

Remembrance 2018 – A harrowing account of the Quintinshill rail disaster

Just over one hundred years ago a disaster unparalleled in the history of British railways and one of the most catastrophic to have occurred on railways anywhere in the world, took place early one bright summers morning in 1915 at a quiet siding at Quintinshill, just over a mile and a half from the border town of Gretna.



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Regiment were killed or injured on 22 May 2015

It took place in wartime so news of the accident soon disappeared from the front pages to be all but forgotten, and it was only during the 1960s that many people became fully aware of the terrible tragedy that had taken place near the Scottish border that May morning. The dreadful calamity involving five trains remains the country's heaviest loss of life in a rail accident to this very day.

The 7th Royal Scots was a volunteer battalion that had been raised at Dalmeny Street in Leith within days of the outbreak of the First World War, and would become known as 'Leith's Own'. Initially used to guard coastal defences around the city, the regiment would later leave from the Central Station in Leith bound for Larbert where they would complete their training, each man receiving the gift of a pipe, lighter and cigarettes from the Leith Provost Malcolm Smith on behalf of the Town Council before making their way to Stirlingshire.

Their training completed, on the morning of 22nd May 1915 two troop transports containing the soldiers of the 1/7th Royal Scots, left Larbert on their way to Liverpool and eventual embarkation to Gallipoli.

The first train that left around 4am reached its destination safely, but as the second troop transport containing 470 men and 16 officers from A and D divisions plus the machine gun and signalling sections that had left Larbert two hours later, approached Quintinshill around 6.50am, it collided with a stationary local train standing on the same line.

A slight curve in an otherwise straight track meant that the driver of the troop transport, estimated to have been travelling at around 70 mph, would only have been able to see the local train almost at the last minute and a collision was inevitable. Within seconds, the 21 carriages of the troop

train that had measured well over two hundred yards in length had been telescoped into a space less than a third of its size the first half dozen carriages disintegrating completely as its engine catapulted the stationary train propelling the latter back almost a 100 yards, the wreckage spread over both main line tracks.

The situation could well have been worse, but fortunately the rear half dozen wagons containing the ammunition and other explosives had broken free on impact and remained largely undamaged both by the collision itself and the resulting fire.

The survivors from the troop train, most of whom had been asleep at the time of the collision, stumbled from the wreckage in a dazed and shaken state. Those that were still able immediately returned to the carnage in an effort to rescue their colleagues still trapped in the wreckage, completely unaware of the further calamity that was bearing down upon them. Just under a minute later the north bound Euston to Glasgow express ran through the wreckage of both trains wreaking further destruction and devastation in the area creating scenes of confusion and unimaginable horror.

Frantic efforts had been made, not only to stop the express but also to warn rescuers already at the scene, but this had been to no avail and the express ploughed through the wreckage.



Quintinshill is near Gretna

The abnormal demand by wartime traffic had created a shortage of carriages and the troops had been travelling in obsolete wooden stock lit by gas lamps that had been hurriedly pressed into service. Soon the entire area had been turned into a blazing inferno, the fire so severe that the paint of the nearby signal box was blistered by the incredible heat. Several minor explosions were heard, most believed to have been caused by the detonation of small arms ammunition, but there were several reports that some of the trapped soldiers had been shot by their colleagues before they could be engulfed by the approaching conflagration.

Because it was such a lovely spring morning many people were out and about and nearby farm workers and villagers who had heard the collision were joined by many of the passengers from the express train including a contingent of Royal Navy sailors, who all did their best in trying to rescue those still trapped in the wreckage and also to give what aid they could to the injured.

An ambulance train sent from Carlisle would later be joined at the scene by doctors and nurses from Edinburgh and Glasgow. It took some time for the fire engines to travel the ten miles

from Carlisle, but once on the scene, hampered by an inadequate supply of water, the nearest stream being over 200 yards away, little could be done to extinguish the flames and the fires burned for the rest of the day until nothing was left to burn.

As the seriously injured were rushed to Carlisle Infirmary and other hospitals in the area, many of the more serious cases dying on the way, the dead were being laid out in a nearby field, the recognisable on one side and the unidentifiable on the other. Some nearby farm buildings and the village hall at Gretna Green were later utilised as makeshift morgues, while those with less serious injuries were housed temporarily in the Gretna area, many in private dwellings.

Over 200 declared dead

At the end of the day over 200 had been killed including the driver and fireman of the troop train, and over 240 injured, many seriously. At a roll call taken around 4.00pm that afternoon only 67 soldiers were capable of answer. Those that were still able were initially sent on to Liverpool to continue their journey to Gallipoli, but thankfully reason prevailed, and the men were returned to their homes to recuperate. Because the register had been lost in the fire and many of the bodies totally consumed by the flames, the exact total will never be known, but it is believed that 214 soldiers and nine civilians had lost their lives in the terrible accident. As well as the bodies that had been totally consumed by the flames, over eighty had been charred beyond recognition and the final total may be significantly higher.

It later turned out that signalman James Tinsley had been due to start work at 6am but had an unofficial arrangement with the nightshift man George Meakin that he could start 30 minutes later, an understanding that allowed him to catch a lift to work on the local train thereby avoiding the mile and a half walk from Gretna. Because entries were required to be

made in handwriting, any traffic reaching the signal box after 6am could not have been recorded officially by Meakin, their movements after this time merely written on a slip of paper.

Meanwhile, because the down loop was already occupied by a goods train the local had been shunted across to the main up line to allow the much faster Euston to Glasgow express to pass, a procedure not unknown at the time. Incredibly, although he had just travelled to work on the local which was still sitting just yards from the signal box and in clear view, Tinsley later claimed to have completely forgotten all about it as he copied the entries into the official log, and sent the troop transport forward to collide with the stationary train.



