

The Peat's Ferry train disaster

HISTORICAL *Feature*

ONE-hundred-and-four-years ago today, Sydney and, indeed, the rest of Australia, was in festive mood, to celebrate the jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne.

In NSW, a public holiday had been declared and Sydney was festooned with flags and bunting and pictures of the Queen.

On the morning of June 21, 1887, a crowd of more than 1000 hurried to Redfern railway station to take excursion trains to Peat's Ferry, on the Hawkesbury River.

Most of them intended returning that afternoon in time for the grand fireworks display which was to be held on the harbor that night. But hopes of a happy ending to a happy day were not to be realised.

By 2.30 that afternoon, many of the train trippers were dead, dozens were injured and few of the shocked survivors were in any mood for the festivities.

At that stage of the State's development, railway lines had spread south to Albury and to beyond Bathurst in the west but the Hawkesbury still stood as a barrier to the north.

Rail passengers to the far north of NSW had to go by train from Newcastle, which they could reach by steamer — the most popular transport — or by road. Motorists crossed the Hawkesbury at Wiseman's Ferry or by George Peat's ferry at Brooklyn.

To connect Sydney with the northern railway, running from Newcastle, the Government decided to span the Hawkesbury. This ambitious project, which included building a bridge about 1000 metres long, presented major engineering problems.

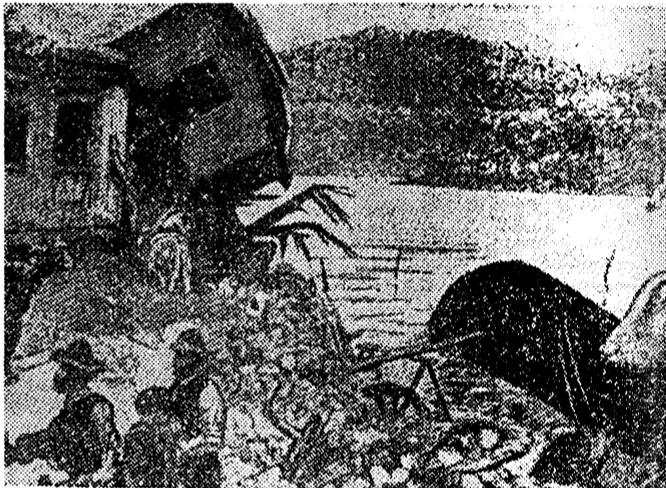
Having committed itself to the bridge, the Government extended the northern line through Hornsby to Peat's Ferry. Work began on the bridge early in 1887.

To make the new line pay and help win public support for the huge expenditure involved, the Government encouraged excursions to Peat's Ferry. Trippers could make the return trip by rail or a round tour by rail and steamer.

The tours became so popular that three excursion trains left Redfern (which was then Sydney's rail terminal) for Peat's Ferry on this June Jubilee Holiday. The third train departed at 10.27am, carrying about 400 passengers.

Among them were several high Government officials and a number of prominent socialites. Most of them were seated in two imported American carriages, which, with two locally-built "Redfern" cars and five of the old-fashioned, four-wheel carriages, made up the train.

Engine No.178 was one of the smokestack models, which found the going heavy. Three times on the run to Hornsby, the driver was forced to back



An artist's impression of the accident scene. Although six died, the death toll could have been worse.

down from a grade and then, gathering steam, race at it to reach the summit.

Despite this, the expedient failed and eventually the guard, one Alfred Clissold, had to divide the train. Half was taken to Hornsby and the train returned later for the remainder of the carriages.

At the start of the day's trip, the passengers were in high spirits, singing merrily on the run to Ryde. But the later long delay somewhat dampened their enthusiasm and they were in less happy mood when the train left Hornsby 2½ hours late.

Guard Clissold had not before travelled on the line beyond Ryde. The engine driver, Thomas Wilson, and the fireman, John Pye, had made only one trip each. Nevertheless, the train was soon coasting down the one-in-40 grade from the present site of Cowan to Peat's Ferry Station, now known as Hawkesbury River station.

The line went through five tunnels and several deep cuttings, which had been hewn out of solid rock. The track twisted and turned for some three kilometres.

