

Quintinshill Rail Disaster – 100 Years On



Photo: Electric Edwardians

One hundred years ago the worst accident in British railway history occurred at Quintinshill, near Gretna Green in the Scottish borders. At 3.45am on 22 May 1915, a troop train carrying 498 officers and men of the 7th Battalion the Royal Scots – many of whom were from Leith – left Larbert in Stirlingshire en route to Liverpool. They were due to head for the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey where casualties in the Great War had been tragically high.

About 6.49am, this train, travelling at high speed, collided with a local passenger train which had been shunted on to the main line at Quintinshill. Seconds later, an express train travelling from Glasgow to London ploughed into the wreckage.

The troop train, with its antiquated gas lighting system and wooden carriages, quickly became a blazing inferno. With the huge demands on the railway network as a result of the Great War, old rolling stock had to be pressed into service, hence the age of the train. The raging fire engulfed all three trains and another two goods trains nearby.

216 men of the 7th Battalion the Royal Scots perished in the disaster along with 11 others including the driver and the fireman of the troop train. A further 246 people were injured. At a roll call taken later that day, only 65 men were present. Initially, these men were sent onwards to Liverpool but, following a medical examination, were sent back home for two weeks leave.

Of those who died, some bodies were unrecognisable and the bodies of 50 men were never recovered. Four of the bodies at the crash site were children. The remains of those men who could be identified were returned to the Battalion's drill hall in Dalmeny Street in Leith and burials took place in Rosebank Cemetery, Pilrig Street on 24 May 1915. The funeral cortege was lined with thousands of people from Dalmeny Street to the cemetery. Coffins were laid three deep, each row covered by a Union Flag, in a ceremony which took three hours and ended with the Last Post. A memorial stands in the cemetery today with the names of those who died.

The cause of the disaster was a result of poor working practices on the part of the two signalmen at Quintinshill. George Meakin, who had shunted a local passenger train on to the main line for operational reasons, should have been off-duty, but due to an informal arrangement between himself and the relieving man, James Tinsley, continued to work until his arrival. Meakin also omitted to place a locking collar on the levers of the southbound signal. Tinsley, preoccupied writing his log from the notes left by his colleague, overlooked the passenger train standing in full sight of the box and accepted the troop train from the north, clearing the signals for the approaching train.

The troop train ploughed into the stationary passenger train, creating a scene of devastation and carnage. Within about a minute, a northbound express ran into the wreckage causing further destruction and killing and injuring many who had survived the first impact. To add to the horror, hot coals from the locomotives then set fire to escaping gas from the troop trains lighting equipment and the debris of the timber carriages quickly became an inferno.

After legal proceedings in both Scotland and England, both signalmen were put on trial afterwards, as well as the fireman of the local passenger train who, it was alleged, failed to protect his train.

The trial ended after just a day and a half. Meakin was sentenced to imprisonment for 18 months for culpable homicide while Tinsley was sentenced to three years hard labour. The fireman of the local passenger train was acquitted.

A tragic day for the families of the husbands, fathers, brothers and friends who were lost in what is the saddest entry to the history of Leith in modern times. It has been said by some historians that no family in Leith was unaffected by the tragedy. It was also Edinburgh's tragedy with casualties from Portobello and Musselburgh.

Events in Gretna and in Leith – where a march to the Rosebank Cemetery is scheduled for tomorrow morning – will commemorate the tragedy.

Leith, Edinburgh and the nation will never forget them.