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In Leith

As news of the accident slowly started to filter back to Edinburgh, anxious crowds of relatives began to gather at the Drill Hall in Dalmeny Street eager for news, many of the women quite understandably in tears.

On the Monday evening many of the bodies arrived back at Leith Central Station, ironically the scene of their original departure for Larbert, and although it had not been publicised, a large crowd already lined the route all the way from the station to the drill hall where the bodies would lie overnight. Because of the dreadful condition of many of the remains, the coffins remained closed to spare the relatives any additional suffering.

Many of the soldiers received private funerals, several buried either at Easter Road cemetery close to the football stadium and others at Seafield, but over a hundred were laid to rest with full military honours at a service at Rosebank cemetery in Pilrig to which the general public were excluded. The cortege took several hours to travel the short distance from the drill hall to the cemetery, the entire route lined with soldiers from the 15th and 16th Royal Scots, the surrounding streets packed with thousands of the general public who had come to pay their respects in their own individual way.

An impressive memorial sculpted by John Rhind, who had also carved the statue of Queen Victoria at the Foot of the Walk, was later raised at Rosebank Cemetery recording the names of those interred in the graveyard, and a bed in Leith Hospital was dedicated to their memory by mourning comrades and friends.

ENQUIRY

An official enquiry held at Carlisle a few days after the disaster laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of Tinsley, Meakin and to a lesser extent Fireman George Hutchison whose

job it had been to ensure that certain safety procedures had been followed, and all three were committed for trial charged with involuntary manslaughter due to gross negligence. At the trial at the High Court in Edinburgh a few months later that lasted just one and a half days, the jury took only a few minutes to find both Tinsley and Meakin guilty and they were jailed for their part in the catastrophe, Tinsley for three years and Meakin for 18 months. Fireman Hutchison was acquitted of all charges.

Tinsley and Meakin were later released early after serving just 12 months, and incredibly, both were reemployed by the Caledonian Railway Company, a concern not noted for its generosity of spirit regarding its employees, Tinsley as a lamp man and Meakin as a goods train guard. It is also alleged that the families of both had received the men's wages while they were in prison, prompting a conspiracy theory that they had agreed to act as scapegoats as part of a cover up for any deficiencies in the safety procedures of the railway company.

It has been suggested since that Tinsley may have been suffering from epilepsy at the time of the accident and that this could well have been the reason for his catastrophic oversight, but no medical evidence has ever been produced to support this theory. What is known however, is that for sometime after the accident he was close to a mental breakdown and far too ill to be interviewed, which was probably understandable considering the horrific circumstances, and he would almost certainly have been suffering from post traumatic stress.

Because the accident had occurred in wartime a rumour had circulated that the cause had possibly been due to sabotage and that a large hoard of gold coins had been found in Tinsley's house, but this theory was quickly ruled out.

GEORGE MEAKIN

On the afternoon of the tragedy George Meakin could be seen serving drinks in the pub his wife owned in the Gretna area, and was seemingly overheard making the joke that the newspaper reporters and others who had flocked to the area in the wake of the accident was good for business. If true, either he felt that he had played no direct part in the disaster, or more likely, like Tinsley, he could possibly have been suffering from post-traumatic stress.

In later years after being made redundant by the railway, Meakin would set up in business as a self employed coal merchant with a yard directly adjacent to the scene of the accident, and one can only begin to wonder at his thought's as he arrived at work each morning.

James Tinsley died in 1962, George Meakin in 1950.

Perhaps the saddest story is that of the four young children whose bodies were never identified and later buried in an unmarked grave in the Western Necropolis in Glasgow. It is now thought that the carriages of the troop train had been brought through from Maryhill and that the children had possibly been stowaways seeking adventure.

In 2011 a memorial to their memory was finally raised at the graveside.

The register of soldiers involved in the awful tragedy reveals that most were from Leith and the surrounding areas and it has been claimed that at least eight had been on the books of Hibernian Football Club at one time or other. It is also believed that the father and two uncles of the future Hibs and Scotland player Bobby Combe were amongst the survivors. Although there is no distinction in death it is not stretching the imagination too far to believe that many of the casualties would have supported the Easter Road side.

Today nothing remains to suggest that it was once the scene of a disaster unparalleled in British railway history. The nearby farm buildings have gone, as has the signal box that was demolished in the 1970's, the track layout slightly altered, making it difficult to even begin to imagine the horrors that had occurred here exactly one hundred years ago.

In 1995 a memorial to the disaster was erected at Larbert Station and another near the famous Blacksmiths shop at Gretna Green. In September 2010 a memorial was also unveiled on Blacksyke Bridge that overlooks the site of the disaster.

The soldiers in the earlier train that had reached Liverpool safely would later depart bound for Gallipoli and a disaster of a different kind, the ill conceived campaign resulting in many thousands of casualties on both sides and eventual humiliation for the Allies.

Now part of the 52nd Lowland Division, at Gallipoli the Royal Scots would take part in the actions at Gully Ravine, Achi Baba and the battle for Krithia before the embarrassing evacuation the following January due to the horrific number of casualties both from Turkish bullets and disease.

Later the Division would see action at Sinai and Palestine before taking part in the second battle of the Somme in April 1918.

The battalion would be disbanded in May 1919.



Martin Scott and Alex Mallia from Scots in the Great War Living History on board the restored railway carriage in Leith on Saturday 10 November 2018.

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