

# 20th Century Railway Accidents

by Desmond Fitzgerald

The dreadful 1889 disaster dwarfs in scale and importance all other railway accidents, not only in Armagh but also in Ireland, but there have been many other railway fatalities in the county. Some of the twentieth century accidents are recorded below.

## Death of Trespassers

The proximity of the lunatic asylums at Armagh and Omagh to the railway would have seemed to be a big security risk but in fact not many fatalities were recorded. One such took place on 2nd March, 1902 at Armagh when Peter Loughran, a Lurgan man, was apparently struck by a train and killed. Dr. Lawless, R.M.S. at the Asylum, gave evidence at the inquest that Loughran

*“was allowed a good deal of liberty on account of his exceptional trustworthiness. He was not suicidal and had never before attempted to escape.”*

An asylum attendant gave evidence that Loughran was thought to be laying the table for supper but about 7.40 p.m. the alarm was raised. When no trace was found of Loughran, Dr. Lawless assumed he had gone back to Lurgan and contacted the police there. A search on the railway line just over the wall would have yielded results since Loughran's body was found on the down line about nine o'clock the following morning. No light was thrown on the accident by the railway company, who could only say no blood was found on engines or carriages and

*“it was very possible that the blow could have been given without causing any blood to be on the engine or carriages.”*

A young farm labourer, Stewart Simpson, went to a show in Annaghmore, variously described as a circus, a cinematograph show and “indulged to some extent in liquor” later on 2nd October 1910. Afterwards he went on the line at the station, heading for either his father's house or his employer's house. It was recorded that

*“some of the inhabitants of the district are accustomed to walk upon the line on the way to their home.”*

Simpson's body was found the next day on the line Teaguy, about three quarters of a mile from Annaghmore station. It was surmised that he might have sat down and fallen asleep but no trace of human remains was found on the engine of the Derry mail train which arrived at Annaghmore at 9.a.m. nor did the driver or the guard feel any shock.

A Portadown mason employed by the G.N.R. was killed on 8th October, 1910. He was Samuel Hewitt who had recently been working in Clones and therefore only came home at weekends. This was a Saturday and Hewitt was walking home to Drumnasoo, as was his custom, on a siding on the Armagh section when he was apparently struck by wagons being shunted. His body was found the following morning.

On 13th August, 1942, a soldier was killed on the Portadown-Armagh line. He was Lance-Corporal H.G.E. Morris who was walking from Armagh, presumably returning to his unit. However, presumably because of wartime restrictions, no mention was made in the inquest report of where that unit was. Morris had been in an Armagh café and was perfectly sober then. He was struck at Kelter's Bridge, between Armagh and Retreat, by an empty carriage train, hauled by a tank engine travelling bunker first, which left Armagh at 12.28 a.m. The driver, John Shields neither saw nor felt anything and made a routine examination at Portadown. The victim was not found until 6.50 a.m. when a cyclist found him lying on the ditch having crawled from the accident site and fallen from the bridge to the roadway below. A lorry was obtained and it brought Morris to Armagh Infirmary where he died that afternoon.

By coincidence, two young trespassers

were killed at or near Portadown on the same day, 2nd August, 1947. The first was Frederick Jude, a baker, who was struck as he walked along the line to Portadown station to catch a train to work in Belfast. The local paper reported he had been struck by a light engine but no evidence was offered at the inquest to back this up. The “paper train” from Dublin had come in at 5.12 a.m. and a few minutes afterwards Jude's body was found. Two drivers gave evidence of seeing or hearing nothing. Jude died in Lurgan Hospital later that night.

The second victim, on the other hand, was traced because of the human remains (forearm and hand) and clothing which were found on the engine and first carriage of an express from Dublin when it arrived at Belfast after midnight that evening. A search along the line led to the discovery of the body of James Campbell between Scarva and Tandragee. He was a farm labourer, working at Bellymegarity and a native of Adavoyle. He had left his employer's farm to cycle to Gilford, saying he would be back in an hour. The inquests on both men were held at Lurgan. The driver of the train, William Jones, said he was not aware of any contact.

## Alcohol

The railway companies were at the time much inclined to blame alcohol for accidents but it would appear that the only two recorded instances were in the first year of the century.

An inebriated trespasser was killed near Annaghmore on 10th August, 1900. He was Samuel James Mullen, a 26-year old local man. It appeared that he had been seeing some friends off at Annaghmore station and the party then adjourned to a local public house and “remained a considerable time”. Mullen then took a short cut home and was run over by a train. His body was discovered by

the driver of the 3 a.m. goods the next morning.

An Armagh trespasser was killed on 24th October, 1900. He was David Toner, who was apparently struck by a train at Mullynure, on the Portadown line, having been drinking in Armagh and later presumably making his way home. An inquest witness

*“was of opinion that he had a little drink taken at that time but he was quite able to walk”.*

That was on Banbrook Hill at about five o'clock, but when a local fireman was going home there was no body at Mullynure whereas the next morning Fireman Frazer found Toner's body on the line. No evidence of contact with an engine was produced.

