

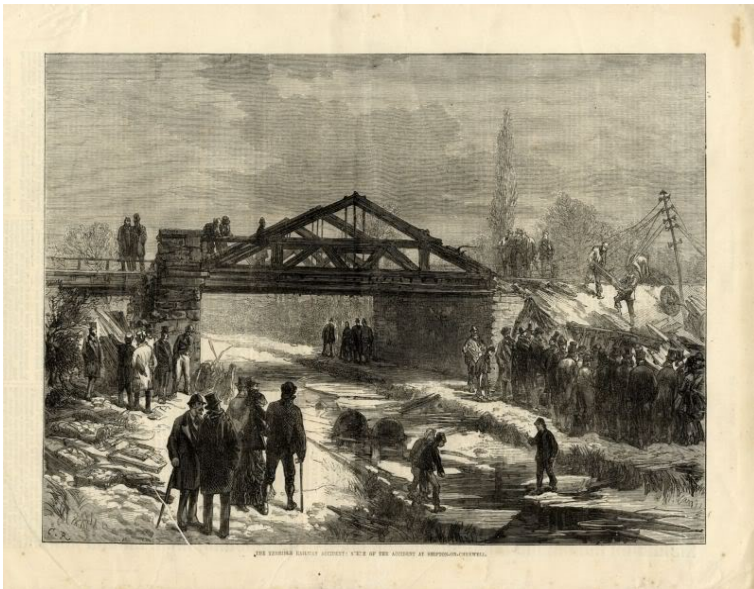
FAIRFORD HISTORY



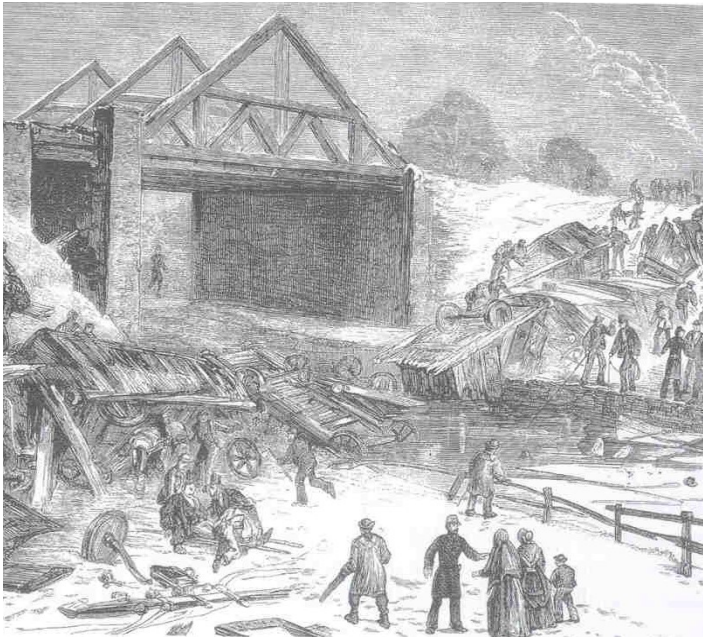
SOCIETY

A CHRISTMAS RAILWAY TRAGEDY

by Chris Hobson



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Illustrations — cover and above:
Sketches of the accident site at the railway bridge
over the Oxford Canal
Published in the Illustrated London News

A CHRISTMAS RAILWAY TRAGEDY

On the bitterly cold Christmas Eve morning of 1874 a mother and her two small children waited on the platform of Fairford railway station to catch the train to Oxford. Sarah Yeates and her two youngest children, Fanny aged five and Lizzie aged two, were travelling to Wolverhampton to spend the Christmas holiday with their relatives. However their much anticipated Christmas break would end prematurely in a disaster that would shock the whole country.

Born at Filkins near Lechlade in 1838, Sarah had married William Yeates at Highworth in 1857. Although the Yeates family was from Hannington, the 1861 census finds William and Sarah living at 65 Duke Street, Wolverhampton where William was working as a porter. A few doors away lived William's widowed mother Jane and his brother Edward. It is possible that the Yeates family had moved to Wolverhampton after William's father Thomas, a baker, had died in 1845. By 1871 William and Sarah had returned to Hannington where William is listed as the landlord of The Dog public house, the family having expanded to four children: Richard, Mary, Anne and Fanny. The two elder children had been born in Wolverhampton but the last two had been born in Hannington in 1867 and 1869 respectively.

