goat
- Gold nuggets
- A basket containing ostrich eggs (remarkably undamaged)

Others claimed for losses, including:

- Several animal skins that had been made into ornaments, value of £15/-
- A number of boots, bags, baskets, jackets, caps and 25 hats

People killed

NAME	AGE	KNOWN FACTS
John Bradley	53	Of Dalton-in-Furness, iron miner. Married to Elizabeth. Two children: Elizabeth D and William. Buried on Saturday 15 November 1890 at Dalton cemetery in the Dissenters ground.
Arthur Henry Carroll	30	Of 75 St Andrew's Road, Southsea. Arthur was returning from Cape Colony after 11 months. Arthur previously lived at 182 Westgate Road in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Arthur was a commercial traveller (salesman), having worked previously for a firm of tea and coffee merchants. He had gone to South Africa as a representative of the Lever Brothers' Sunlight Soap.
Joseph Reed	30	Of Seaton Burn, near Long Benton, Northumberland. He had been living in Boksburgh, South Africa for 3 years. Joseph was a miner. Unmarried. Buried on Saturday 15 November in Gosforth.
Louis Cohen	26	Of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Cohen was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Bristol on Sunday 16th November.
Max Heimann	50	Of Bloemfontein, South Africa. Diamond merchant. Unmarried. He had travelled in a first class cabin from South Africa. He was reported as being well dressed - black clothes and a fashionable grey cape Ulster (a daytime overcoat with a cape and sleeves). Body taken to London for burial.
Robert Walker	35	Of Hoyland Common near Barnsley, Yorkshire. Robert was a contractor. Married to Jane. Buried on 15 November 1890 in Hoyland Common cemetery.
Thomas Smith	58	Of 38 Cobden Street, Dalton-in-Furness. Incorrectly called Henry Smith in contemporary reports. Thomas was an iron ore miner. Married to Mary. Buried on Saturday 15 November 1890 at Dalton cemetery.
Matthew Benson	50	Of Ulverston Road, Dalton-in-Furness. Iron miner. Married to Lucy. Three children: Thomas, Mary E and Lucy A. Buried on Saturday 15 November 1890 at Dalton cemetery.
John Edward Morris	38	Of Six Mile Bridge, Wallsend-on-Tyne. Unmarried. Returning from 2 years working as a contractor in the Transvaal (Johannesburg and Boksburgh), South Africa, mining. Previously worked at Dudley colliery in Northumberland. Married with 3 children. The family received £2250 (£185,000) damages from the GWR. Buried on Friday 14 November in Benton churchyard.
Titus Mbongwe	22	Son of Wesleyan minister in Horton, Grahamstown, South Africa. Titus had been offered a scholarship at Hampton University in Virginia, USA. The scholarship was being paid for by Orpheus Myron McAdoo, an African-American singer and minstrel show impresario. He toured extensively in Britain, South Africa and Australia, first with Frederick Loudin's Jubilee Singers and then with his own minstrel companies. Titus had heard the Jubilee Singers when he was a clerk in Kimberley and had made an impression on McAdoo as an exceptionally intelligent young man. Titus was buried in St Mary's cemetery, Taunton. Titus was decapitated in the accident. His body was conveyed in an open glass-panelled car supplied by Mr A Lewis of Fore Street, Taunton. A great many mourners were present, including a deputation from the GWR.



The investigations

After the accident three separate investigations began: the coroner's inquest into the deaths, the criminal case against Rice the signaller and the Board of Trade inquiry.

The inquest into the deaths began on Thursday the 13th November, led by the Deputy Coroner for the south-western division of Somerset, Dr Cordwint. The Great Western Railway had several of its senior managers in attendance, including J E Bowen (solicitor for the GWR), J N Burlinson (superintendent of the line), J Campfield (divisional superintendent).

After being sworn in, the jury viewed the bodies at the Refreshment Rooms and then went to inspect the scene of the accident and the signal box.

As relatives arrived to identify the bodies, burial orders were signed by the coroner. The first to be moved were Morris and Reed.

The Board of Trade enquiry was led by Colonel Frederick Henry Rich. Rich was a British soldier, who served with the Royal Engineers and was the Chief Inspecting Officer of the Railway Inspectorate between 1885 and 1889. He investigated many of the major railway accidents in the late 19th century.

The inquiry ruled that a contributory factor was the premature change of the goods train's headlamp from red to green; it was possible that the driver of the boat train would have noticed a red lamp ahead of him in time to apply his brakes.

Another contributory factor was the failure of the guard of the goods train to notify the signalman of the presence of his train on the main line, as required by the rules of the company.

Several newspapers recorded comments from the public that the railway lines were not able to cope with the volume of traffic and that slow goods trains frequently had to be shunted on to the adjoining line to allow express trains to pass.

Following the inquest twelve refuge sidings were built between Exeter and Weston-super-Mare. A relief siding on the down side of the line was installed at Norton Fitzwarren in about 1904.

On 20 November one newspaper reported that Rice was seriously unwell and had become deaf. By 14 February 1891 the Great Western Railway had paid out £10,795 (about £890,000 today) in compensation to the families of the dead and to those injured in the accident.

Rice was tried at the Taunton Assizes with having caused the accident. The judge, Mr Justice Grantham, acquitted him and in his summing up said that "persons besides Rice were to blame". He warned the GWR that if they did not cease the practice of shunting goods trains on to main lines then they would be compelled to do so by the courts. The jury also expressed the view that "no man should be placed in a signalbox all night alone, especially a man over sixty years of age".