At the first tunnel, Wilson applied the train's air brakes; they held firm. Then, at No 2 tunnel, the train's speed increased suddenly and inexplicably. Wilson applied heav-

ier braking — but there was no response.

The driver panicked, twisting the air-brake valve to emergency. Still there was no response. The train's speed increased to 25 to 30km/h. The fireman, John Pye, did not need any telling that the train was a run-away. He leaped to the brake on the coal tender, which the engine was pushing, and spun the wheel hard. Sparks flew from the tender's wheels — but the train continued to gain speed.

Despite the sudden acceleration, the passengers were unaware of the impending danger. They continued to sing lustily, which drowned out the increasing roar of the wheels on the railway lines.

By this time, Clissold had applied the guard's brakes to their full extent. Now, although both the brakes on the engine and the tender were at their ultimate capacity, the train continued to plunge headlong on.

It was about then that Wilson realised that he would have to take the dangerous emergency procedure of putting the locomotive into reverse. Later estimates were that the train at that time was travelling at near 100km/h. But his attempt to go into reverse failed.

It was just as well, because had he succeeded there is little doubt that the death toll would have been horrendous,

as the train was at that time rounding a bend, with a sheer drop to one side.

Meanwhile, at Peat's Ferry, the two earlier trains were waiting at No 1 platform. One's departure had been delayed owing to the late arrival of the third train. About 300 impatient passengers awaited its arrival.

When it finally appeared at the top of the downgrade into the river station, the station master, unaware of any trouble, sent his porter, Patrick Proctor, to switch the points. This was normal practice and intended to turn the incoming train on to the No 2 line.

The No 3 line ended at light buffers on the river bank beyond the station but several goods trucks had been earlier shunted along it and parked.

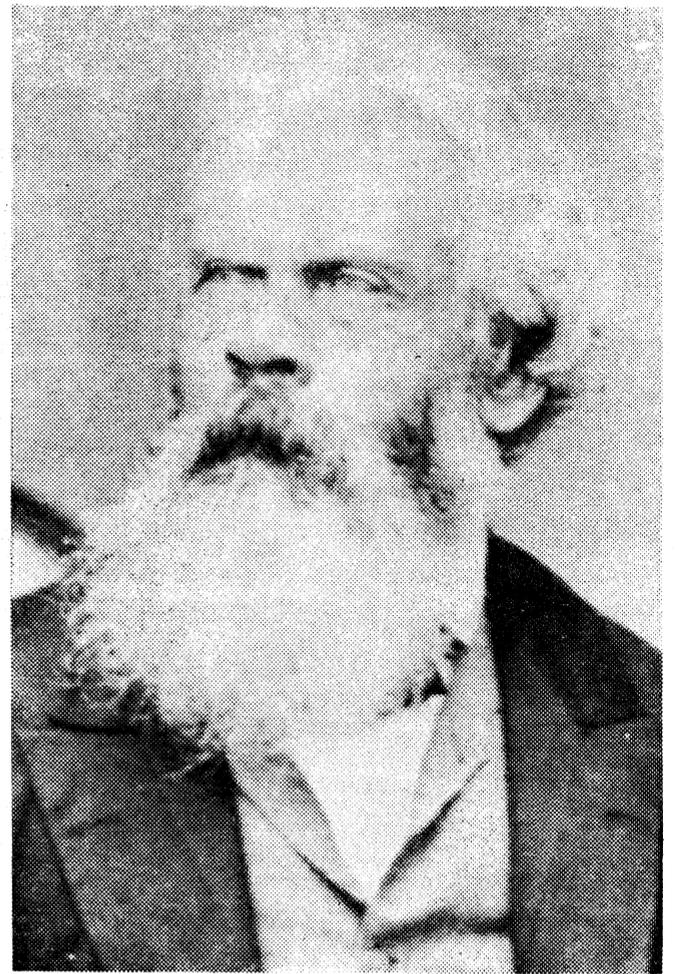
Proctor was some distance from the points when he heard the blast of the incoming loco's whistle. Suddenly realising that it was out of control, he raced for the points but had not reached them when the train approached at tremendous speed around a sharp bend — and heading for disaster.

