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ABERGELE



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## Great train disaster

Last updated: 26 April 2006

**Dr Robert Hume from Ramsgate**, author of *Death by Chance: The Abergele Train Disaster, 1868* (Gwasg Carreg Gwalch) tells us about Britain's first big train accident.



Recent rail accidents have been blamed on inadequate track maintenance, poor communication and human error. But what were the causes of accidents in the early years of the railways when speeds were a fraction of those today, manual signals were operated by station staff and the network was served by numerous privately owned companies each with its own regulations?

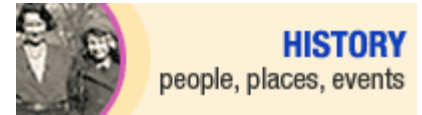
The events that led up to the first major rail disaster at Abergele in 1868 show us how little some things have changed today.

At 7.30am on Thursday August 20 1868 the Irish Mail left Euston station in London on its daily journey to Holyhead. The train had the reputation of being the fastest in the kingdom and transported some of the wealthiest men and women in the country to their estates in Ireland via the Holyhead ferry. It comprised four carriages for first and second class passengers, a post office van and a travelling post office where the mail was sorted on the journey.

At 11.30am the Mail reached Chester, a busy junction where four extra carriages were attached to the front of the train. Many passengers joining here had stayed overnight at the Queen Railway Hotel and had arrived at the station after walking through a special connecting tunnel. As they emerged from the tunnel, most passengers turned left and boarded the newly attached carriages; but some turned right, perhaps to join their friends who had travelled from London. Their decision to turn either right or left was to be hugely significant that day.

About an hour later, as the train was approaching Abergele and ready to climb towards Colwyn Bay, goods trucks were still being shunted on the main line three miles ahead at Llanddulas. They formed part of a daily goods train scheduled to run about 20 minutes ahead of the Irish Mail but with enough time to shunt trucks into the sidings. However, on this particular day there were already wagons on both tracks in the sidings and the goods train's 43 trucks would not fit in without splitting them up.

During the shunting, it was necessary to leave six trucks and a brake van on the main line. Provided the line was protected with signals and the brake firmly applied in the brake van, it



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should have presented no difficulty. But at one point during the operation some trucks were shunted from the sidings against those left on the main line. In an instant all of them began rolling down the incline towards the oncoming Irish Mail. The fact that two of the trucks carried 50 barrels of paraffin was to turn a collision into a catastrophe.

Arthur Thompson, driver of the Irish Mail, had 20 years of experience as an engine driver and had been on the footplate when the Irish Mail made its maiden journey in 1860. But on August 20 1868 circumstances were entirely beyond his control. The track



ahead of him curved away from the sea wall, obscuring the trucks with their deadly paraffin as they rushed towards him. In any case, the shunting crew could not have warned him because there was no telegraph connection between the stations at Abergele and Llanddulas. When he did see the trucks they were almost upon him. He turned off the steam immediately and threw the engine into reverse. But by then it was too late - the trains had collided.

The paraffin exploded, and in an instant the front carriages were enveloped in flames. A column of black smoke spiralled upwards into the hills. Labourers from a nearby quarry ran to the scene and began to form a human chain, passing buckets of water from the sea to the fire. But before long the scene was one of complete confusion - a tangled mass of iron bars and bolts jutting out at peculiar angles and horribly charred bodies.

The victims' possessions scattered along the track evoked a poignant reminder of a divided society. On one side, the possessions of a privileged class - a diamond ring worth 60 guineas, a pair of opera glasses, the gold tops from smelling bottles, dozens of gold watches, one stopped at 12.52 and 23 seconds. On the other side, the possessions of those who served them - a simple blue hairpin, a crochet needle, an ink bottle.

There were no injured passengers. It was either a complete escape or a horrible death. So disfigured were the remains of the 33 bodies brought from the wreckage that identification was impossible in all but three cases and the coffins were simply given numbers. The London & North Western Railway Company paid the funeral expenses of all the victims and arranged for the bodies to be interred in a huge trench. Death proved indeed to be a great leveller: rich and poor were buried side by side.

