

Limerick men and the Kiltimagh Railway accident in 1916

by Joe Coleman

Kiltimagh Railway Station, in County Mayo, was the scene of one of the worst accidents in the history of Irish railways, when on the dark, damp, foggy night of Monday 19 December 1916, at about 5.45 p.m., six Limerick railway workers were killed and ten others injured, some seriously, when two trains crashed, about three quarters of a mile from the station at milepost 103. The accident occurred when a ballast train coming from Limerick ran through the station, and collided head-on with a goods special coming from Sligo. The impact caused both engines to become derailed and they sustained severe damage. The guard's van on the ballast train was shattered in the impact and six wagons of the goods special were reduced to matchwood. Wheels, bolts and heaps of twisted iron littered

both sides of the line for a distance of fifty feet.

The ballast train left Limerick at 8 o'clock that morning for Tubbercurry, a distance of 124 miles. It consisted of a J Class 0-6-0 engine No 187, with a six wheeled tender. The vacuum brake operated on all wheels and a hand operated brake for applying the tender brake blocks, was in working order on all its wheels. The total weight of its engine and tender was 64 tons and the train consisted of 21 flat wagons with drop sides with each full of sand, gravel and chippings (ballast), and a brake van at each end. The front van was six wheeled, with brake blocks on each wheel and it weighted 12 tons 2 cwt. The rear van was a four wheeler, with hand brakes on all units, weighed

10 tons and was occupied by the brakeman. In addition to the crew which consisted of a driver, fireman, conductor and brakeman, there were twelve permanent way workers (better known as 'navvies') who travelled in the front compartment of the front van, in the adjoining section was the train's conductor (guard).

Water was taken on and trains were crossed at Ennis, Gort, Athenry, Tuam and Claremorris, respectively. Progress was slow and Claremorris (Southern Yard) was not reached until 2 45 p.m. where it had to wait for line clearance until 3 50 p.m. While stationary the brakeman Mick Kelly, happened to be leaning out of his van, when he saw an elderly woman, wearing a shawl, walking towards him. As she passed, she



Group of Great Southern and Western Railway men at Limerick c.1916.



Kiltimagh Railway Station facing north in direction of accident

peered up at him from under her shawl and muttered "May God have mercy on those who are going to die today". Kelly thought that she was referring to the men fighting in the Great War, which was raging at the time. Little did he know that several of his colleagues were going to meet their untimely deaths within a few hours.

The goods special from Sligo was held at Swinford to allow the ballast train to cross down to Tubbercurry. However, more time was lost as the ballast train got stuck on the wet rails on the hill out of Claremorris and it had to be banked up the gradient, by an assisting engine in the rear. With the delay, it was decided to allow the goods train to continue on to Kiltimagh and cross the ballast there. The driver of the ballast train was Michael Hanrahan who was from Limerick, as were all the others on board. As he approached Kiltimagh, at first on a rising and then falling gradient he missed both the distant and home signals at danger and ran right through the station and met head-on with the goods train.

The driver of the goods special Maurice Curran, and the fireman Michael Murphy, had left Tuam for Sligo on the previous Saturday, with J Class 0-6-0 No.191, working 34 cattle wagons, which were picked up at all stations

along the way, to be returned to Tuam for washing and disinfecting before being put back into traffic. Fireman Murphy whose duties on that fatal day should have kept him in Tuam, as he had been detailed to wash out the boiler of the local pilot engine, but changed duties with the rostered fireman Pa Ryan. Curran saw the ballast train coming straight at them and shouted at Murphy to jump and run and so he did, but the jacket of his overalls got caught in the top strand of a nearby fence. As he stooped down to extricate himself, the front right spring of no 191 tender flew over his head, barely missing him, and lodged in a field close by. The front van was badly smashed in the impact and five men on board died at the scene while others were able to jump out and another man died on the way to hospital. Miraculously none of the crew of either train were badly injured, but six wagons on the goods special were reduced to matchwood.

