

Rail rules squabble led to horror Blue Mountains disaster

"THERE'S a fellow on the line, damn him," the driver of the goods locomotive Michael Stevenson shouted to his sweat-dripping fireman John Wiggins. It was 11 pm on January 30, 1878, and the goods had just begun the ascent of the Blue Mountains from Emu Plains.

Wiggins, who had been feeding the furnace, dropped his shovel and leaning from the cabin stared ahead. Dead in the middle of the track and about 200m ahead was a light. Stevenson grabbed the whistle cord and pulled. The shrill blast soared up and over the mountains.

The light was closer now and it was bigger. That's when terror gripped the goods' loco crew.

The light ahead was not being carried by a man walking between the tracks. It was too high. It was the headlamp of an oncoming train speeding down Lapstone Hill on the single track.

Stevenson and Wiggins could have jumped for it down the embankment. The risks were not great for the goods, laboring up the slope, was making little speed.

Instead they decided to stay with their engine. The men gripped the controls for support and closed their eyes.

The two engines hit. It was like an explosion. They reared, rolled and then plunged over the embankment.

With them the two locomotives — both were hauling freight — took 35 trucks. Over and over they rolled, tearing at trees and scrub until they reached the slope's bottom. The engines were still fused together.

The people of Penrith and Emu Plains, shocked awake by the thunder of the awesome collision, rushed from their houses and stared towards the mountains.

Flying sparks had ignited the tonnes of coal and kerosene shale carried by the Sydney-bound train. Already the flames that were to destroy 14 of the trucks were leaping skywards.

The miracle was that only two men died at the instant of impact. Of the others aboard the trains six were seriously burned by steam and boiling water spraying from the locos' fractured boilers.

FEW BURNS

At a final count the driver of the up-train to Sydney, two firemen and a guard died. Michael Stevenson suffered nothing more serious than a few burns.

Following an inquiry into what was then the worst railway disaster in New South Wales for 23 years, responsibility for the collision was placed on the shoulders of the guard of the Sydney-bound goods.

He had, so evidence suggested, gambled on the Blue Mountains train reaching the Emu Plains siding before Stevenson left Penrith.

Despite this official finding many felt the real culprits were top railway officials who created an atmosphere of uncertainty in the service by fiddling with safety regulations.

In Parliament it was said that John Sutherland, the minister responsible for rail-

HISTORICAL FEATURE

ways, could have averted the Lapstone Hill tragedy if he had insisted on retaining the safety code relating to single-track rail systems.

These regulations stipulated that goods trains hauling coal and shale from the Blue Mountains could proceed from one siding only if they were able to reach the next siding 15 minutes

For a start a new series of working orders for station-masters and guards were issued. In some respects they suspended old regulations long regarded as sacrosanct.

Now instead of the old 15-minute rule that applied to coal and shale trains, the guards were allowed to use some discretion in deciding

used overseas they were not accepted by all NSW railwaymen. In fact they split the department into two warring camps.

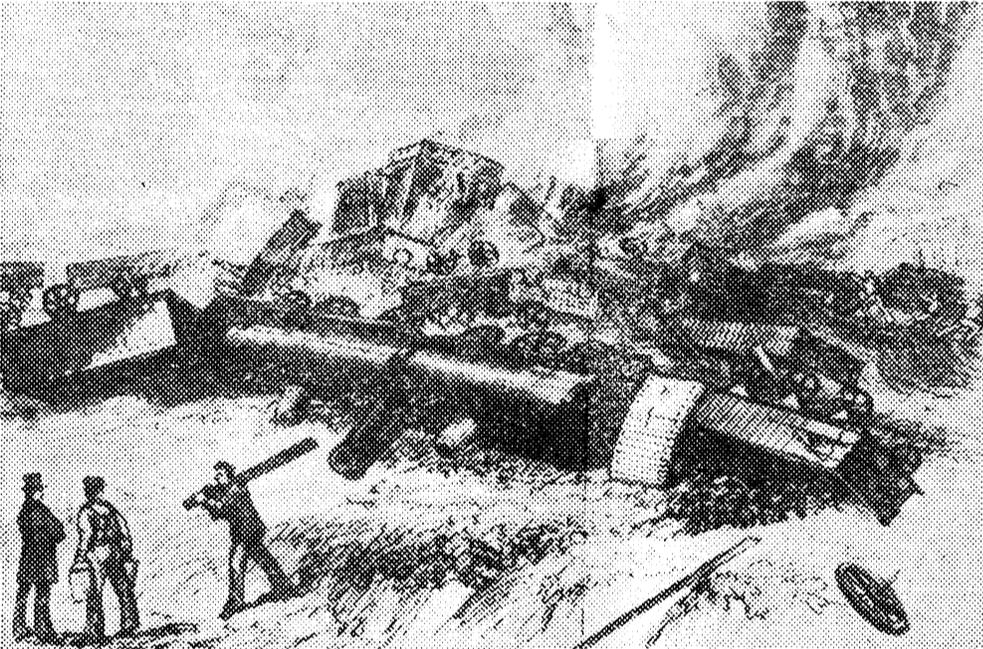
The chief opponents of the new system were the anti-Vernon faction who not only pledged to get rid of the man but openly stated they'd ignore the regulations.

But there were supporters of the rules, men who claimed the new code provided a sensible means of using individual initiative.

On November 5, 1877, the unyielding differences of opinion between the two camps produced what was almost a fatal accident.

