

‘Shocking Fatalities’ on the Great Western Railway

Railways have always been dangerous places to work none more so than in the late 19th century when over 500 deaths per year were recorded for railway employees. Nowhere did death and injury come so quickly and unexpectedly as on the permanent way. Passenger trains even then routinely travelled at 50-60 miles an hour with the fastest expresses often going much faster. Health and safety and high visibility jackets were of course unknown.



The redundant church at Lower Basildon is now owned by the Churches Conservation Trust and opens occasionally to the public. The Hursts are inveterate gravestone readers and on a recent visit we noticed no fewer than three headstones in the churchyard to men killed on the nearby GWR main line. Two of them occurred on the same day. This prompted a search of the old newspapers for the coroner’s reports.

Right: Edward Hearmon’s gravestone [Mike Hurst]

22 February 1878

On the morning of 22 February 1878 Edward Hearmon of Basildon was struck by the 0530 ex-Paddington train as he walked to work. To quote the inquest ‘the deceased was in the habit of going from his home in Basildon to work at Goring and for the saving of the distance walked along the railway’.

At this time the railway was still broad gauge and had just two lines. The 0530 train went all the way to Penzance, a journey that took nearly 12 hours. It was due out of Reading at 0630 and would have passed through Goring about 0650. A quick glance at a modern sunrise table shows us that the sun rose in 2013 in London on 22 February at 0700 exactly. Thus it seems likely that the accident occurred in the faint light of dawn.

The driver of the train spotted Hearmon crossing the track about 70 yards ahead just after a freight had passed the other way. He whistled and applied the brakes but Hearmon took no notice and was struck on the shoulder and knocked down the embankment near milepost 44. A GWR ganger Joseph Bennett heard the whistles and the brakes going on and hastened to find Hearmon ‘quite dead’. The verdict was ‘accidental death whilst trespassing on the railway’.

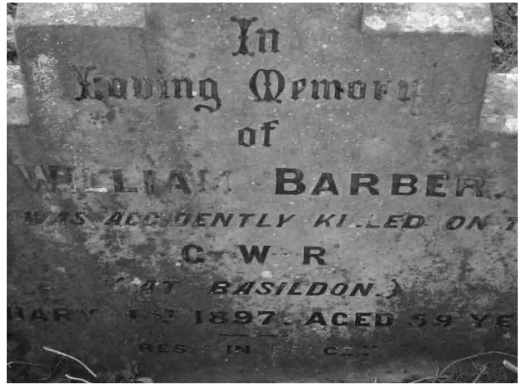
Further research showed that in 1871 Hearmon, aged 44, was living in Basildon with his wife Rachel and three young children. His occupation in the census was given as ‘groom’, but it is impossible to find out who he worked for in Goring.

1 February 1897

Causing more press interest and a detailed and gruesome inquest report was the accident when two men, Daniel Cole aged 55 and William Barber aged 59, were killed together on 1 February 1897 whilst working as platelayers on the line. Both lived in Lower Basildon. Daniel had been in GWR service for 17 years and left a widow and ‘a grown up family of seven’. William was a widower of 31 years’ railway experience with no children. The

inquest made much of the fact that both men were teetotallers.

The headstones of Daniel Cole and William Barber [Mike Hurst]



Gatehampton Viaduct, were just two years old. The men were part of a team of three lifting the rail on the down (towards London) fast line about ten yards from the Goring end of the troughs.

The survivor of the team, William Lovegrove, stated that he saw the 3 pm express from Paddington (bound for Plymouth and running non-stop to Bristol in 2½ hours) burst out from under Shackle Bridge. The weather was foggy which aggravated things. He shouted a warning to his colleagues and stepped to the outside of the track. The others stepped the other way. Unfortunately at the same time two other trains, one a freight and the other an express from Bristol came through on the other lines and crossed at that exact point. When all three trains had gone Cole and Barber were not to be seen. Lovegrove soon found Barber lying between the tracks 'quite dead' (that phrase again, see above) whilst the remains of Cole were scattered over 400 yards. As these were found along the water troughs he was obviously hit by the 1358 Bristol to London train whilst avoiding the Plymouth Express. Note that all Cornwall expresses still passed through Goring on the **Great Way Round** via Bristol at this time. The direct line to Taunton via Newbury and Westbury was not built for another nine years.

Lovegrove ran to Goring to tell the Station Master, Sidney Malcolm Tame about the accident. He advised the police and telegraphed Reading and Paddington. Tame sent a Dr Bateman (from Whitchurch) to the scene where he pronounced both men dead. The remains were taken to the Crown Public House, Lower Basildon (now an Indian Restaurant).

At the inquest at the Crown a few days later, Mr Cockburn Pinniger presiding, William Lovegrove gave his evidence backed up by Charles E. Hayward a 'pumper' from Didcot

Goring water troughs in mid 20c, the means by which steam engines picked up water without having to pause on their journey



who was walking along the track as the trains passed. He and Lovegrove had the grisly task of picking human remains out of the water troughs. The newspaper is surprisingly graphic about the gruesome details, which is perhaps what the Victorian reader liked!

The driver of the Bristol to London Express, William Reading from First Avenue, Queens Park, a man with 32 years experience, reported that he saw no-one on the track at the time as he was passing through the steam of adjacent trains but did feel a bump. At Paddington he found signs of what he thought might be human remains but was about to sign off (!!) when the timekeeper received a telegram about the fatalities. Reading said his train was travelling at 50 mph in the Goring area. His fireman had noticed nothing.

It would appear that the men got a bit careless and unlucky with the simultaneous arrival of three trains at the point they were working. The misty smoky conditions were also felt to have played a part.

The verdict was ‘accidentally killed by an express train while at work on the Great Western Railway’ and that was it. There was no company review of working practices then, such were employment conditions at the time. The engine driver whistled as per instructions and that was the end of the company’s responsibility. Nowadays of course track gangs have safety clothing and permanent look outs. The dangers however are probably greater as the trains are faster and quieter. Nonetheless there were no fatalities to railway staff on British railways last year. In the 1880s and 90s the figure was around 500 per year.

However for their bereaved families, the incidents were important enough for them to mark the means of the men’s deaths by the inscriptions on their memorial stones.

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References

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Reading Mercury 6 February 1897

Time Tables of the Great Western Railway 1902 reprinted Ian Allan 1973