

## Meldreth

### Alarming Accident on the Railway

#### One Man Killed and Others Injured

An accident of a most extraordinary character, attended with fatal results to one man and injury to others, occurred near the [Meldreth Railway Station](#) on the Hitchin, Royston and Cambridge Branch of the GN Railway about midday on Tuesday last. The goods train, known as the NO. 8 up from Cambridge to Hitchin, which is accustomed to draw into a side line just outside the Station while the express passenger trains pass, had arrived at Meldreth Station in due course, made up of about 35 wagons, some loaded and some empty. The side line upon which this shunting for the expresses takes place, runs by the side of the down line for some distance on the Royston side of the Meldreth Station; consequently when a long rain, such as that of Tuesday, had run into the siding the engines would be a considerable distance from the Station, and the tail end of the train a short distance clear of the Bridge crossed by the road from Melbourn to Meldreth. Just on the Royston side of this Bridge, and in a line with the metals of the siding stood a very substantial hut, built with sleepers used by the platelayers and others working on the line, and about a quarter past twelve on Tuesday when the accident happened, there were four men sitting in the hut eating their dinners, with the goods train standing still in the siding which ends close to the hut. There are two express passenger trains, the down express (passing Royston about 12.10, and the up express stopping at Royston at 12.10) which pass through Meldreth Station down and up just about the same time, about a quarter past twelve. As soon as these have passed it is customary for the goods train, on receiving the signal, to "set back" and cross the points of the siding on to the main line.

On Tuesday the driver, named Wm. Turner, the fireman Edward Shepherd, and a porter named Vellam, were on the engine, and the guard named John Worker, was some little distance down the line. Through some misunderstanding, which has yet to be explained, the driver backed his engine before the points had been moved, with the result that instead of the rear of the train turning on to the main line it continued down the side line towards the unprotected end, where the workmen's hut was standing. The four men who were in the hut having their dinner, unconscious that anything was going wrong with the train, were, Frederick Dilley, aged 67, of Baldock; Wm. Pearce, aged 63 of Melbourn; James Mabbitt, of Baldock; and [Thomas Abrey](#), of Melbourn. Just outside the hut, on the end of the line, the workmen had left their trolley standing. Before the poor fellows had had time to realise what was happening the train had backed into the trolley, smashed that up and came crashing into the hut, in which the men were sitting. The hut was completely demolished, and the four men were crushed and imprisoned under the sleepers in such a position that any hope of escape alive would seem out of the question. Fortunately the Station Master was able to obtain the services of a break down gang, and efforts were at once made to release the four men. Dilley and Pearce were sitting on the side of the hut next the metals, and had the greatest crush upon them. It was soon seen by the rescuers that Dilley was dead. Of the two men, Mabbitt and Abrey, the latter was able to creep out through an opening between the sleepers, and strange to say was unhurt, only getting his coat torn. It was more than half-an-hour before the other three men were rescued from the ruins. Dilley, who must have been killed instantly as he was in the act of eating his food, with his knife in his hand, was conveyed to the Station close by. Pearce, who was crushed and appeared seriously hurt, was placed upon the trolley and taken to his home in Melbourn, and Mabbitt, when

released after his long confinement beneath the sleepers, appeared not so much hurt. Dr Bindloss was sent for but was out, and came immediately on his return home. Meanwhile messengers had come up to Royston on an engine, and Mr Balding was fetched and travelled back on the engine to Meldreth Station.

The sad affair cast quite a gloom over the neighbourhood. Information was sent on to Baldock, and the son of the deceased man Dilley came down by the afternoon train to see his father. Though the exact circumstances under which the train was set in motion are best known to those who will be called to give an explanation at the Inquiry, a great deal of surprise has been expressed that the train was started at the moment, and under the conditions which must have existed to cause such a disaster.

### **Opening of the Inquest (from the same paper)**

The inquest on the body of Frederick Dilley, who was killed in the accident, was opened at the [Railway Tavern](#) near the Railway Station, Meldreth, on Wednesday evening by A J Lyon, Esq. Coroner for Cambs.

There were also present Inspector Grant, of the Police Department, GNR; Mr Sinclair, of the Locomotive Department; Mr Kelly, District Superintendent of Cambridge, and Mr Scott, Station Master of Meldreth.

