

Million-to-one disaster

Chain of freak events in rail crash

By CHRISTINE MIDDAP
in London

IT was a million-to-one disaster, a sequence of freak events which could have ended safely if things had been different by just a few metres, just a few seconds.

If Gary Hart had lost control of his Land Rover anywhere else on the M62 he would not have ended up on Britain's fastest rail line.

If the 4.45am express from Newcastle to London had been running even a minute or two late, Mr Hart's desperate mobile phone warning could have been passed to the train driver in time.

If British Rail had not lifted its post-Hatfield speed limit on the line last week, the express would have been travelling at no more than 120km/h, rather than the 200km/h at which it slammed into the Land Rover.

If luck had been on the side of the estimated 100 passengers and crew, the line ahead would have been clear and the express, off the rails but still upright, would eventually have ploughed to a halt in the track ballast.

Instead, a freight train carrying 1500 tonnes of coal was only seconds away, too close to be warned and, although the driver jammed on his brakes, far too close to stop.

The wicked combination of circumstances ended with the trains hitting head-on near the North Yorkshire village of Great Heck at 6.12am turning the track and nearby fields into scenes of carnage.

Nigel Metcalfe, one of the first ambulance officers to reach the accident, said it was as if a bomb had exploded.

"The carnage was appalling," he said. "You could hear mobile phones going off inside the mangled carriages."

Besides the 13 people who died, including two train drivers, 75 more were hurt, at least eight seriously.

The disaster left the beleaguered rail industry reeling yet again. But for once, investigators were not focusing on causes such as mechanical failure, human error or management incompetence.

Deputy Premier John Prescott



Firefighters search through the wreckage after the train collision at Great Heck near Selby, 320km north of London, yesterday.

Picture: AP



The wrecked car lies across the track

'While the operator was speaking to him we heard him shout: 'The train's coming', and then there was a bang'

— police spokesman

told the Commons: "These are a set of circumstances that defy belief. If I had come to the House and said that we would get an accident in this particular way, I think most people would have said it is not possible."

Police were still waiting to interview Mr Hart, 36, from Alford, Lincolnshire, who was said to be too shaken to be questioned fully.

He had been towing a Renault

car on a trailer to Wigan when he is believed to have suffered a tyre blow-out.

The bridge over the railway track is protected on either side by 36m of crash barrier.

But Mr Hart careered across the hard shoulder before the start of the barrier, then somehow drove along the side of the embankment, rather than tumbling down it.

He escaped virtually unhurt,

and was making an emergency call from his mobile when the passenger express loomed out of the dawn gloom.

"While the operator was speaking to him we heard him shout: 'The train's coming', and then there was a bang," a police spokesman said.

Mr Hart was being comforted by his wife Elaine last night.

"He will be absolutely devastated by this," his mother Margaret said.

13 killed in horror UK rail smash

By CHRISTINE MIDDAP
in London

THIRTEEN people are confirmed dead and 130 others injured after a London-bound passenger train collided with a freight train in northern England yesterday.

Four hours after the crash the desperate sound of knocking and a female voice crying for help could still be heard from one of the nine derailed carriages of the Great North Eastern Railway train.

"We are looking at 15 [fatalities] at the moment but I'm sure that number will rise," British Transport spokesman Andy Selby said.

At least 30 passengers rescued from the twisted carnage of the Newcastle to Kings Cross high-speed train were seriously injured, including the driver.

The freak accident happened when a Land Rover pulling a trailer, laden with an estate car, crashed off the M62 motorway bridge on to the tracks near the north Yorkshire town of Selby about 6.15am local time.

It was struck by the passenger train travelling at 200km/h and carrying about 150 people. The partly derailed train continued along the tracks before colliding head-on with the freight train travelling at 120km/h and carrying 1000 tonnes of coal.

Police said the driver of the low loader made a frantic call to emergency services to warn of the danger minutes before the accident.

"While the operator was speaking to him we heard him shout: 'The train's coming', and then there was a bang."

The driver escaped uninjured.

The crash has plunged British train services into chaos and spells a new disaster for the British Government.

Train services in Britain were only just returning to normal after the Hatfield crash in Hertfordshire which killed four people last October. In October 1999, 31



Wrecked carriages beside the tracks.

people were killed in one of Britain's worst train disasters at Paddington in London.

Last night, as driving sleet and snow battered the Selby crash site, witnesses described a scene of devastation.

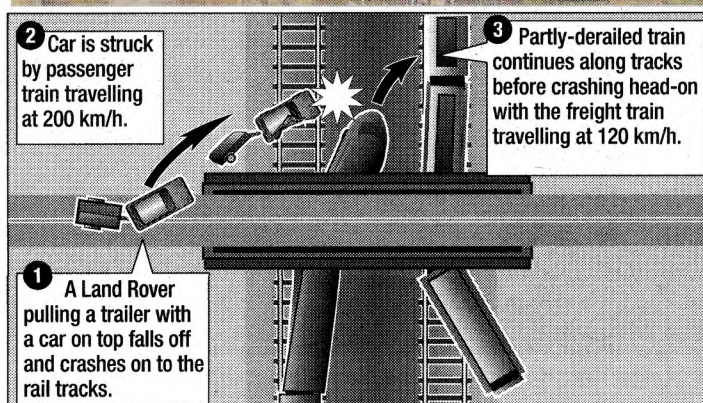
A passenger on the GNER train, Janine Edwards, 22 told how she escaped uninjured from the crash.

"I heard screaming and shouting and the lights went out. I held on to the table in front of me and then there was a huge impact," she said.

"My carriage was on its side. I was lucky, I was still in my seat, clinging to the table. But one lady, who was travelling with her daughter, had been flung into the air and was lying in the next corridor.

"The man opposite me was streaming with blood. His wife sitting next to him was covered in his blood."

As the weather hampered the rescue, the partially derailed freight train lying on its side, was lying in the back garden of a house. The freight train driver spotted the danger but could not stop in time.



The scene of the rail accident near Selby in north Yorkshire.