An immediate investigation began and a team of senior Great Southern and Western Railway (G.S.&W.R) management travelled on the down night mail to Claremorris, where a special train brought them to the scene of the carnage. Gangs who had come by breakdown trains from Tuam and Limerick worked to clear the line, so that the heavy lifting gear borrowed

from the Midland, Great Western Railway (M.G.W.R.) at Broadstone could be used to release some of the injured and also re-rail the damaged engines. An engine from Sligo was also sent to the scene to haul the remainder of the wagons of the special that had not been derailed back to Swinford.

Railway police, local people and many outsiders stayed up all night to offer assistance as they removed the dead, who had suffered horrific injuries, from the debris with great difficulty. They were brought to Kiltimagh Station and were laid out in the waiting room, and another special train later brought their remains to Limerick. From there they were taken to their own homes in Oola and Castleconnell. A special train was also organised to take the injured members of the gang to Tuam Hospital, and after they were treated, the train brought them on to Limerick. Apart from the damage to the engines and wagons, there was a great deal of damage to the permanent way. During clearance of the track passengers were conveyed by road to their respective trains at Swinford and Claremorris.

The line was repaired and opened for traffic just two days later, on Wednesday 21 December. An inquest was held in Swinford on Thursday 28 December and found no blame attached to any of

the staff at Kiltimagh Station, but added there was neglect, not yet defined, of some officials of the company. In conclusion, Colonel Druitt referred to Driver Hanrahan's excellent record in the employment of the G.S.&W.R. He was aware that he had often taken trains of a similar composition, and was accustomed to working over the Claremorris and Collooney part of the line. However, he considered that on this occasion, he had not worked his train with sufficient care, under the conditions that prevailed, and of which he must have been aware. It is not known whether any legal proceedings were instituted against the driver, but he never drove an engine again, as he was 'grounded' immediately, and given a job in his local depot as a washout man.

Commenting on the report, the *Railway Gazette* was of the opinion that a number of fatal accidents during December 1916, were caused by freight trains overrunning stop signals, and that it was time that automatic train control was introduced. The paper noted with disappointment, that no such recommendation was contained in the document as issued. The driver of the goods special Maurice Curran retired in

1928 and the fireman Michael Murphy, was transferred to Limerick, where he retired in 1942. Andy Cosgrave, the guard was based in Tuam, but a native of Limerick, and resigned from the G.S.&W.R and joined the British Army in March 1917. Later that year he was sent to France, with an expeditionary

force and when the war was over he went back to work on the railway. Both locomotives involved in the crash were based at Limerick and were scrapped with the withdrawal on steam traction by C.I.É. in the early 1960's.

G.S. & W.R. Timekeeping of G. 15th Dec 1916

for Month of November 1916

No.	Loco	Class	Driver	Fireman	Guard	Start	End	Time	Remarks
1									
2	1					9 2			2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
3									
4	3					10 2	2 1/2		2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
5									
6	13					10	2 1/2	14 20 2nd Dept.	
7	9					1 3	10	5 20 2nd Dept.	
8	20					8	12	15 11	
9	20					2	14	12 4	4th Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
10	20					7	16	10 21	do
11	20					7	16	9 7	do
12									
13	20					3	15	8 7	2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
14	20					20	20	10 20 2nd Dept.	do
15	20					3	19	11 10	do
16	20					12	2	10 11	2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
17	20					4	4	7 6	2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
18	20					17	8	10 2 1/2	do
19									
20	20					6	25	6 6	2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
21	20					4	13	8 5	2nd Dept. (Limerick) 2nd Dept.
22	22					16	6	10 7	do
23	20					3	2	10 2 1/2	do
24	20					5	4	7 5	do
25	20					17	20	8 21	do
26									
27	20					2	11	6 20 2nd Dept.	do
28	20					6	18	10 20 2nd Dept.	do
29	20					28	28	10 2 1/2	do
30	20					4	8	0	do

Great Southern and Western Railway's timekeeping log for November 1916



A J Class Loco 116 arriving with a goods train from Sligo in 1962