The following were sworn on the Jury: Messrs George Palmer (foreman), [J F Blomfield](#), John Bowman, Alfred Elbourn, Andrew Howard, [Geo. Hale](#), Thomas Kelshall, Samuel Mulberry, Mark Palmer, W J Sanders, Amos Warren and Wm Pullen.

The Coroner, upon the Jury being sworn, said: I propose simply that the Jury shall view the body now, and I will take evidence of identification, and if the doctor is here, take his evidence, and then adjourn to some day that may be convenient for most of you; probably next Tuesday.

The Jury then went to view the body of the deceased, lying in a building on the Station premises, and upon their return the following evidence was taken.

George Dilley said: I live at Baldock, and am a foreman platelayer on the Great Northern Railway. Deceased, Frederick Dilley, was my father and lived at Baldock. He was a labourer, and went about anywhere on the line for odd jobs and had worked for the Great Northern for many years. His age was 67.

The Coroner: Was he deaf at all? He was a bit deaf.

You saw nothing of the accident? No, sir.

Edmund Frederick Bindloss, who made affirmation, said: I live at Melbourn and am a surgeon. I saw the deceased at twenty minutes to two yesterday afternoon. I was sent for to the Meldreth Station. I was out when they sent, and went immediately after my return. I saw the deceased in the Station office. He was dead. I examined him. He was crushed to death. The body, and notably the head and neck, was of a purplish colour. I examined the chest and found the ribs on the left side had been torn away from their attachment, and there must have been considerable pressure.

The Coroner: At this stage I think it would be convenient to adjourn, and I should like to know what day would suit the Jury best. We want to give time for the officials of the Board of Trade to get to

know, and decide whether they will attend or not. As three or four days will be sufficient for that, I think myself that Tuesday in next week would be a convenient day, at the same hour?

Mr Kelly: Earlier if you can. There will be so many men have to be brought here.

The Coroner: Then we will adjourn till Tuesday at half past four, and in the [Parish Room](#), as there will be a good many representatives here I understand.

Inspector Grant said he was instructed by the Great Northern Railway Company to say that at the adjournment the Company would be represented by a solicitor and every possible information would be given. He would like to say also that this poor unfortunate man was working as a superannuated man. He was employed at 14s a week just to keep him in work.

Mr Kelly: As a labourer. He had been employed as a platelayer many years.

The son here said his father had worked on the line for 45 years, for the Great Northern and Great Eastern together.

Mr Kelly said it was a matter of kindness to keep the man employed at such work as was suitable for him. When this happened he was just barrowing some stones from one place to another. He did not want the impression to be formed that he was actually at work on the railway itself. He was really employed in the yard sweeping up and keeping the place tidy.

It was then arranged that the time for the adjournment should be 4.45pm on Tuesday next at the Parish Room, Meldreth, and the Jury were bound over to attend on that occasion.

## **Herts & Cambs Reporter, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1896**

### **Accident**

#### **An Unfortunate Mistake**

#### **The Adjourned Inquest**

On Tuesday at the [Parish Room](#), Meldreth, Mr A J Lyon, Coroner for Cambridgeshire, and a Jury, of whom Mr G Palmer was Foreman, resumed the inquiry into the death of Frederick Dilley (67) of Baldock, a workman employed on the Great Northern Railway, who was killed, and two others injured, by a goods train running into the hut in which the men were sitting at dinner on Tuesday August 18<sup>th</sup>.

Mr Jackson and Mr Thomson, solicitors, appeared for the GNR Company; and Mr Passingham, solicitor of Hitchin, appeared to watch the case on behalf of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. Mr Cannon of the Engineers' Department; Inspector Grant of the Police Department; Mr Kelly, District Superintendent (Cambridge); Mr Hawkins, Locomotive Department (Hitchin), and Mr Scott, station master at Meldreth, were also present. Supt. Wilderspin and Sergt. Ding were in attendance, and assisted the Coroner with the witnesses.

[Alfred Gray](#) said: I live at Chiswick End, Meldreth, and am a signalman employed on the Great Northern Railway. On the 18<sup>th</sup> inst. I was on duty at the [box](#) at the [Meldreth Station](#) at about 12.15. A luggage train had come from the up road from Cambridge and crossed over into the down siding, engine first. I never noticed anything until I heard a smash. I looked out at once and I saw the train

backed straight down out of the siding instead of coming into the main line. The points were not moved – it backed onto the platelayers' hut.

