

The
VIRTUAL MUSEUM
of the
LANCASHIRE & YORKSHIRE RAILWAY

Accident Reports.

14 August 1851

BoT Report into Accident at
Church.

(2 Pages).

Appendix No. 37.
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ACCIDENTS.

London and North
Western Railway.

point at which the carriages were traced to have gone off there was a broken joint-chair, which left an opening in the rails through which the off-wheels appear to have passed. A week having elapsed between the accident and my visit to the spot, the traces which might have enabled me to ascertain the proximate cause of the accident were consequently obliterated, and the cause of the accident must now necessarily be subject of conjecture, but its having occurred on a curve, and on a block-road which had only been just relayed in ballast of a light description, it is not improbable that with the inherent difficulty of keeping a road so circumstanced in gauge, that to some derangement in the blocks may be ascribed the accident; it was fortunately unattended with danger to any of the passengers, and from the short distance in which the train brought up, there is reason to suppose the driver was travelling with the caution he says he was.

Captain Simmons, R.E.,
&c. &c.

I have, &c.,

GEO. WYNNE,
Capt. Royal Engineers.

APPENDIX No. 38.

Appendix No. 38.

East Lancashire
Railway.

EAST LANCASHIRE RAILWAY.

Office of Commissioners of Railways,
Whitehall, September 15, 1851.

SIR,

I HAVE the honour to lay before you, for the information of the Commissioners, the following Report upon the circumstances attending an accident which occurred at the Church station, on the East Lancashire Railway, about half-past 12 A.M. on the morning of Thursday the 14th ultimo.

The Church station is situated between Blackburn and Accrington, the former distant 6 miles to the westward, the latter little more than 1 mile to the east.

At the western end of the platform at Church, the line crosses a public road by a cast-iron girder bridge. In constructing this bridge, the Company's engineer had not allowed sufficient height between the girders and the road; and in consequence of remonstrances from the road trustees, it became necessary to raise the girders.

Notice was sent to all the drivers on the line, that certain repairs being required to the bridge at Church, the up-line between that station and Accrington would be closed on Monday the 11th ultimo, and that the whole of the traffic between those stations would be worked upon the down-line; and on the Monday morning the station semaphore, as also another semaphore on the Blackburn side, distant about 450 yards, which had been erected to protect a siding, but which had been seldom used, having both been set to "danger," all the trains from Blackburn were brought to a stand outside the station, and not allowed to proceed till a messenger had been sent to Accrington to announce them. In the same way all the up-trains were stopped at Accrington, and having been crossed to the down-line, were not allowed to move till a messenger had been sent to the Church station. After passing the bridge at Church on the down-rails, they were passed through the crossing to their own line.

On Tuesday the 12th ultimo, the girders of the up-rails having been raised to the required height, the up-line was relaid, and on Tuesday night the traffic was conducted in the usual manner on both lines.

On Wednesday the 13th ultimo, the girders of the down-line were taken up, and the traffic between Church and Accrington was passed over the up-line. No notice of this second alteration was sent to the engine-drivers; the officer charged with the conduct of the traffic thinking that he might trust its safety to the signals. The station semaphore, as also the distant one, were set to "danger," and they sufficed during the day-time to warn all the trains from Blackburn that the line in front was taken up.

But at night it was found that the station signal-lamp was useless, as the gas had been cut off by the repairs going on at the bridge; and the safety of the trains from Blackburn therefore depended solely upon the lamp in the distant semaphore, the light from which could not be seen from the station in consequence of a curve in the line; so that it might go out at any moment without the parties at the station being made aware of it.

The lamp at the distant semaphore, if properly directed, would throw a red light along the line for a distance of nearly 1,000 yards; but it was not fixed in that position, but traversed on a pivot which was moved by a long wire from a handle at the points of the siding it had been erected to protect. A man or a boy running against the wire in the dark while crossing the line, or even the contraction of the wire itself on a very cold night, might shift the position of the lamp without any one at the station being aware of it. It was singularly imprudent to trust the safety of the traffic to such an uncertain agency.

