

Tragedy stalked 5.55 to Hurstville

As the 5.55 from Redfern rocketed through St Peters and thundered down the track towards Sydenham passengers began looking up from their newspapers and gazing out in vague alarm.

Three nights previously on the evening of February 12, 1901, the 5.55 had arrived at Hurstville several minutes late. The driver this Friday was obviously determined to be on time.

Some in the leading carriage craned their necks out to watch their little tank-engine bucketing along the line ahead. With no slackening of speed they roared through Sydenham, the people on the platform looking on in surprise at finding her two minutes early.

Downhill towards Tempe they raced. Suddenly, as the branch line to Belmore peeled off to the right, the leading wheels jumped the rails and ploughed along the sleepers a short distance.

Then, as the passengers in the front coach remembered, they had a split-second glimpse of the funnel of the engine rearing skywards before being hurled violently from their seats as engine and carriage collided in mid-air.

The coach split right down the centre while turning a complete somersault; the engine landed on its wheels again, ripped down a signal-post and crashed through the level-crossing gates of Bridge St, Sydenham.

With steam still spouting from its funnel, it finally came to rest in the road outside a two-storey house.

Nine people died and 25 were seriously injured in the worst NSW railway passenger accident since the original service, Redfern to Parramatta, opened in 1855.

The first major disaster on January 25, 1885, had been at Salt Clay Creek near Cootamundra when the Melbourne-Sydney mail train plunged into the creek killing seven.

It was pure mischance, the telegraph line being down and the driver having no means of knowing that a local flood had washed away part of the track. Human error though was purely responsible for the spectacular runaway on the Hawkesbury line two years later.

The holiday excursion train was so hopelessly overcrowded on leaving Strathfield that the driver was obliged to divide his train in two and haul each half separately up one difficult gradient approaching Hornsby.

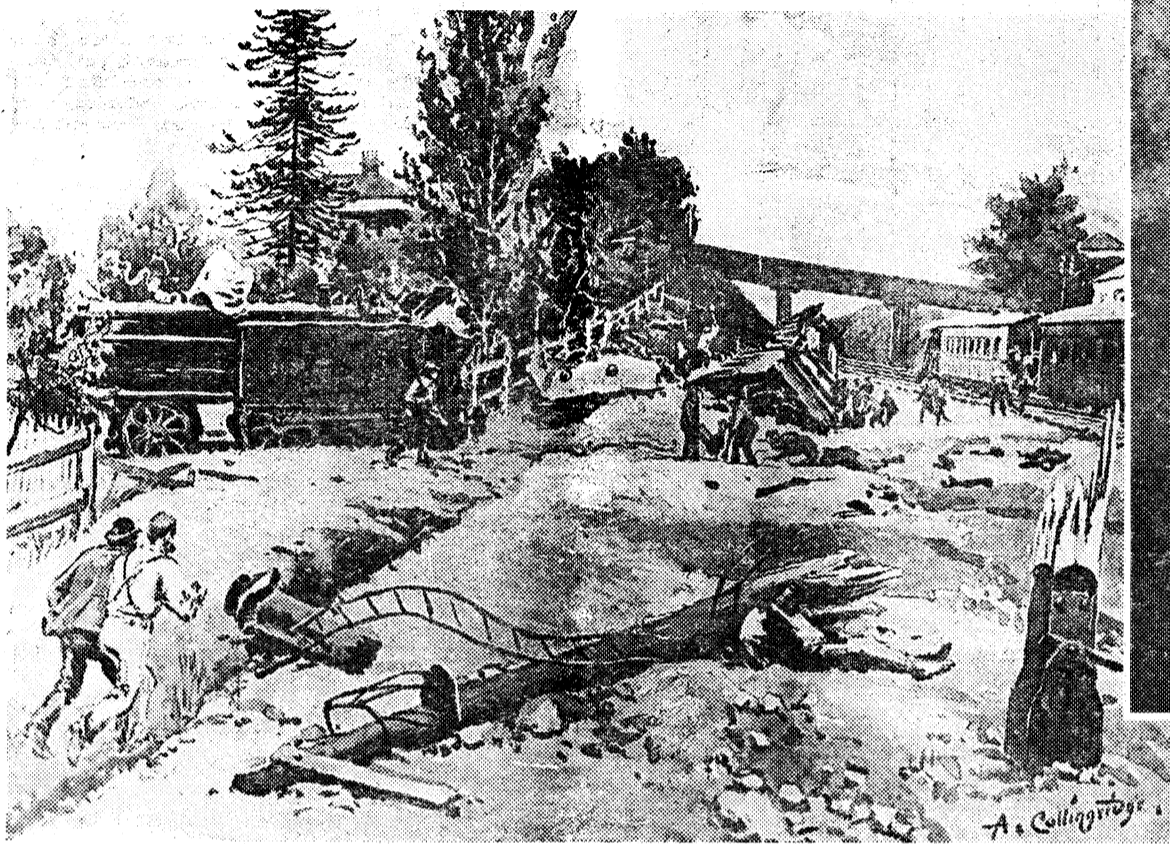
Then, to make up time, he seemed to forget about the brakes altogether on the long downhill run to the river. Hurling round the curves at dizzying speed, the packed train was out of control as she finally straightened up and headed for Peats Ferry station.