The Coroner: Had you given any signal for it to move? -I had given no signal at all. There are two disks, one inlet and one out, in connection with the siding. The disks were all over right.

Were they both against the train moving? -Yes sir.

Was it improper for that train to move with the disks against them? They should not have attempted to come out of the siding until the points and disks were over. I did not leave my box at all, and saw nothing further of it.

Are these points worked from your box? -Yes sir.

Was anyone in the box with you? Yes, three: Knott, a signalman, and two "indicating" men. They had nothing to do with the working of the line at the time.

William Turner said: I live at 98 Nightingale Road, Hitchin, and am an engine driver on the Great Northern Railway. On the 18<sup>th</sup> inst. I was in charge of a luggage train as driver. About 12.15 we shunted on the down road and drew into the siding.

Who was on the engine with you? -Edward Shepherd, the fireman, and shunter Vellam.

What took place? When the down express had gone about two minutes shunter Vellam shouted, "right! Come on back; they are calling you back." He repeated this twice.

Yes, and what did you do? -My fireman took the break off and I put back.

Could you see any signals against you? -I did not look on the \_\_\_\_ to see if all was right, but I looked at the other side and I acted in the usual way in taking the work from the shunter.

That's what you commonly do? -Yes. I backed the engine and saw a wagon of straw jump as if off the road. I shut off steam and put the break on as quickly as I could, and said "We are going off the road." Vellam was on the side of the engine with the fireman. At the same time, almost before I could get the break on properly, I felt a slight bump, not much: as if we had struck a wagon.

If you had looked towards the disk could you see it at that distance? -On a clear day I might perhaps if I had crossed to that side, but on a dull day –

Was the day dull? -Yes, it was drizzling with rain at the time.

What did you do after that? -I left the engine all right and went down to see what we had done to the hut. The train had gone off the catch points and the break lay right on the hut, in which the deceased was. I afterwards saw him got out.

What are the regulations with regard to disks and points and signals: -You should, by the regulations, see them off before you start.

Not the points? -You cannot see them.

You are ordered to see the signals or disks right before moving: -Yes, the shunters and guards should see it, before they call us back from the other end, which is too far off, or receive a hand signal to that effect.

Are the signals given by hand in that case only? -A flag is sometimes used, but not in a place like that. Flags are never used by shunters.

Would you take a hand signal from any person you thought to be employed by the Company? -Not from anyone, but from a shunter or anyone I considered responsible.

Receiving the word from Vellam was, of course, sufficient for you? -Yes, sir.

A Juryman: Who do you generally take the orders from, at the back? -The guard, and shunter as well, we are allowed at the station to take signals from.

The Coroner: And, of course, the box signalman too? -Yes. There were 35 wagons and a break on the train. It would occupy about 210 yards and we might be two or three wagons inside the points.

By Mr Jackson: I was on the right side of the engine and the disk would be on the other side.

The Coroner: Would that be next the main line or the fields? -Next the fields.

[Thomas Abrey](#) said: I live at Cross Lane, Melbourn, and am a platelayer on the GNR. On the 18<sup>th</sup> inst. I was in the hut with the deceased about 12.15. I had been in about five minutes then. We were having dinner at the time. I heard a crash and the hut came in at once. It fell on two of the other men, including the deceased, and Mabbitt was penned in by some sleepers. I had not heard the train moving but knew it was in the siding. Some bricks fell on my legs. I shifted them and sat up and held up my hands, but the train had stopped. I then helped to get Mabbitt out. Mabbitt called to me, but I did not hear deceased speak, but I saw Dilley got out and I helped to take him to the office. He appeared dead.

At the end of this point was there any buffer stops? -No sir. A heap of sleepers lay at the end of the hut.

Is it usual to have a buffer at the end of catch points – do you know any others anywhere? -No, only these.

Are not the catch points for the purpose of throwing the train off the main line? -Yes, but this is not a catch point, there is only one pair of points. I consider it a dead end or a safety point from the main line; they cannot get on to the main line that way.

Where were these sleepers? -About 18ft from the end of the rails against the end of the hut.

A Juryman: How far would the break go before it got to your hut? -About 28ft.