Two policemen were on duty at the Church station on the Wednesday night; one remained always at the platform, and it was the duty of the other to meet all the trains coming from Blackburn at the crossing between the distant signal and the bridge; and when they should have been stopped by that distant signal, to call them forward and cross them to the up-line, and then, when they should have passed the bridge, to pass them through another

crossing to their own line. This man had strict orders not to touch the distant semaphore, and had no means of knowing what kind of light it showed, as it could not be seen from the station.

The first two trains from Blackburn on Wednesday night passed safely. It was fortunate that the lamp had not been disturbed prior to the arrival of these, for one of them was a passenger train, and if it had been precipitated into the road the loss of life might have been frightful. A second goods train, however, approached from Blackburn about 12.30 A.M., the driver of which knew nothing of the removal of the down-line over the bridge. The lamp at the distant semaphore had been shifted by some unknown cause, and showed a distinct white light, the signal that all was right; and as this goods train had not to stop at Church, the driver, who had shut off his steam till he could make out the signal, again put it on to keep up his speed.

As the train drew nearer the driver perceived that the lamp, though not set for danger, was still not quite "all right." He shut off steam again, and then, seeing a man with a red lamp ahead, proceeded to reverse the engine: but it was too late; the engine and tender and five or six of the waggons went over into the road.

The driver fell between the tender and a waggon, and was buried beneath a mass of potatoes, and in great danger of being smothered by the contents of a barrel of treacle which poured over his face; his escape altogether was most wonderful, for he scarcely experienced any permanent injury. The fireman had jumped off as the engine approached the bridge.

This accident evidently arose from the imprudence of the officer charged with the conduct of the traffic at Church during the continuance of the work at the bridge. He should not have trusted the safety of the public to a distant signal which might become displaced at any moment without any one at the station being aware of it. It would have been imprudent to leave a line leading to so evident a danger even with the best system of signals to protect it; but to trust the lives of passengers and the property of the Company to a single lamp which an accident might displace, and which was left without any one to watch over it, showed a singular want of foresight.

Captain Simmons, R.E.,
&c. &c.

I have, &c.,

R. M. LAFFAN,
Capt. Royal Engineers.

SIR,

Office of Commissioners of Railways,
Whitehall, September 22, 1851.

I AM directed by the Commissioners of Railways to forward to you a copy of the Report of their inspecting officer, relative to the accident which occurred at the Church station on the East Lancashire Railway on the 14th ultimo, caused by a train running up to a bridge carrying the railway over a public road, the girders of which had been removed for the purpose of making certain alterations, the consequence being that the train was precipitated into the chasm.

I am to request you to point out to the Directors, the great apparent carelessness exhibited by those to whom was intrusted the execution of the work required at the bridge, in removing the girders before they had ascertained that proper precautions had been adopted for the security of the traffic, and the great want of foresight exhibited by the officers of the Company, who were aware of the repairs, first, in not warning the drivers, a precaution which ordinary prudence and foresight would have enjoined, and which had been adopted but three days previously at the same spot; and secondly, in trusting the fate of trains to a signal which common consideration and the usual practice on all railways with regard to distant signals would have pointed out as insufficient, on account of the possibility of its being wrong without the knowledge of the persons in charge of the station.

Although this accident has most providentially been unattended with loss of life or serious injury to individuals, the Commissioners trust that the Directors will take into their serious consideration the conduct of their officers, which appears so reprehensible; and consider whether those who can be guilty of such negligence or want of foresight are proper persons to be entrusted in responsible stations upon a railway where passengers are conveyed in such numbers as on the lines of the East Lancashire Railway Company.

I have, &c.,

The Secretary of the
East Lancashire Railway Company.

J. L. A. SIMMONS,
Capt. Royal Engineers.

SIR,

East Lancashire Railway, Secretary's Department,
Bury, Lancashire, September 23, 1851.

YOUR letter of the 22d, on the subject of the late accident at Church station, shall be submitted to the Directors at their next meeting.

I have, &c.,

Captain Simmons, R.E.,
&c. &c.

JAMES SMITHELLS,
Secretary.