## Children

While one of these sad events was especially tragic, in the other two the children involved seem to have escaped serious injury.

A particularly distressing accident took place at Portadown on 11th June, 1904. The victims were Lizzie Atkinson, aged 13, and her brother Joseph Atkinson, aged 7, who were cut to pieces by the mail train from Belfast to Dublin. As the “Portadown News” put it –

*“it appears that the mail was just turning this corner when the little fellow, who was deficient in intellect and who is said to have had some other slight defects or peculiarities, came through the wicket and proceeded to cross the line. A cry of agony and despair went up from the sister as she very pluckily rushed to his rescue but unfortunately she was too late. She had just caught hold of her brother, when they were both knocked down by the train. The bodies were frightfully mangled, portions of the remains being strewn along the line for a distance of twenty yards. Hundreds of the townspeople visited the scene of the sad accident.....”*

The signalman at Tavanagh nearby gave evidence that

*“about a fortnight or three weeks ago I had occasion to put this little boy off the line. At considerable risk I ran out and saved him and only for me he could have been caught by the train on that occasion”.*

There was a level crossing, originally installed for factory workers but it was not a public crossing and was kept shut except when carts were crossing. There was also a wicket gate which remained open,

through which the young boy emerged. The coroner said the

*“wicket gate seemed to be kept in a very loose way indeed. If it were under the control of the Railway Company they should keep it under their control and see that it was shut at such times, as it would be dangerous for people to pass through. Where people were living so near the railway and where children were running about there should be some better supervision over the wicket gate than there appeared to be.”*

Michael Russell, the driver of the train, said he was prevented by the sharp curve in the line and the overhead bridge from seeing anything until his fireman shouted. The solicitor for the family of the dead children thanked the company for their expression of sympathy

*“but he thought that the Railway Company should put their sympathy in a little more tangible form than mere words and he had no doubt that if the jury made a recommendation to that effect that it would be very favourable considered by the directors.”*

The jury duly complied and the company contributed £25 towards funeral expenses. They also agreed either to close the crossing or to make it more secure.

A very fortunate young passenger escaped injury at Armagh on 3rd August, 1907. She was 6-year old Mary Kevin who, according to the local paper, was travelling on a Clones train and, in her own words, “creeped out” through a window half a mile from Armagh between the Desert crossing and Callan Bridge, falling on a grassy slope. The communication cord was pulled but the crossing-keeper's wife, Mrs. Stringer, had seen the child fall and she ran to pick up the injured child and carried her to the Armagh station. The mother was informed by telegram at Killylea station and she came back to Armagh on the waiting Belfast train to bring the child to the Infirmary to have injuries dressed.

A five year old boy fell from a train at Boilie crossing between Portadown and Lurgan on 15th November 1920. He was travelling with his mother, Mrs. Parks and two younger children from Newry to Glasgow. His distraught mother had to be restrained from jumping after the boy. The train was stopped at Lurgan and the following train from Portadown stopped a few yards short of the boy who was

taken to Lurgan Hospital.

## Suicides

The fact that the Portadown-Armagh line passed close to the County Asylum in Armagh and to a private asylum obviously had much bearing on several of these unfortunate incidents.

A suicide was recorded at the Retreat crossing between Armagh and Richhill on 12th August, 1900. Mrs. Elizabeth Rodgers, wife of a Bangor commission agent, was the victim. She had been resident in Allen's Retreat, a private asylum nearby, for seven months and “was under the constant surveillance of a special attendant”. She escaped attention and hid behind a haystack until the 11.30 a.m. train from Armagh approached when she ran out and knelt on the line.

An unusual suicide episode took place at Armagh station on 31st August, 1908,

*“James Clarke, late barman in the Charlemont Arms Armagh (formerly publican at Tassagh) came off the 2.10 mail train at Armagh. For a long time he wandered about the station premises and asked for permission to stay from the night-watchman Ross which was given. At 7 o'clock he asked Porter Wilson if he could get a ‘Daily Mail’ and was told the bookstall was shut. He then went into the Ladies 3rd class visiting room. Ten minutes afterwards Ross was passing the room and looked in and saw him lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Ross thought Clarke was dying and at once called Porter Baxter who ran in and found Clarke lying on his back with his throat cut from ear to ear, apparently lifeless and a razor lying on his right breast”*

the ‘Armagh Guardian’ reported. Evidence was given of a drink problem (he had just been dismissed from Shaw's Hotel, Portrush for drunken habits) and the coroner

*“thought it was a clear case of suicide whilst temporarily insane. There seemed no other reason why a man coming home to see his wife should wait till the last moment to take his life.”*

A passenger attempted to cut his throat at Scarva station on 12th July, 1910. He was John Fitzsimmons, a 23-year old Cavan man who had just returned from America. He missed his connection at Dundalk and alighted at Scarva where he spent the night. When he returned to the station he went to the lavatory and cut his throat. Two policemen took him to

Banbridge Union Infirmary. The local paper's comment was

*"His mind is obviously unhinged, as since his admission to hospital he had been raving about having been assassinated."*