Where there were no rails at all? Yes, sir.

By the Coroner: The sleepers were lying not cross ways but length ways with the line. He had not measured it, but he should say that the hut was about 28ft or 29ft from the end of the line.

Mr Carr-Jackson: Twelve yards is the exact distance.

William Vellam said: I live at Chiswick End, Meldreth, am a goods porter on the GNR and have been in their employ about four years last December. My general duties are seeing to the goods work in the yard. I have nothing to do with the shunting of trains as a rule – not into the siding. On the 19<sup>th</sup> inst. I was on the engine with the driver, Turner, in the siding.

The Coroner at this point said it was his duty before the witness gave evidence of what occurred to caution him that he was not bound to say anything that might incriminate himself.

Witness said he quite understood.

The Coroner: Then you are at liberty to make a statement if you wish.

Witness: I went down for the purpose of attaching some wagons to the front of the engine to draw them back to the points when they came out again. After the express trains had gone I was looking out on the side of the engine on the left hand side, next the main line. I saw someone beckon – give a hand signal, waving his hand above his head. I turned to the driver and told him “right, come back.” I know nothing further till I felt the wagons buffer up against the engine. I got off the engine and went to the hind part of the train and found that the points had not been pulled over, and that the train had run into the hut.

Would you like to say who it was that beckoned? -I cannot say, I saw the signal and I took it to be for the train.

Would you like to say where he stood: -He appeared to be straight over to the signal box, or somewhere close to.

By the Jury: I do not know who to think it was.

How far would they be, against the signal box?

Mr Carr-Jackson: It is about 150 yards from the signal box to the points. It would be 410 yards from the engine to the signal box.

A Juryman: Is it not usual for the guard to stand at the points when the train comes out?

Witness said he did not know.

By Mr Passingham: The signal given was the ordinary “come back” signal. It was given from outside the signal box.

The Coroner: From the station? -Yes, sir, it was close to the signal box.

John Worker said: I live at 24, Radcliffe Road, Hitchin, and I was the guard on this train on the 18<sup>th</sup>. After it went in the siding I gave a signal to the driver to stop and I put my hand brake on after it got in the siding. I instructed the signalman in the box that the train was clear of the roads. I went from the line for two or three minutes to get my lunch. I heard a slight crash but did not know what happened. I was just going to the signalman to know if he was ready for us to set back, and from what he said I went to my train and I saw through the sleepers the deceased lying dead. I was much shocked and do not remember anything more.

Did you notice the disks and points? -They were properly closed.

Against your train coming out of the siding? -Yes, sir.

Had you seen any man waving his hands against the box? -No, I saw no hand signal given in any way.

Did you see a man and a little girl? -I am not sure about the little girl, but I saw Chapman against the platelayers’ hut.

By a Juryman: We do not use a flag in shunting goods trains.

The Coroner: Is it not according to regulations to do so? -No, sir, only with passenger trains.

A Juryman: What is the usual manner of giving a signal? -I should have held my right hand up and wave my left, which is according to regulations.

A Juryman: Are you supposed to superintend the shunting? -Yes, sir. I gave the signal when it went in.

By the Coroner: Before the crash I went to the signal box to set the signal for my train to come out of the siding.

What sort of coat was Chapman wearing? -I cannot say. I did not take that notice.

By a Juryman: When it happened I was in the station yard just against the goods shed, when I heard the crash. I could not see the train for the Bridge.

Daniel Chapman said: I live at Rose Lane, Melbourn, and am a foreman platelayer on the GNR. On the day in question I was on the line near the signal box. I stood there till the down train went and I was waiting for my child. I got her over the fence and proceeded to the hut to have my dinner with my mates. I had crossed the line nearly opposite the signal box about 12.10. I heard a crash when going up the line with my dinner with my little girl. It might be a quarter past twelve or more. When I got within a chain of the hut I heard the crash.

When you left the signal box did you walk up the line: -I walked between the down road and the siding.

Would they be able to see you from the engine of this train? -I don't know. I was not thinking anything about any trains. I could not say whether I could see the train. The down line is straight at that point and the siding also. I was against the disk nearest to the ridge when I heard the crash.

In calling your little girl did you wave your hands? -I did not. I did not call her. I did not wave my hand when against the signal box. I was wearing a black coat, only faded by the weather.