What caused the disaster? [More...](#)



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## Debating the cause

Last updated: 26 April 2006

Part two of Dr Robert Hume's account of the Abergele Train Disaster in 1868.



What had caused the accident? At first, sabotage was suspected. The coroner who presided over the inquest into the disaster received an anonymous letter, claiming that 'the catastrophe had a great deal to do with Fenianism', and that railway officials along the line to Holyhead were undercover Fenian agents. When they received intelligence that the Irish Mail on August 20 would be conveying none other than the wife and servants of the Duke of Abercorn, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, they decided that the time was ripe to strike a blow against Britain, with the intention of killing the leading government figure in Ireland.

But the letter was quickly dismissed as a hoax and the blame was placed elsewhere. Suspicion fell next on the locomotive driver. Although Arthur Thompson maintained that his train was only going at 28-30mph, other eyewitnesses claimed that it was travelling much faster. George Grundy, a seven-year-old boy, was on holiday nearby with his mother and a school friend. Later in life he became an Oxford professor and wrote 'every detail' he had witnessed in his autobiography:

"I saw what appeared to me to be a short luggage train without an engine coming down a long incline from Llanddulas on the same line as the express, and having watched trains for hours, I knew that something was wrong ... the train was going at full speed, sixty miles an hour. At the moment of impact took place the engine rose like a horse taking a fence and came down on the fourth truck..."

Despite the claims of speeding, there was much public sympathy for the engine driver who was too ill to appear at court and in October died from his injuries.



Attention then turned to the role of the brakemen.

Although they swore that they were shunting safely and according to the company's regulations, the stationmaster's boy claimed that he had witnessed runaway trucks at Llanddulas several times before.

One survivor, the Marquis of Hamilton, was certain that death was instantaneous from inhaling smoke; but Catherine Dicken

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who lived in a cottage by the track told the inquest that she believed the victims could have been saved but were burned to death behind locked doors. She had gone to help and spoken to a lady in the train, urging her to leave. The passenger, not realising the danger she was in, told Mrs Dicken to 'Mind your own business.' A little further along, another lady with a child told her to do the same.

The London & North Western Railway was very anxious to discover the causes of the crash. There was an official inquest, a criminal trial in which the brakemen were cleared of responsibility and a report by the Board of Trade. Alongside this raged a trial by media. Correspondents to The Times put the onus for the accident squarely on the railway company for not doing enough to ensure the safety of its passengers. The Board of Trade reached a similar conclusion, recommending amongst other things that every station be connected to a telegraph system; that inflammable materials should be transported on special trains; and that only one train should be allowed on a block of line at a time. All of these recommendations were eventually implemented, but even in the 19th century cost was an important factor holding up safety measures. The human cost of the 1868 disaster cannot be calculated. The Railway Company's negligence had cut short many lives, including that of Arthur Aylmer, a lad of 18, just about to start at Trinity College, Cambridge; and that of Louisa Syme, a seven-year-old Irish girl, placed by her relatives in the care of one of the passengers at Euston.

Amongst the dead were merchants from Blackburn looking forward to a few days' recuperation by the Lakes of Killarney. They included William and Christopher Parkinson who, by rights, should never have been on the train but they had tipped the driver of the Blackburn to Liverpool train to go faster so as to make the connection at Chester and guarantee their place on the Irish Mail.

Yet, in the wake of the tragedy there also emerged some happier tales and near escapes. An American gentleman, Mr Bayard Clarke, believed to be amongst the dead, wrote to The Times stating "I am still in the land of the living and hope to continue so for some time to come." It turned out that he had not been on the train at all, but having lunch with a friend in Cheltenham.

There was also a Miss Finch returning from Switzerland who had been encouraged by her friends to spend an extra day with them in London instead of boarding the Mail on August 20.

Not least, there were those passengers joining at Chester who unknowingly made the hugely significant decision to turn right rather than left as they came from the connecting tunnel into the station. In so doing they were spared a horrible death in the first of Britain's major railway disasters.

*Dr Robert Hume from Ramsgate.*

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