

Pea-soup fog was chief ingredient in rail disaster

THE fog was thick enough over Melbourne on the morning of July 12, 1910, to be grasped like snow and squeezed. And it was just as heavy at Richmond railway station about 3km north-east of the city's heart.

And it certainly hadn't lifted to any extent by nine o'clock when the train from Brighton left South Yarra. The pea-souper had made it late and by the time it reached its next stop at Richmond it would be 20 minutes behind schedule.

Fog-signalman Emmett who stood under a signal mast about 700m on the South Yarra side of Richmond station heard the train coming but, because of the opaque atmosphere, didn't see it until it actually rattled past him.

But he did see the signal arm drop to the stop position and the green light change to red.

Emmett was about to bend and clip detonators to the rail when there was a roar and he saw the express from Elsternwick shoot out of the gloom.

By this the packed Brighton train was stationary at Richmond's No. 1 platform taking on more passengers. The Elsternwick express was roaring towards it on the same line. Death was but moments away.

Now all were aboard the Melbourne-bound Brighton train and the guard Michael Davitt stood on the platform waiting for the all-clear signal from the station attendant.

The signal came and Davitt turned to board his train. He froze as he heard the familiar sound of a train travelling at speed over the Swan St bridge. It happened about 20 seconds later.

DYING

According to the usual schedule the Elsternwick express that suddenly speared out of the fog and ploughed into the rear of the Brighton train should, at that moment, have been standing at South Yarra nearly 3km away.

But something terrible had gone wrong and now nine passengers were dying and 475 were lying injured alongside the litter-strewn Richmond station.

The explosive impact rammed the stationary train 15m forward. And the charging locomotive blasted its way completely through the guard's van and into the rear coach.

The Brighton train was made up of eight packed coaches, one of which was old and flimsy. Caught between two heavier coaches it was compressed like a con-certina.

Two other carriages were rammed together with such force that the colliding ends were lifted high in the air and came to rest like an inverted V.

Logic would dictate the casualty list should have been much higher than it was. Among those who might have been expected to die were the crew of the Elsternwick express's locomotive.

As it was the two men, Driver Millward and Fireman Burke, bleeding, burnt and dazed, were able to

HISTORICAL FEATURE

stagger out on to the platform where they collapsed. But they were not dead.

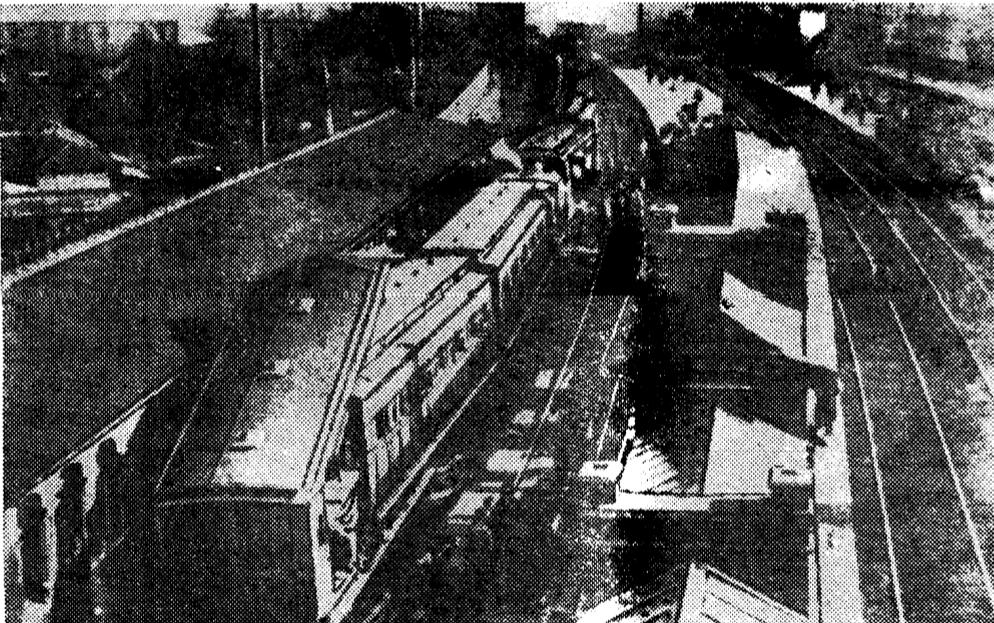
Although the Brighton train's rear section had been reduced, in some areas, to little more than matchwood, passengers near the engine felt no more than a severe jolt as the train was rammed forward.