Did you blow any whistle when against the Box? -No, sir. I stood against the box leaning over the fence, and my little girl saw me and crossed the stubble field and I helped her over the fence.

A Juryman: Would she see you unless you gave some sign? -Yes, but if I had made a sign no one could have seen me up the line there, as I was leaning over the fence.

John Reed said: I live at Meldreth and am a miller's carman [[at Topcliffe Mill](#)]. On the 18<sup>th</sup> inst. I was just coming out of the station yard. I had been fetching corn away. As Chapman was crossing the line he beckoned his girl to come along – to hasten on I suppose with his dinner. At that time Chapman was against the signal box. I saw no more of Chapman and did not hear anything?

Has Chapman said anything to you about this accident?

Witness hesitated.

The Coroner: You must tell the Jury what it was if anything was said.

Witness: He said he did not want me to make use of his name.

With regard to what? -This accident.

Did he hold his arm up when he beckoned? -Yes.

By a Juryman: Chapman's girl was not over the fence when he beckoned, but in the field?

By another Juryman: I should be about twenty yards off Chapman when he beckoned.

The Coroner said that was all the evidence to be submitted to the Jury today, and he thought they would agree that it was sufficient to enable them to come to a decision. All the witnesses, with perhaps the exception of Chapman, had given their evidence in a very straightforward manner, and the witness Vellam, whom he had thought it necessary to caution, voluntarily made a statement.

They had heard that statement. They had heard the witnesses, and had seen their demeanour in giving evidence, and he thought they would hardly have much difficulty in coming to a conclusion. With regard to negligence in carrying on work of this kind, the law was that if anyone in carrying out his duty did it in a negligent manner, he was liable for the results of his negligence. The only man he thought, according to the evidence, who could have been guilty at all in the matter was the witness Vellam, but he had told them on this oath, and gave his evidence in a fairly straightforward way, that he saw a signal from someone waving his hand, and in such a way as would be done in signalling for this train. Thereupon he gave the word to the driver to back his train. He (the Coroner) thought if the signal had been so given it would have been in the ordinary course. Then came the question whether any such signal was given or whether Vellam without being negligent, could consider such signal had been given. They had heard the witness Chapman as to what took place at the box, and they had heard that he was calling to his little girl. He did not say that Chapman had not given evidence strictly according to his recollection of the matter, but what was more likely than when a person was calling to anyone else, he should wave his hand? It would not be a very important matter at that time when nothing depended upon it except the little girl's bringing the dinner a little quicker, and there would be no reason to suppose that Chapman would particularly remember that he waved his hand. But they had the evidence of Reed who saw him from the yard, and he noticed Chapman calling to the girl, and said distinctly that he saw Chapman beckon her and that in doing so he raised his arm. It was extremely probable that this was the sign that Vellam saw. Further they had his sworn evidence that he did see a signal which he took to mean that the train was to back, and the sworn testimony of the motion made by Chapman, which could reasonably or not as they might think, be interpreted into such signal. He did not think they would have any difficulty in coming to a conclusion that the death of the poor man was caused through sheer accident. However, it was for them to say, and if they thought there was such culpable negligence on the part of anyone as would warrant them in returning a verdict of manslaughter against anyone, of course, according to their oaths, they would not shirk their responsibility. He would ask them to consider their verdict.

The Jury then retired into an ante-room for about ten minutes, and upon their return the Foreman (Mr G Palmer) said their verdict was that they attached no blame to anyone, and that it was quite an accident. At the same time they wished to add that they thought the way of signalling rains spoken of in the evidence was rather a loose way, when a man beckoning to his could be taken as evidence to move on a train.

The Coroner said the representatives of the Railway Company were present, and he had no doubt would take notice of this rider to the verdict of the Jury. He might add, however, that this practice of hand signalling was in use all over England, and he was told on the Continent as well.

The Foreman said but 450 yards was a long way to see it.

The Coroner said no doubt a mistake had been made in this instance.

A Juryman asked why they could not use flags as for passenger trains, and then there would be no risk of any other person using it but the servants.

The Coroner then entered the verdict that death was accidentally caused by the train running off the line into the hut in which the deceased was. The rest of course would go as a rider.

The Inquiry then ended, after lasting for upwards of two hours.