When the stricken train hurtled into view, its carriages were lurching perilously from side to side. With its whistle blowing desperately and with its wheels sending showers of sparks in all directions, it sped along the short stretch to the platform.

Officials watched helplessly, petrified now by what they knew was an inevitable tragedy of considerable proportions. There had been no time to unload the passengers from the waiting train and it was obvious now that the porter Proctor would not reach the points in time.

The porter had only a split second in which to make up his mind. He could jump clear and thereby be sure of saving his own life at the cost of a head-on collision with the packed passenger train or he could risk his life by trying to switch the runaway train to an inevitable crash with the goods trucks on the No 2 line. Either way, disaster was unavoidable.

He decided on the latter, grabbing the points lever and holding on to it for dear life,



NSW Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, promised to hold an inquiry but never did — so who was to blame was never satisfactorily decided.

only a metre from the line. Almost simultaneously, the engine hit the switch and the train hurtled past on its race to destruction.

Although an official estimate put the train's speed at only 25km/h when it sped through the station, many passengers claimed it was nearer to 50km/h. Mr C. Burge, the engineer in charge of the bridge building, who had a clear view of the accident, agreed with the passengers.

The engine was rocking so violently as it raced through the station that it tore away a section of the platform before careering on into the parked goods trucks, standing 200 metres along the siding.

Passengers were by now screaming hysterically as the runaway engine ripped into the trucks. The force of the impact hurled the first truck several metres into the air, before falling in a shower of splintered wood and twisted iron.

The engine reared almost upright, then somersaulted, its couplings snapping as it plunged into the river. There it settled, half submerged and almost hidden by a cloud of steam as the water poured into its fire-box.

Wilson and Pye rode the footplate right to the end, fighting a desperate but vain battle with the useless brakes. Pye was thrown several metres out into the river and was rescued, seriously injured. Wilson, however, was flung beneath the engine and crushed to death.

The woodwork of the leading carriage — a Redfern — was smashed to splinters and its steel chassis twisted beyond recognition. The following heavy American carriages had rammed it hard up against the engine.

Almost immediately after the deafening roar of the collision, there came a series of violent explosions as gas cylinders under carriages exploded. All that was needed now to complete the disaster was fire.

As railway officials and men working on the bridge raced to the scene, they were met with the agonised screams of the passengers, trapped in the tangled wreck of the telescoped carriages, some of which now teetered dangerously over the bank of the river.

With axes, crowbars and their bare hands the rescuers attacked the wreckage, free-

ing those still alive and cutting their way into those still trapped. Four bodies were quickly recovered.

There was no doctor within 20km of the ferry and medical supplies at the station and on the bridge site amounted to little more than first-aid. More than 70 injured passengers were carried to the station, where one of them died soon afterwards. Within minutes, the death toll had risen to six.

Many of the passengers were cared for at the nearby Hotel Brooklyn until a train, converted into an ambulance, left for Sydney at 4.30pm. As survivors scrambled from the wreckage, many ran to the station's telegraph office to send messages to relatives and friends that they were safe.

Horrified by the enormity of the tragedy, the telegraph operator was unable to operate his Morse key and one of the passengers took over.

When news of the tragedy reached Sydney, a special train, carrying the Railways Commissioner, G.A. Goodchap, other senior railway officials and a number of doctors left for the crash site. By the time they reached Peat's Ferry, however, there was little they could do.

Shortly after, a board of inquiry was set up by the Department of Railways. It released its finding on July 15, the same day as a coroner delivered his finding on the six victims.

The coroner found that the driver, Wilson, was not to blame for the crash. He found that the engine was not powerful enough to haul such a load and that railway supervision in safety matters was lax.

The railways board of inquiry, however, placed the blame squarely on driver Wilson, saying that he had allowed the air tanks, which operated the brakes, to become exhausted.

These diametrically opposed views resulted in such a heated controversy in the press that the then Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, promised to refer the whole of the evidence to a leading barrister for his opinion.

Nothing came of the promise. And there the tragedy of Peat's Ferry — a tragedy which could have been of greater proportions — ended.