In fact the first inkling they got that something serious had happened were the cries of terror and agony that rose up over Richmond station.

more seriously injured from the ruins of the last coach of the Brighton train. So many casualties lay in this carriage that blood could be seen dripping from it.

There was bedlam out on the streets too. The sound of the collision came like a thunderclap causing traffic to halt and customers and staff in their hundreds to rush from shops and businesses.

The sight they saw momentarily stopped them in their tracks. Then they



The crash scene at Richmond station soon after an express rammed into a stationary commuter train on July 12, 1910. The collision left nine dead and 475 injured.

But if they heard the cacophony of disaster they could see nothing when they clambered from the train for the fog was still opaque.

Then a slight breeze caught the meteorological curtain and lifted it just enough to reveal the full extent of the disaster. The platform swarmed with men, women and children, staggering, falling, blood-covered, screaming.

Others, still in the train's wrecked sections, were trying to force open jammed doors. Some clambered through shattered windows and suffered horrible wounds from jagged glass in the process.

Part of the two trains rested on the Swan St bridge. Here terror-stricken passengers were scrambling, crawling or falling like ants on to the narrow space between the carriages and the parapet.

To make the confusion even more frenetic commuters on other platforms — disregarding the possibility of other trains emerging from the fog — began crossing the tracks to the collision scene.

There they joined in attempts to haul the

poured forwards, overwhelmed the porters who tried to hold them back and surged towards the station entrance.

The first horror of the van of this unwanted undisciplined mob of would-be rescuers saw caused many to retreat.

It was one of the passengers from the wrecked carriage. He was insane with shock, his face was a mask of blood and one hand was

hanging by a sliver of skin. Screaming that he was "lucky to have missed the train," he ran down the street for about 100m. Then he fell unconscious.

DEMENTED

But if shock demented many of those who survived the Richmond wreck, one who kept his head was the cadet journalist Norman McCance who was later to become well known as a sporting broadcaster.

McCance had taken a severe shaking at the moment of impact but when he realised he was not seriously injured he scrambled from the train right into the thick of the milling crowd that swarmed on the platform.

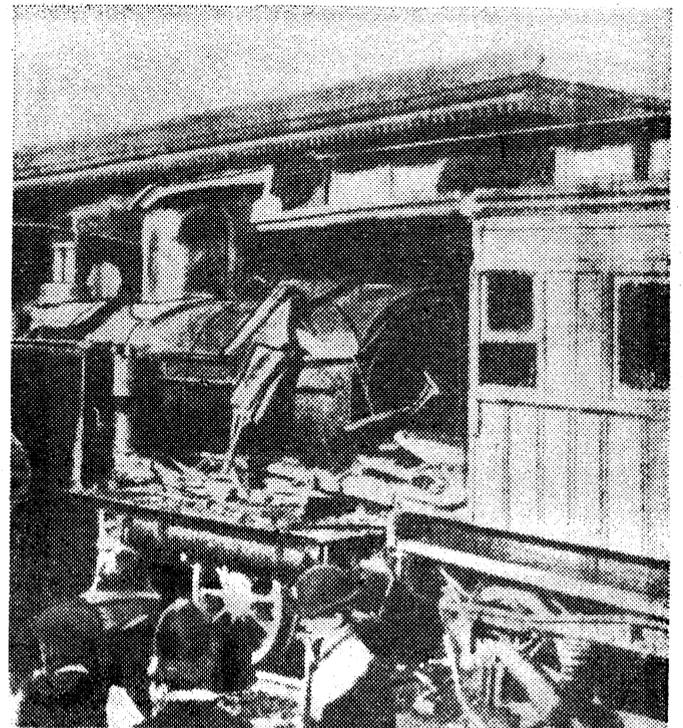
Stepping over mutilated bodies he literally fought his way through the mob, out of the station and across the bedlam in the street to a post office.

