

The 1848 Train Crash at Shrivenham Station

On 10 May 1848, Constable George Pargetter, on duty as signalman at Shrivenham Station, left his post at around 3.17pm for a toilet break at the nearby Victoria Tavern. He had left the signals on ‘*all clear*’, without having advised railway staff working at the station that the mid-day express from Exeter to Paddington which should have already passed through, was running nearly half an hour late.

Daniel Gooch, Brunel’s chief engineer had only recently travelled the whole length of the line to check that all signals were clearly visible from a good distance, re-siting those he deemed not. Shrivenham’s signal was fine and could be clearly seen from Acorn Bridge, 1½ miles to the west. In that distance, any train of the time could have been brought to a halt before the station, if the signals had been against it.

“Bob” Roscoe, a highly-regarded train driver who later received the honour of driving the Royal Train for Queen Victoria, was driving *Sultan*, an ‘Iron Duke’ Class engine with nearly 200 passengers on board, to Paddington that day. The

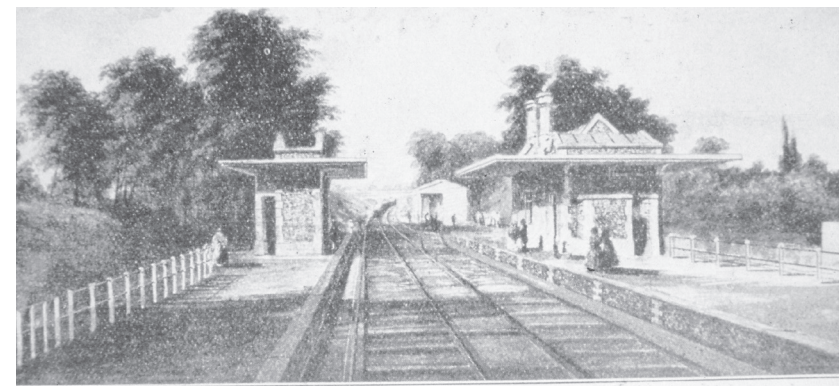


A replica of an ‘Iron Duke’ Class engine. (Photograph courtesy of *transport-illustrated.blogspot.com*)

train was twenty-three minutes overdue, having left Exeter late and losing traction in Box Tunnel which caused it further delay. His instructions were that he was not to make up lost time, so as the train crossed Acorn Bridge, he was at his usual speed for this stretch, around 55mph.

Unaware that the train had not yet passed, two of the stations porters, James Weybury and William Willoughby, were working on the line. Willoughby, a local jack-of-all-trades was not a regular porter but had been standing in for the past three months as a replacement for porter Copley, a friend, who was supposedly ill. The two porters had been assigned the task of unloading a truck of merchandise which was bound for Highworth. They were in the process of doing this, an empty horse-box and a cattle truck having just been manoeuvred out of the way and onto the main line, when the approaching train was heard.

Bob Roscoe, the driver of Sultan between 1847 and 1872.
(*Photograph courtesy of Lisa Robinson, Bob Roscoe's great granddaughter*)



Shrevenham Railway Station in 1841.
(*Photograph courtesy of The Les Judd Collection*)

Bob Roscoe first saw the obstruction from a distance of only 150 yards but decided not to apply his brakes as they would not have prevented the inevitable collision at the speed he was travelling. Instead, relying on the weight of the engine and its velocity, he struck on hitting the horse-box which appeared to disintegrate upon impact, sending large, lethal wooden splinters through the air. One of the wrought iron wheel axles was bent double with the impact and landed in the booking office doorway, hitting Corbett Hudson, the station clerk who was just coming out at the time.

The cattle truck however, offered some resistance to the train by spinning round and getting one corner jammed against the platform whilst another struck first the luggage van, immediately behind the tender, before crushing nearly all the carriages behind.

Despite the effect of the collision, it did not stop the train which came to a halt nearly half a mile further on from the station. Upon impact, nearly 30 passengers from a second class carriage, positioned third from the engine, had been either severely wounded or thrown out onto the track. By the time the engine returned, four of the passengers had died with a further three dying soon after. Other injuries included concussion, fractures, lacerations and one amputation. At the scene, station staff had to restrain a looter who was caught trying to steal a gold watch and chain from the body of a dead clergyman lying there. Eight days later, a further passenger died from the injuries he sustained in the accident.

Villagers from Shrevenham arrived on the scene shortly after and helped move the injured into the Victoria Tavern where they lodged for a few days. The more seriously wounded passengers were later moved to Swindon to receive medical attention and

the dead were placed in a stable at the rear of the building.

On 20 May, *The Times* reported that at the inquest held into the death of Captain Blair R.N., the coroner's jury unanimously found porters Weybury and Willoughby guilty of manslaughter, "*leaving the policeman Pargetter, as far as they were concerned, to be dealt with by his employers.*"

Regarding Willoughby, Corbett Hudson confirmed that despite the temporary nature of Willoughby's position, he had previously performed his duties very well but had been perfectly acquainted with his duties as a porter and should have given notice to the signalman before putting anything on the main line.

The jury at a court held later that year, overturned his manslaughter charge. They heard that the signalman, who had known that the train was late, failed to alert the porters that it was due. The two porters, who had only come back from lunch three minutes before the accident, believed the train had already gone and so continued with their work, unaware of the fatal obstruction they were causing.

Bibliography

The following works were consulted in the preparation of this supplement and the author is indebted to the writers and publishers named:

Brunel's Blind Spot, (extract supplied by Lisa Robinson, great granddaughter of Bob Roscoe.