After many years in the planning, the East Gloucestershire Railway Company opened its line to Fairford on 15 January 1873. The line was an extension of an existing branch line that led from Yarnton junction, on the main Oxford to Worcester line, to Witney and which was opened in 1861. The plans for extending the Witney branch through to Fairford, Cirencester, Cheltenham and Gloucester dates back to at least 1845 but opposition from other railway companies and a lack of funding had delayed construction. One of the prime movers behind the scheme was Fairford's John Raymond Barker who by 1874 had become chairman of the company's board of directors. Unfortunately, the line never proved to be the commercial success that had been hoped for and eventually the plans for proceeding to Cirencester and beyond were dropped and Fairford remained the terminus. Despite the disappointing lack of commercial return the Fairford line did provide residents of the town and the surrounding area with a greater opportunity to travel and also

brought in many tourists thereby benefiting public house landlords, shop keepers and local carriers. The branch line was managed and staffed by the Great Western Railway.

To travel to Wolverhampton Sarah and her children first had to catch a train from Fairford that would take them to Oxford in time to catch the main line service from Paddington to Birkenhead which called at numerous other towns on the way. It is not known which train she took from Fairford on that Christmas Eve morning. The 7.15 would have arrived at Oxford at 8.35 while the 10.15 would have arrived at 11.25. She probably took the early train to be in good time for the connection but in the event the London train was late anyway so either would have sufficed. The main line service left Paddington at 10.00 but at its first stop at Reading two more carriages had to be added due to the large number of passengers who crowded the platform. By the time the train arrived at Oxford it was already half an hour late. A further delay then ensued as yet another carriage had to be found to cater for Third Class passengers at Oxford. In addition to the extra carriage another engine was coupled at the front as it was thought that a single engine would have difficulty pulling the heavy train up some of the inclined sections of the line, especially as the rails were slippery due to ice and snow. The extra carriage (number 845) was older than the others that formed the train and was placed directly behind the engines. In total the train now consisted of two engines, two First-class carriages, two Second-class, six Third-class, two composite-class, and three brake vans.

The train eventually pulled out of Oxford station at 12.15, some 35 minutes late. As the train passed through the outskirts of Oxford and Kidlington out into open countryside it was travelling at about 40 miles per hour, probably as fast as it could go in the icy conditions. As the train approached the village of Shipton-on-Cherwell, about six miles north of Oxford, some of the passengers in the leading carriages noticed an unusual and increasingly violent vibration. Some passengers and a guard attempted to signal the drivers of the two engines but just as one of the drivers noticed the signals, carriage 845 shed a wheel and started to break up. The final moments took place in the short section of track between the bridges over the River Cherwell and the Oxford Canal, a section that was unfortunately situated on a 16-foot high embankment. As carriage 845 left the rails it broke away from the engine and dragged other carriages with it down the embankment. Several of the following larger carriages ran into 845 splintering it into matchwood.

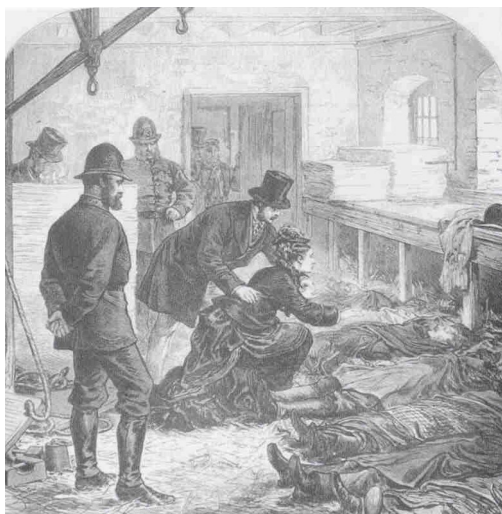
The two engines continued on the rails but all but four of the carriages and brake vans were derailed and fell down the steep embankment, the wheels from at least one of the carriages smashing through the ice that covered the Oxford Canal. One of the carriages had hit the parapet of the bridge over the canal which threw the carriage violently to one side and down the embankment.



The site of the 1874 accident today. The original wooden bridge over the Oxford Canal has been replaced by this metal bridge. This image shows the height of the railway above the canal as the line was situated on a 16 foot-high embankment in order to cross the canal and the River Cherwell less than 200 yards to the south. Carriages fell down the embankment on both sides of the canal with some wreckage landing in the water.

