

The Armagh Disaster Revisited

By Jeremy Clarke

The Armagh disaster of 125 years ago, which Neil Cameron noted in the 15th June edition of the Bluebell eNewsletter, caused perhaps the greatest shock to the public than almost any railway accident preceding it.

The line from Armagh to Warrenpoint began with a three mile-long climb at 1 in 75/82 to Dobbins Bridge Summit. It was single and worked on the staff and ticket system but with a time interval and not by absolute block. This interval was ten minutes, or twenty minutes if a passenger train followed a goods. The driver of the excursion train involved, Thomas McGrath, had been sent from Dundalk to work it with a four-coupled engine even though he was not particularly familiar with the route.

However, he knew enough about it to know the gradient he faced to begin with and was thus very disconcerted to find he was expected to haul a fifteen-vehicle train with over 900 passengers aboard. He complained to the Armagh stationmaster that he had been advised the load would not exceed thirteen and in the circumstances stated he would need pilot assistance on the bank. There was an altercation between the two men during which the stationmaster, in effect, accused McGrath of being incompetent.

James Elliott, the assistant to the Dundalk Superintendent, was to ride on the footplate and having heard the altercation suggested to McGrath the engine of the regular train due to follow the excursion might provide banking assistance. McGrath, presumably nettled by the stationmaster's accusations, refused. With safety valves blowing hard he put his engine to the bank but gradually lost speed until coming to a stand within sight of the summit. With the boiler pressure only a few pounds off the full 130psi he knew he would never be able to restart the train.

After some debate over what to do Elliott decided to take the first five coaches and shunt them into the siding at Hamilton's Bawn, the first station over the summit. The front guard, Moorhead, therefore began to uncouple between the fifth and sixth vehicles. However, the train was fitted with the old 'simple' vacuum brake which worked in the opposite way to the automatic vacuum brake. This meant as soon as the hoses were uncoupled the brake was released. Having placed stones beneath the wheels of the sixth coach, and to obviate the need for McGrath to set back, the guard began to undo the screw coupling to its fullest extent. He had just lifted the link over the hook when McGrath did set back, the coach wheels crushing and riding over the stones. The rear part of the train now began to run slowly back down the gradient and despite best efforts by Elliott and two passengers to get another turn on the brake handle the brake would not hold.

McGrath, on Moorhead's instructions, was now setting back with the idea of re-coupling but though Moorhead twice had the link over the hook he tripped over some discarded rails at the trackside. Others tried vainly to get stones under the rolling wheels until the train began to outpace the pursuers. Worse from the passengers point of view the doors had been locked before the train left Armagh so that apart from those people in the guard's vans nobody could escape.

In the meantime the ordinary passenger train left Armagh after the appointed interval and with a light load the driver, Patrick Murphy, was making good time up the gradient at some 30mph. About 1½ miles from the summit Murphy's fireman saw the ten coaches of the excursion coming towards them and shouted a warning. Murphy managed to brake his train to about 5mph before the impact. The leading three vehicles of the excursion were reduced to matchwood and the others were piled up on the track or fallen down the high embankment. Murphy's engine was overturned while its train broke away and began to run back down the gradient in two parts. The guard managed to stop the rear portion but a second collision was fortuitously avoided. As the tender broke away from the engine Murphy managed to cling on to it and despite being dazed and shocked he screwed down the handbrake, bringing the tender and the leading vehicle, a horsebox, to a stand some three coach lengths from the rest of his train.

In the disaster eighty lives were lost, most being young children, while the number of injured, many very seriously, was as high.

The Board of Trade Inspector, the very experienced Major-General Hutchinson, carried out several trials on the Armagh incline. He found a train of the exact composition and weight hauled by the same engine attained the

summit without difficulty, and a brakevan of the same type was quite capable of holding nine laden coaches on the gradient. He concluded the one was caused by inexperience, the other either by a fault in the brake or that it had been tampered with by passengers riding in the van. However, the inspector also pointed out that a load on this gradient was about equal to the maximum drawbar pull a locomotive of this class could exert. In that light he criticised the shed foreman at Dundalk for allocating such an engine to the duty as well as a driver with little experience of the route. But he placed most responsibility for the disaster on James Elliott who was in charge of the excursion and who authorised these procedures in 'direct and flagrant' contravention of Company rules.

By that time, as Hutchinson acknowledged in his report, the President of the Board of Trade has already stated his intention to introduce a Bill making the adoption of automatic brakes compulsory. But the Major-General also recommended the President similarly consider introducing clauses to the Bill making absolute block working compulsory. That Bill was enacted with commendable speed and was on the statute books before the end of the year. Though railway companies in general had long had an ambivalent view on introducing costly safety devices, it is true to say very considerable progress had already been made in this regard purely by persuasion. But the Act of 1889 gave the Board of Trade power to compel defaulters to conform. The pity is that, like so many other railway safety measures, it took a major disaster for the law to be involved and exercised.