The closeness of the Armagh Mental Asylum to the railway line was always a possible source of trouble and so it proved on 22nd June, 1918 when a patient, John McKenna of Moneyquin committed suicide there. He had been working in the Asylum farm when he broke away and ran over the hedge to the line just north of Armagh. William Leake of Clones was the driver of the 3.43 p.m. train from Armagh and saw McKenna "creeping on his hands and knees out of the water table". He was struck a glancing blow on the head and died the following day. McKenna was in fact almost fit to be discharged. The inquest jury said that

*"having regard to the fact that the deceased attempted to break away twice previously that day they thought it would have been more prudent for the attendant to have sent the deceased into the Asylum buildings".*

A suicide at the Retreat, between Richhill and Armagh, involved, on 8th July, 1927, Beatrice Sarah Baxter. She was sitting on the embankment between the line and the private mental home and when the 10.25 a.m. Armagh-Portadown train came along she jumped in front of the engine when it was four or five yards away. She had been a patient at the mental home for four months and had always complained of being miserable and once had talked about committing suicide. She was required by the nurses to stay on a path and had never left it before, but on this occasion she had not given any promise to stay on the path. The resident doctor said at the inquest that Mrs. Baxter was not "a typical suicidal type" but warned everyone that she should be watched.

## Demonstrations

The G.N.R. did very good business with all people attending demonstrations.

A young lad, John Cadoo, was killed on 12th July 1917 near Tynan. He had been at the Orange demonstration and was taking a short cut to his home at

Kilshannagh, Caledon. He was crossing the railway bridge at Limnagore when a train approached. It was supposed that the boy who "was not keen of hearing" did not hear the train because of the sound of the bands and drums, but a companion said that Cadoo, seeing the train approach, said "Come on, we will stop it", and ran towards it. He had not taken drink. The driver of the train, due in Tynan at 4 o'clock, was not aware of any impact.

A young trespasser was killed near Armagh on 17th June, 1920. He was John Thompson of Tyra and he had been at a Royal Black Preceptory meeting at Killylea which he left at about 2 a.m. to walk home. He and a friend took the railway line as a short-cut but Thompson was very tired and eventually at Lisadian Bridge they sat down for a rest. Thompson had taken only one bottle of stout, his friend told the inquest, and he sat down on the rail with his feet on the sleepers, whereas his companion sat on the bank. A goods train came along and cut Thompson to pieces but the driver, James Dodds, saw and felt nothing, nor were any traces of blood or tissue found on the engine.

On 12th July 1930, Isaac Smith, an Orangeman going to a Markethill demonstration, was killed at Annaghmore. His lodge was late in arriving at the station for a 9.30 departure and in the absence of a footbridge their approach to the platform should have been around the rear of the train. However, several men decided to run between carriages, under the couplings. A police sergeant shouted at them to stop but it was too late to stop Bro. Smith, a Clonmacate man who was treasurer of Derryadd L.O.L. The drums had been put in the front van and apparently the stationmaster thought it was proper to proceed, and told the driver to pull the rear carriages up to the platform. It was then that Smith was caught between couplings, fell and was run over by carriage wheels, in spite of a colleague's catching him and dragging him clear. He was placed on an embankment, where he dictated his will and was taken to Armagh County Infirmary where he died that afternoon. The G.N.R. engineer suggested that no

sane man would pass under the couplings of a train.

## Death of Passengers

For passengers to be fatally injured in a station was a much less common experience than for people struck on the line.

A passenger who had returned from a Warrenpoint excursion trip was run over and killed at Armagh station on 16th April, 1900, Easter Monday. He was John Livingstone, a 62 year old local man who on his return at 11.15 p.m. went to the lavatory and was not seen alive again. The engine of the train he had arrived on was reversing back to the turntable and it ran over Livingstone without any of the three men on the footplate being aware of it. The body was found by a shunter. Medical opinion at the inquest was that

*"the man attempted to cross the line but fell. He got up and perhaps suffering from slight concussion he walked to 'cross-over' and there he again fell causing an injury to the back of his head. He must have been there until the train passed over him."*

The solicitor for next-of-kin asked the jury to find there was gross negligence on the part of the G.N.R. but they merely added a rider to the 'accidental death' verdict to the effect

*"that there were not sufficient porters to assist on the arrival of the excursion train which came that day"*

although a ratio of two porters to a dozen passengers would seem reasonable. Livingstone's widow issued a writ against the company but I have no detail of the outcome.

A passenger was killed at Portadown station on 26th September, 1946 when he was crossing the tracks from Platform 2 to Platform 1. He was Arthur Thomas Martin, a 74 year old retired farmer from Tempo and he was travelling from Buncrana to Warrenpoint on family business. He had been told to use the subway but instead he stepped out in front of the 4.45 Belfast-Portadown train. The fireman said that

*"the man looked up, saw the train, and stopped about two feet from the rail on which the train was travelling. At the last minute he seemed to 'swerve' over towards the train the buffer of which caught and carried him".*