Sensing the peril, a quick-thinking railway employee heaved over the points and diverted the charging monster on to a siding where it piled into a row of trucks. Five passengers were killed instead of the hundreds who must have drowned had she gone into the river.

So nearly a tragedy of monumental proportions, the Peats Ferry disaster claimed the public's attention for the next few weeks as more details and little accident items came to light.

In the circumstances, a derailment on the main track at Newtown when locomotive F-363 left the rails rated barely a paragraph.

Two more similar derailments though, involving this time the



same class of engine on the northern Newcastle-based network, demanded an investigation.

In a report to NSW's three railway commissioners the F-class engine was condemned as "unsuitable in design for NSW tracks".

Ten however had only recently arrived from Beyer, Peacock of Manchester. With the colony already experiencing a serious shortage of locomotives, six more were being made by Henry Vale at Auburn in Sydney and delivery was expected any day.

The weakness of the F-class in engineering opinion was that these small engines were incapable of generating sufficient cylinder power to build up full adhesive weight on the rails.

That was coupled with the fact that their centre of gravity, 15 inches behind the driving axle, meant the locomotive tended to develop a remarkable pitching and rolling movement when travelling at speed.

The system however was too short of engines to dispense with the F-class, although in 1899 following several more derailments it was restricted to working suburban lines where high average speeds to maintain timetables was not so necessary.

The three commissioners under the masterful Edward Miller Eddy had other things on their minds in the 1890s - first and foremost being the recently-formed Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association.

The chief commissioner is very properly concerned, wrote one leading Sydney newspaper, that "if he is not to govern, but to be governed instead by the union, then he will lose administrative control and be unable to check extravagance and waste".

The commissioners' response to the growing influence of the union movement was to bear down heavily on all unionist employees.

Thus when driver Matt Doyle failed to get the 5.55 to Hurstville on time one evening in February 1901 he was summoned to Redfern head offices for an interview.

He found the officials there completely uninterested in any ex-

planation of why he was late reaching Hurstville. He was simply reminded of the dire consequences if it ever happened again.

Doyle, a veteran who had driven every kind of engine on every line in NSW and was now confined to relief work because of rheumatism, left the office, an aggrieved man. "Next time I get the 5.55," he told guard, Alf Bull, "I'll let her have it."

He got the job again three nights later, grumbling this time that his light engine, in fact the same F-363 that had run off the rails at Newtown in 1887, should not be expected to draw eight fully-loaded coaches and still keep to schedule.

He kept his 18-year-old fireman frantically busy in working up to 37 mph at Erskineville signal-box. A minute later and a mile farther on they were opposite St Peters box meaning they had covered the last mile at an average 60 mph.

Luggage kept dropping from the racks. Travellers gave up trying to read their newspapers as the line of carriages lurched and swayed through St Peters and Sydenham.

They would have been even more concerned if they could have seen the left-hand flanges of the leading wheels trying to mount the rail at every joint.

Construction teams engaged in replacing the original 24-foot rail lengths with 40-foot rails had reached only as far as Sydenham on the Illawarra line by 1901.

Bolted together with the new six-bolt fishplates, the track was now less likely to develop a distinct drop at the point where one rail met the other.

Beyond Sydenham though the train reached that part of the line not taken up since first laid down in 1884 and there the inevitable happened. The front wheels found a rail which worn bolts had caused to sink half an inch lower than the next one.

The locomotive's two nearside main wheels rode up on to the top of the rail, travelled diagonally across it and dropped on to the outside. Ten metres farther on, the far side wheels did the same thing.

As the engine suddenly shot into the air, the young fireman was flung from the cabin and killed in-

stantly. Driver Doyle on the other hand escaped with only head injuries and a broken leg.

In the guard's compartment at the rear Alf Bull felt only a minor shock as the engine left the rails. He assumed Doyle had had to brake sharply at a signal.

Then he looked out to see the engine standing in the middle of Bridge St. Nearby lay the splintered wreckage of the front carriage as the rest of the train sailed on for another 200 metres before Bull slammed on the brakes and the seven coaches squealed to a halt.