Great Western Railway Magazine and Temperance Union Record, (extract supplied by Lisa Robinson, great granddaughter of Bob Roscoe.

Reckless, Cool and Genial, (extract supplied by Lisa Robinson, great granddaughter of Bob Roscoe.

The Annual Register, 1848.

The Times, 20 May 1848.

The Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 11 May 1848.

THE 1868 SHRIVENHAM ACCIDENT

The railway policeman, now called signalmen, had to relieve themselves occasionally whilst on duty, and due to the weak signalling system this sometimes led to disasters. Constable Fargetter was on duty at Shrivenham on 10th May 1868, with a beam that covered the entire station layout from the sidings east of the little flint-and-stone station building. He had two disc-and-crossbar signals to work. The down signal was on the level crossing, while the up line one was 50 yards from the crossing, towards the station. Great Western expresses were then at the peak of their fame, running at speeds of 60 mph, and Daniel Gooch, the locomotive engineer, had toured the line to ensure that all signals were visible at a good distance. Shrivenham's up signal could be seen from Acorn bridge over the road and canal, 1½ miles to the west.

At 3 pm Fargetter closed the level-crossing gates against the lane ready for the noon express from Exeter due past Shrivenham at 3-3 pm. He had a clear view along the tracks, east and west. All was clear and in order, the discs were turned on (that is, clear), and his caution board turned edgewise, almost invisible to drivers. He leaned back against the gate to wait. Without any electric telegraph to advise him he was unaware that the express was running late.

At 3-5 pm Porter Weybury emerged from the Victoria, close to the crossing, waved to the top-hatted policeman, and strolled to the station. Kent's horse and cart from Highworth came slowly at the lane from Shrivenham and turned in through the station gates. Fargetter waited with growing impatience for the express - a farmer in his gig had arrived at the gates from Ashbury but Fargetter dared not let him cross the line. When, at 3-17, the down slow train arrived he hurriedly turned the bar signal on behind it and rushed across to the Victoria - not for a beer but for a p.

Mr Corbett Hudson, the station clerk, waved the slow train on its way towards Swindon, and returned to the booking office to sell tickets for the Parliamentary train due down in 20 minutes. Weybury and his assistant Willoughby went into the goods shed to load Kent's cart with some of the contents of a coal wagon. Willoughby was a local jack-of-all-trades who for three months had stood in for the regular porter, Copley, who was supposedly ill but had found some other work and had rented out his railway job to Willoughby, being then considerably in funds, spent a proportion of his wages in the Victoria.

To bring the coal train down for unloading, the porters and Kent's cart first had to push a horsebox and cattle truck out of the goods shed along a siding which led to the main line. Without thinking, they pushed them far enough to foul the line. If Fargetter had been there he must have seen what the men had done - but he was in the Victoria and his Up disc signal remained at Clear.

Driver Bob Roscoe had backed his engine 'Sultan' on to the Exeter shed, and he took the train away 23 minutes late. 'Sultan' was only 6 months old and Bob had driven it since it came fresh from Swindon works. He was told not to make up any time, so he let 'Sultan' cross Acorn Bridge at 55 mph with Shrivenham's Up signal showing as a tiny red dot over the parapet of Bourton Bridge spanned the cutting ahead. Bob had a clear road, and let her run. 'Sultan' shot under the bridge of the station in all her brassy broad-gauge glory. Bob saw the situation 150 yards ahead just as Weybury saw him and ran forward with arms outstretched. Bob sounded a

whistle to get the guard to apply his brake, but did not brake his engine, and struck home hard, relying on his superior speed to smash through the obstruction. 'Sultan' ripped into the side of the cattle-truck and brushed past it, the wrecked truck tearing open the leading 2nd-class carriage. The horsebox was struck near end-on, and seemed to explode. Its wheels flew through the air, the axles bent double, to land in the booking-office doorway just as Corbett Hudson was coming out. Splinters of wood flew like spears, and the truck roof came off like a lid, took off 'Sultan's' chimney, and just missed decapitating Roscoe and his mate before falling onto the tender.

Four people were spilled out onto the track and killed, 14 were badly injured, and the station staff had to forcibly restrain a looter who was removing a gold cross and chain from the corpse of a clergyman.

The dead were lodged in the stables of the Victoria, and several of the injured remained in the inn, seriously ill, where, to quote the foreman of the inquest jury, they were 'nightly serenaded by the raucous company of the tap room', led by the 3-months-sick Porter Copley.

THE 1936 SHRIVENHAM ACCIDENT

In the early hours of 15 January 1936, a heavy coal train of 53 wagons left Swindon for London - approaching Shrivenham, the brake van and the last five wagons broke away and came to a halt. The Shrivenham signalman did not notice that the coal train had passed his incomplete (ie without a tail lamp), and the guard did not realise until several minutes after he had stopped that he was on his own.

Thinking that the line was clear, the Shrivenham signalman accepted the sleeper express from Penzance, which ran into the wagons just west of the station at about 55 mph.

The driver and one passenger were killed, and ten passengers were injured.

Mr Bill Curtis, who was a signalman at Knighton Crossing in 1936, has personal memories of this accident.

SHRIVENHAM STATION

Opened on 17 December 1840, then the only station between Challow (called Faringdon Road) and Hay Lane (near Wootton Bassett).

Closed for passengers on 7 December 1964, and for goods on 4 October 1965. The signalbox closed on 5 June 1966.

The ambulance train sidings were open from April 1944 to December 1949.