At 10.7 am the station-master at Kelso, a man named Pass, sent a goods train towards Bathurst although a passenger train was due to leave Bathurst for Sydney two minutes later.

Pass believed his action was justified because the goods was late. Certainly he



A contemporary illustration of the aftermath of the 1878 head-on collision above Emu Plains. The force of the crash welded the locomotives together.

before the scheduled arrival of a train coming in the opposite direction.

This rule obviated head-on collisions but it did cause inconvenient delays.

This was something Sutherland quickly learnt when in 1868 he became Secretary for Public Works, a title then given to a parliamentary minister.

The new minister's one aim was to modernise and speed up the transport system. Trouble was his methods of achieving this met with strong opposition from some quarters.

The most powerful of Sutherland's opponents was the NSW railway's engineer-in-chief John Whitton, one of the founders of the present rail system.

In that era governments were for ever being put in and out of office and John Sutherland followed them.

Yet despite these interruptions he was able to attract to his ideas on how a railway should be run a number of senior officers in the rail service.

Then in 1874 one of the pro-Sutherland men, Donald Vernon, was appointed chief traffic manager. He began implementing Sutherland's plans almost at once.

how far their trains should proceed.

Nor were station-masters required to adhere blindly to timetables. If trains ran late it was up to them to ensure the traffic moved as smoothly and quickly as possible.

While giving guards and station-masters more lati-

sent a telegraph to Bathurst saying he was sending the train on but didn't bother to wait for a reply.

Meanwhile, before the telegraph was sent, Higgs, the Bathurst station-master, sent off on schedule the Sydney-bound express from Orange. He assumed the line to Kelso was clear but didn't

The 1878 Lapstone Hill crash

tude, chief traffic manager Vernon said they should never risk sending two trains on a collision course between stations.

TELEGRAPH

If any uncertainty existed a station-master, before allowing a train to leave his station, should telegraph the next stop and check with his opposite number that the line was clear.

Having done that he would give the guard a written authority to proceed to that station or, in some cases, to an intermediate siding.

Although the new regulations followed procedures

bother to make a telegraph check.

Probably the two trains would have collided had not a Kelso horseman riding on a hill seen them advancing on a single track.

He got a warning to station-master Pass who was able to signal the trains to a halt only a few hundred metres apart.

When the matter came before Chief Traffic Manager Vernon he put most of the blame on the shoulders of the Bathurst station-master Higgs.

Vernon held that Higgs had flagrantly defied instructions by sending off the express without ensuring the line was clear. Higgs



This is the spot on Lapstone Hill where two goods trains made tragic railway history on the night of January 30, 1878.

was immediately suspended from duty.

Now the Engineer-in-Chief John Whitton — he'd never agreed with the new regulations introduced by Vernon — intervened.

Acting through the Railway Commissioner, John Rae, he had Vernon's decision rescinded. Higgs was cleared and promoted to acting traffic manager and station-master Pass was suspended.

By now railway employees were not only bewildered by the extraordinary switch of events but were not sure which particular set of regulations to follow.

Then in December 1877 events again switched. The Government fell and John Sutherland once more took over the public works portfolio which included the railways.

Station-master Pass was reinstated and the minister's protege Donald Vernon was given the newly created post of Under-Secretary for Railways.

Although the correct procedure for starting unscheduled trains was still in the melting pot weeks later, railwaymen were adamant about one thing.

They would make sure little record of their actions remained behind to convict them, in the case of an accident, of making some contributory mistake.

As a result of this attitude lack of documents made it difficult to discover exactly what went wrong when the two goods trains collided on Lapstone Hill on the night of January 30, 1878.

Though not a regular train the Orange-Sydney goods, when it did run, left Katoomba at about 8.30 pm and reached Penrith at about 11 pm. The goods for

(Lawson) it was, according to the watch of the guard George Perdue, a few minutes behind schedule.

It did not stop at Blue Mountains to check, as regulations stated, that the line to Penrith was clear.

Instead it simply slowed down enough to allow the guard Perdue to tell station-master King he could easily make Wascoe's Siding (Blaxland).

By day King would have telegraphed the goods' movements to Wascoe's and Springwood. But it was night and both stations were unmanned.

That's why King simply telegraphed Penrith saying the line was clear except for the Orange train that was waiting at Wascoe's Siding.

But Perdue didn't stop his train at Wascoe's. Although still running a little late he reckoned he'd made Emu Siding soon after 11 pm. And the goods from Penrith always ran late.

THUNDERED

So it was that the train, hauling its coal and shale-laden trucks, gathered speed as it thundered down Lapstone Hill. It would now require nearly a kilometre to pull up.

The tragedy was that for the first time in months the goods heading for Mt Victoria left Penrith not at around 11.30 but dead on time at 11 pm.

With one engine pulling and another at the rear pushing the 23 trucks, the train was steaming at 55km/h as it began the ascent.

The sound of the collision reverberated far over the plain below while the flames, soon leaping from coal and kerosene shale, cast an eerie glow over the mountainside.

The guard George Perdue had taken a calculated risk. It was a tragedy that he had miscalculated by less than two kilometres.

When George Perdue faced a jury on various counts three weeks later, the Chief Justice Sir James Martin refused to admit evidence relating to the uncertainty about railway regulations.

At the trial's end Perdue was found guilty of wilful neglect of duty and was sentenced to a jail term of two years.