The crash occurred between the village of Shipton-on-Cherwell and the tiny hamlet of Hampton Gay and it was residents from these two villages that first arrived on the scene to offer what assistance they could. Graphic descriptions in local and national newspapers of the day portray a terrible scene with dead and maimed bodies as well as dazed survivors found amongst the debris of the carriages and their contents. It was estimated that the crowded train may have contained between 400 to 500 passengers, most of whom were in the carriages that were derailed and had slid down the snow-covered embankment. A doctor visiting a patient in Shipton arrived about five minutes after the accident and started splinting broken limbs straight away but most of the wounded had to wait for some time before a train with doctors arrived from Oxford. The reason for the delay was that the accident had damaged the telegraph wires that ran alongside the railway. Eventually help arrived from Oxford, Banbury and elsewhere and about 70 badly injured passengers were taken to Oxford, 53 of them being treated in the Radcliffe Infirmary, although four of them died during the short journey back to the town.

The gruesome task of recovering the remains of dead passengers had commenced even before help had arrived from Oxford. The nearest building to the accident site was a paper mill at Hampton Gay and it was there that the bodies started to be brought in. The mill was run by Mr Robert Langton Pearson who lived in the nearby 16th Century manor house. He and his workers spared no effort to bring aid to the injured. A total of 26 bodies were brought to the paper mill, many of them were passengers from the totally destroyed carriage 845, and some of them were initially unrecognisable due to their terrible injuries. Over the next few days relatives made the harrowing journey to Hampton Gay to view the remains to identify their loved ones.



The harrowing scene at the Hampton Gay paper mill as sketched by an artist from the Illustrated London News.

Eventually all the 26 bodies brought to the paper mill were identified by their relatives.

One of the relatives was James Yeates, William's brother, who had travelled down from Wolverhampton and who identified one of the bodies as that of his sister-in-law Sarah. The inquest opened at Hampton Gay on 26th December when James Yeates and other relatives formally identified the bodies of 16 of the dead. However, at that time the whereabouts of Sarah's two children was not known. Eventually it was discovered that Fanny had been one of the injured passengers taken to the Radcliffe but had not been identified earlier as she never regained consciousness. Sadly, Fanny died of concussion in the hospital during the morning of New Year's Eve, a week after the accident. The only piece of good news for the Yeates family was the discovery of Lizzie who had been rescued from the accident site and taken to the Boat Inn in the village of Thrupp just south of Shipton-on-Cherwell. As the child was just a toddler

she was unable to tell her rescuers anything so she was cared for by Mrs Mitchell, the landlady of the inn, until James Yeates arrived to identify her and take her home. A newspaper report tells that the child was “... dressed in a dark pelisse with white fur”

A total of 34 passengers were killed or died as the result of the crash making it the worst railway accident in Britain up to that date and the worst in the history of the Great Western Railway. The list of dead passengers (mostly from London or the Midlands) shows a cross-section of Victorian society and include, amongst others: an accountant, a civil engineer, a surgeon, a schoolmistress, a professional singer, a dressmaker, a merchant sailor, a coachmaker, two carpenters, a gas fitter and a milliner. A comprehensive investigation was conducted in parallel with the coroner's inquests and it was determined that the root cause was the failure of the metal tyre fitted to one of the wheels on carriage 845, the carriage that had been added to the train at Oxford. The wheel was of an older design than most in use at that time but despite regular checks it was not possible to detect the fault prior to the accident. Little was known about metal fatigue in 1874 but it appears that a crack had propagated from a weak point in the tyre which eventually failed due to continued wear and vibration. The low temperatures may have hastened the failure but it would have occurred at some point anyway. Carriage 845 was originally built in 1855 but had since been refurbished and had new wheels fitted in 1868. The carriage had been in use on another line the previous week and no problems had been reported. Secondary causes of the accident included the inadequate method of communication between passengers, guards and the drivers, together with the lack of an effective continuous braking system that could have kept the train intact.

Sarah Yeates was buried in Hannington churchyard on 30 December to be joined by her daughter Fanny Meria when she died the next day. Their gravestones add an even sadder twist to the story as William and Sarah's 10-year old daughter Mary Jane had died nine months prior to the accident and is buried next to her mother. 1874 was truly an awful year for the Yeates family. William remarried in 1879 to Emma Lucas, 20 years his junior and by 1881 was running a shop in Hannington. By 1891 they had moved to the nearby hamlet of Hampton Turville where William took up farming until his death on 24 June 1903 at the age of 69. He was buried in Hannington churchyard near to Sarah's grave.



The ruins of the Elizabethan manor house at Hampton Gay still stand as a reminder of the train crash in 1874. This was where some of the injured passengers were brought from the accident site and where the coroner opened the inquest into the accident. The house caught fire on 29 April 1887.

