

Tracks of death

Cries for help rent the foggy early morning air in northern London on October 8, 1952. The anguished calls came from amid the wreckage of three trains. In all, 112 died, 280 were hospitalised and another 200 were treated at the scene. It was to be the worst rail disaster in England's history.

The tragedy occurred when an overnight sleeper train from Perth, Scotland, gathered speed and roared through the mist at more than 110km/h into the rear of a commuter train from Tring in Hertfordshire bound for London's Euston Station. This second train had been stationary at the time of the disaster.

Seconds later twin-locomotives hauling the heavy Manchester Express gathered speed for the long gradient and hit the wreckage of the other two trains.

At first the rescuers at the Harrow And Wealdstone Station dug through the debris by hand. They stopped every few minutes to listen for any sound indicating life under the debris.

Some of the less severely injured and people living near the crash site also worked to rescue those still entrapped.

As well, fire officers helped contain what could have become an inferno.

For many onlookers the crash could have been a return to scenes from World War II, which had ended only seven years previously.

Victims were impaled on steel girders, others crushed between bulkheads or under loads of coal and some were scalded to death by escaping steam.

As horrific as the accident was, greater carnage was avoided due to a fortuitous change in timetables that week.

Usually the train which left from Tring was much more crowded, mostly with office workers.

On this particular week, however, due to the changed timetable the train would be an express for the last 20km into London.

Consequently, fewer passengers had boarded the train before it arrived at Harrow And Wealdstone. At the station, 322 passengers boarded the eight-carriage train.

A signalman had switched the train from the slow line to the fast line just north of the station.

Meanwhile, the 11-coach train travelling from Perth was already more than 30 minutes behind schedule, partly because of fog. Passengers in the sleeping cars of that train were already getting their luggage ready to take off the train at Euston.

The train, which was being pulled by the City Of Glasgow locomotive, was still more than 550 metres from the Harrow And



Destroyed beyond recognition . . . rescuers sift through the debris of England's worst train disaster

Triple train collision killed 112 and injured hundreds

Wealdstone Station when an alert signal man spotted it approaching.

He pulled the lever to lay down stop detonators on the tracks but the City Of Glasgow driver did not heed this warning signal and continued at speed towards the station. Furthermore, the driver ignored the fast line signal being in the caution position and did not brake until the last moment.

By then a collision could not be avoided and the train jack-knifed into the air, ripping away an overhead bridge and striking the Tring-Euston train.

Pieces of both trains landed on the tops of station buildings and nearby tracks.

Part of the wreckage flew on to the line carrying the fast-travelling Manchester Express which was being pulled by two locomotives. This third train then careered into the wrecked carriages.

Gathering wreckage along the way, the disintegrating express train hit platforms where the impact swept waiting passengers off their feet.

Sixteen carriages from this third train were so extensively damaged that they became an unrecognisable tangle.

Meanwhile, the two locomotives

attached to the express had mounted a platform, blocking the local electric line.

Coal shattered the plate glass window of a shop window and a flying suitcase knocked one man unconscious in the street after he left a nearby hotel to see what was going on outside.

Among the rescuers was a survivor from the Manchester express, F.W. Abrahams, an official with Midland Region whose experience as a Battle of Britain senior air raid warden equipped him to cope with the train disaster.

Despite cuts and burns Abrahams climbed out of the tangled wreckage and from the main platform contacted rescue services.

Among those he asked to help was Colonel Eugene Coler, chief surgeon of the 70th US Air Division which was stationed near the accident site. Coler organised for extra supplies of blood plasma to be brought to the scene.

A 15-year-old local Florence Lee also helped. She carried hot drinks to rescue workers and survivors until she herself collapsed from exhaustion after 24 hours.

At the end of the day 87 bodies had been recovered.

Rescue work continued into the night with arc lamps and magnesium flares lighting the way.

When there was no hope of finding anyone alive oxy-acetylene torches were used to cut into the metal.

Identification of all the bodies took weeks because of the severe injuries suffered by many.

It also took weeks for officials to sort through mail carried on both the train from Scotland and the Manchester Express.

Among the dead were Jones and Turnock, the driver and fireman on the Perth train plus three of the Manchester Express crew.

The resultant inquiry blamed the City Of Glasgow driver who had not heeded the signal instructions which were set at stop.

The Harrow And Wealdstone crash was the first major one since the government took over British Railways in 1948 and today remains the second worst in British history.

The worst was the 1915 crash where 227 soldiers were killed in a collision on the Scottish border.

Another accident similar to the 1952 disaster occurred in 1957 when an express crashed into a stationary train at Lewisham killing 90.

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