

The Kildwick Rail Crash of 1875

Appendix 2 – Surely it can't happen again ?

Introduction

With the introduction of the safer block system of track management, and the re-siting of the signal on the approach to Kildwick that was difficult for a driver to see, an accident like the one that happened in 1875 surely couldn't possibly happen again ?

In July 1989, the Craven Herald carried a report on what it called a "Disaster miracle" that had occurred a week earlier at Kildwick crossing¹:

A major disaster was miraculously avoided on Friday morning when a passenger train went over Cross Hills level crossing – while it was still open to cars.

Eye-witnesses said that the driver of the Metro train, en-route from Skipton to Leeds, blasted his horn to alert motorists, and screeched to a halt just past the crossing after narrowly missing a column of cars.

Said witness Mr. Derek Proctor: "I ran out of my office, and as I looked across to the crossing I could see cars. They could have been pulling up rapidly, but it looked like a near miss.

He added that he saw the train driver leap out of his cabin and walk back to the signal box where there were three railway workers. The train continued its journey a few minutes later.

"I couldn't understand why the gates were up – perhaps they were having trouble", said Mr. Proctor.

A British Rail spokesman confirmed that the barriers had not been lowered when the train approached at about 10:20am, but said a preliminary investigation had shown there was no signal malfunction.

"We are keen to find out what happened," he declared, adding that a more detailed investigation would take place.

In March 1990, the driver of the train involved, Albert Lawson, appeared before Skipton Magistrates – and pleaded guilty to the charge of "failing to stop at a red danger signal, thereby causing the safety of persons on the railway to be endangered". The details of the incident, as revealed to the court², turned out to have some remarkable similarities with the events of 1875.

In both cases the signalman in the Cononley box played a significant role; it was claimed that a signal on the approach to Kildwick was difficult for the driver to see; staff at Kildwick were "surprised" by the unexpected arrival of a train; and, following both incidents, the railway authorities brought a court case against the train driver.

What the court was told of the events of July 14th 1989

Driver Albert Lawson came on duty at 4:40am, to drive the Skipton-Leeds-Skipton Metro train. He was an experienced railwayman, 63 years old, and a regular driver on the Leeds-Skipton route.

The regular, timetabled, 10:08am train from Skipton made its first stop at Cononley, and then proceeded on to its next at Steeton and Silsden. However, the signalman at Cononley failed to notify the Kildwick box that the train was on its way and, consequently, the Kildwick signalman did not close the gates at Kildwick crossing to road traffic.

Approaching Kildwick, Lawson failed to respond to a red danger signal and saw that the crossing gates were closed against him when it was already too late to stop. He applied the brakes and sounded the horn, but the train smashed through the gates and came to a halt 80 yards beyond the crossing.

Fortunately there were no vehicles on the crossing, but eye-witnesses on the train reported that collision with a stream of cars was narrowly avoided.

When he arrived in Leeds, Lawson examined the train's maintenance records and discovered that the brakes had been overhauled just a few days previously. He reported the incident and the train was taken out of service.

Subsequent events

Three things that happened in the days and weeks following the Kildwick incident would be brought up later in Lawson's court case:

- Near to the signal that Lawson ran through at red, shrubbery growing close to the line was pruned.
- The brake pads on the train were completely replaced.
- Lawson appeared before an internal inquiry on September 5th 1989. He received a severe reprimand and was told that was the end of the matter.

But that wasn't the end of the matter. For reasons not explained in the Craven Herald report, in February 1990 British Transport Police told Lawson that they had decided to bring a prosecution.

Points raised during the court case

During the case the defence raised a number of points:

- Although Lawson was familiar with the route, the signal that he went through at red was immediately after a sharp bend, and could be partially obscured by a substantial bush if that was not kept pruned back. He asked if it was significant that the bush had been lopped immediately after the incident.

- That there had been “... a breach of duty by the signalman at Cononley by not notifying the signalman at Kildwick of the presence of Lawson’s train. If the Kildwick signalman had known, he could have closed the gates. But the gates weren’t closed to traffic and Mr. Lawson went through.”

The prosecution said he had “no explanation” as to why the Cononley signalman did not notify Kildwick. “But there was no fault on his part. It’s not fair to say that it follows that the Cononley signalman was at fault. It’s fair to say that the signalman at Kildwick was surprised to see a train in his section.”

- British Rail had been asked for the train’s maintenance records to be produced, but Mr. Lawson had been told that they could not be found. “Perhaps those brakes were not working 100 percent and that fact is acknowledged by British Rail as it is unable to disclose the maintenance records to you this morning”.

Outcome of the court case

Lawson, who had pleaded guilty to the charge, was ordered to pay a fine of £200 and costs of £17.

The chairman of the bench said that the court felt Lawson had suffered enough and had been punished already with the severe reprimand administered by his employers.

Acknowledgement

The Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group would like to thank Peter Bewes of Skipton and Craven History Society for making us aware of this incident and drawing our attention to the similarities between this and the 1875 crash.

References

1. Craven Herald and Pioneer, July 21st 1989
2. Craven Herald and Pioneer, March 23rd 1990