Image © C M Hobson

Tragedy even seemed to follow the location of the accident. The paper mill at Hampton Gay that had been used as a temporary mortuary burned down in November 1875 and although it was rebuilt it never really prospered thereafter. Mr Pearson went bankrupt in 1882 and the manor house, which was actually owned by Wadham College, Oxford, was rented to new tenants. However, by a strange twist of fate, the house itself caught fire on 29 April 1887 and was completely gutted leaving only a shell (some would say a romantic ruin) that still stands today overlooking the scene of such devastation of the Christmas Eve of 1874.

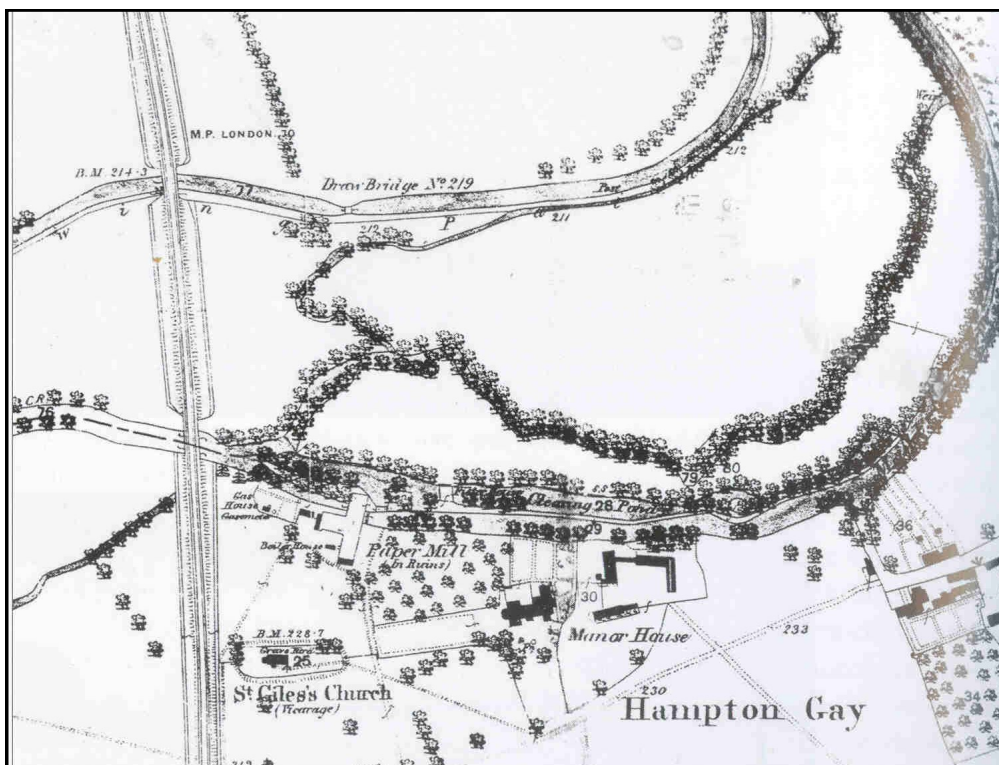
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Wheels to disaster: The Oxford train wreck of Christmas Eve 1874. By Peter R Lewis & Alistair Nisbet. Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2008





The headstone of Sarah Yeates and her daughter Fanny stands in a row of Yeates family graves (as seen below) close to the porch of Hannington church. The Yeates family had been farmers, publicans and shopkeepers in Hannington for many years.

Image © C M Hobson



Fairford History Society Publications

Commander Charles Haultain, RN, KH (1787-1845)
FHS Occasional Paper 1

The Honeybones of Fairford
FHS Occasional Paper 2

Valentine Strong – Cotswold stonemason
FHS Occasional Paper 3

Richard Green, Schoolmaster (1713-1767)
FHS Occasional Paper 4

A Christmas Railway Story
FHS Occasional Paper 5

Fairford's War Memorial and Roll of Honour
Monograph 1

RAF Fairford, 1944
Monograph 2

The Raymond-Barkers of Fairford Park
Monograph 3

The Oldisworths of Fairford
Monograph 4

The Tracys of Toddington and Fairford
Monograph 5

Fairford residents' oral history CDs/taped interviews are also available.

Fairford Flyer - published in January and July

Fairford Now and Then

St Mary's Church Fairford Tomb Trail

Please contact rhs@cotswoldwireless.co.uk or Alison Hobson on 01285 711768 for any enquiries about publications

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