The post office's door was jammed with staff but McCance overcame that problem by a combination of curses and solid shoulder butts.

Now he practically commandeered the local telephone service and ordered calls to be sent to every doctor, ambulance service, fire brigade and hospital in the area.

Once that was done he got through to his newspaper in Melbourne and dictated a detailed account of the collision. Now he dashed back to the station to get the first list of casualties.

It later became obvious



The locomotive of the Elsternwick express and the last carriage of the Brighton train. The roof of the shattered carriage lies over the engine's boiler.

also improvised splints, stretchers and bandages and then carried the injured to shops which were being used as clearing stations.

Newspapers reacted to news of the catastrophe quicker than the crew of the Flinders Street accident train, for lists of casualties were being posted outside paper offices even before the train reached Richmond.

The transmission of these lists as well as scores of other calls related to the collision almost caused the collapse of the Melbourne telephone system.

At neither the city nor the central exchange could the switchboard girls cope with the volume of calls. In fact some became hysterical and burst into tears.

In the end so many girls collapsed under the strain that engineers from headquarters had to be called in to take over from the exhausted operators.

But the system still remained in chaos and worried relatives of passengers on the Brighton and Elsternwick trains, abandoning all attempts to contact railway headquarters by phone, made for the crash scene in all types of conveyances.

The first government official to reach Richmond was Prime Minister Andrew Fisher who, although exhausted by an all-night sitting of the Federal Parliament, did all he could to aid the rescue parties.

After leaving Richmond Fisher spent the rest of the day visiting victims in hospital and ensuring they would be adequately looked after when discharged.

Although the local movie industry was in its infancy, the Richmond crash was responsible for film-making taking a great leap forward.

When news of the crash reached Melbourne the Pathe company rushed a cameraman to the scene.

Death at Richmond station

Many victims were so deeply buried in debris that they could not be seen and rescue workers could only toss aside wreckage and hope they were going in the right direction towards the moans they could hear.

One of the first finds was a decapitated body still grasping an attache case in a hand.

Now the doctors began arriving and with them a number of university medical students who were on their way to lectures in other trains.

These young men gave first aid to minor cases and

The film was processed that day and shown in St George Hall, Bourke St., that evening.

It was that all for the movie was then put aboard the night express and the following evening Sydneysiders were able to view the aftermath of a train crash that shocked the nation.

Meanwhile by late afternoon on July 12 railway breakdown gangs had hauled the wreckage away and the line was being used for normal operations.

But in 1910 two world wars and several decades of inter-

national crises and major disasters had not yet immunised the people against a tragedy of this dimension and Melbourne went into shock.

In official circles the effect was akin to panic for only two years before a worse rail tragedy had occurred at Sunshine killing 44 and injuring more than 400.

And in between the two rail horrors there had been several other incidents which, although comparatively minor, had shaken confidence in the Melbourne rail service.

Now, coming on top of these crashes, the Richmond disaster threatened to topple the State Government.

INQUIRY

Soon after the crash a board of inquiry was set up to pinpoint its cause. The board deliberated for months but could not come up with a definite answer.

The matter was then taken over by the city coroner Dr R. H. Cole, who was charged with finding why the nine who died at Richmond station had lost their lives.

Dr Cole didn't spend months probing the matter. Actually it was all over in three hours and a definite verdict was brought down.

The coroner found the deaths had been brought about by an honest mistake made by the South Yarra signalman who, having worked a 12-hour shift, was too tired to carry out his work efficiently.

The most amazing aspect of the Richmond crash was the small number of dead.

Considering the force of the impact, the lightness of the carriages and the fact that the two trains carried more than a thousand passengers, a much higher death toll could have been expected.

And the Government was lucky for compensation to relatives of the dead and the 475 injured cost it only \$200,000.

Had scores died — and experts said that could easily have been the case — the payout would have considerably lightened the Treasury's coffers.