The guard raced back to the wreck as the steam engine finally spluttered into silence and the screams and moans of more than 30 badly-injured men and women filled the air instead.

Their bodies sprawled beside both sides of the track; seven were dead already. Two more died in the ambulances that rushed the more critical cases to Marrickville Hospital.

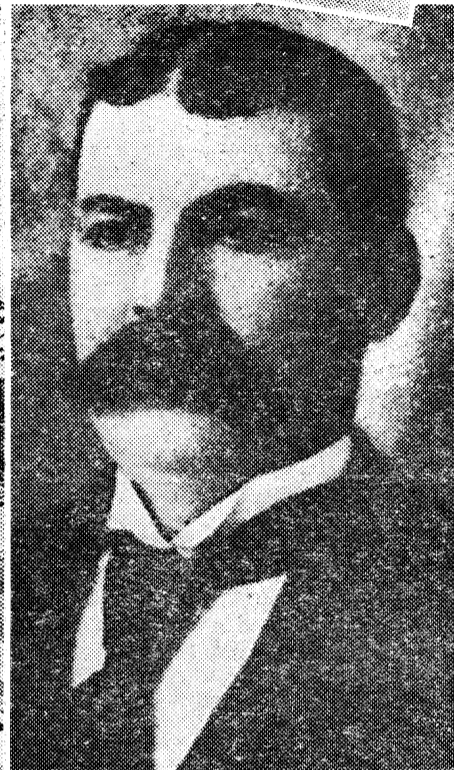
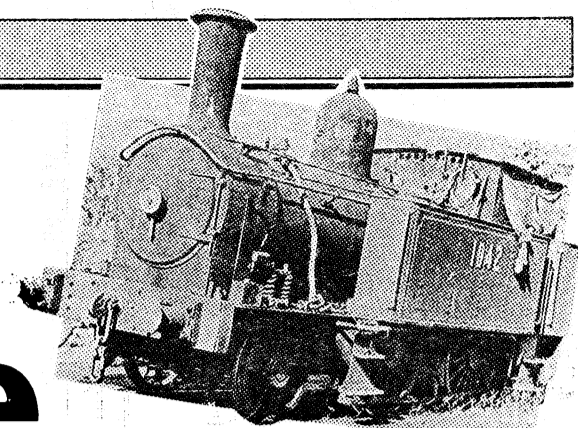
A coroner's inquest into the deaths was undoubtedly the most searching public inquiry the department had ever had to face. The F-class engine, the state of the track, the excessive speed of the driver, all came in for severe criticism.

Waiting tensely for the jury's verdict some months later though, Matt Doyle found himself unexpectedly relieved. The engine having been selected as the main scapegoat, the whole class was then removed from passenger service and the driver kept his job.

Yet they had been excellent little engines in their way. Long after steam was removed from all main lines in the State they were still doing shunting work around the locomotive works at Cardiff near Newcastle in the 1970s.

Meanwhile the Sydenham disaster had produced some good out of bad. For years the rail unions backed up by the emerging Labor Party had been pressing for the manufacture of locomotives within the colony.

The free trade interests were the ones against it. They preferred to see the engines continue to be made in England rather than ex-



The unstable F-class engine (top) which veteran Sydney train driver Matthew Doyle (above) drove when the 5.55 from Redfern to Hurstville left the tracks in February, 1901, killing nine people. An artist's impression of the scene is shown at left

pand the railway repair shops at Eveleigh St which would then only increase the number of people in Government employ.

"Look at the present list of labor disputes in the colony," wrote the Sydney Mail in 1890. "Of those which remain unsettled we have the seamen versus the steamship companies, the shearers versus the pastoralists. Do we now want the railwaymen against the Government?"

Men's livelihoods were at stake however. The opposing point of view was put by William Willis, MP for Bourke, when addressing a gathering of maintenance men threatened with dismissal that year.

"If 600 men are to be treated in the way proposed," he told them, "it is your sacred duty to stop every engine running. You should take this Mr Eddy, this tyrant imported from England, by the throat and strangle him."

The Sydenham crash was certainly good publicity for the Labor cause. Opinion was swinging around gradually and in 1906 the Government finally bowed to union pressure and awarded a contract for the construction of 60 locomotives, passenger and freight, to Clyde Engineering of Granville.

They were to be built to the design of William Thow, the railway's chief mechanical engineer who had been designing engines for NSW tracks since 1889.

He too would have preferred Beyer, Peacock as the manufacturers, yet he had to admit after Clyde had completed the job that their P and T-Class engines were an outstanding success judged by the highest international standards.

Eveleigh St too was expanded to manufacture locomotives. By 1912 its workshops employed 3270 people, with Australians proving to the world that, in manufacturing at least, they could compete with the best in the world.