

Little Downham's Railway Accident

In 1950 there was a small settlement, part of Littleport, that was only accessible to traffic by Second Drove. It consisted of 21 houses and farms, a chapel and a public house (the Dog and Gun). Just before 8pm on the Second of January, 1950, Percy and Evelyn Oakey of Downham Road, Ely drove their 10 H.P. Austin saloon over the Second Drove level crossing to visit the hamlet. They must have had an enjoyable evening because they started back to Ely after midnight.

Percy Lesley James Oakey (postman's son) married Evelyn May Green (farmer's daughter) at St Leonard's church, Little Downham on 28th September 1935. When their daughter Bridget was baptised in 1936 at St Leonard's Percy is described as a tobacconist of this parish.

As Percy and Evelyn set off back towards Little Downham it was a dark night, the rain was drizzling and they were following a lorry belonging to G A Hobbs and Son Loaded with celery destined for London. The driver was Mr W Walker, he was accompanied by his thirteen year old son and they stopped at the crossing gates. There was a gate house at the crossing occupied by George Larham and his wife. George was a railway ganger and his wife operated the crossing gates at night until a daytime gatekeeper arrived and occupied the nearby gate hut. The crossing gates should have been padlocked but things had slipped in recent years and, not seeing any lights in the gatehouse and not wanting to disturb anyone, lorry driver Walker turned off the engine and he and his son went to check for trains. Mrs Larham said later that she had taken some medicine and fallen asleep. Satisfying themselves the way was clear the son opened the gates and Walker drove the lorry across. Mr Walker was later unclear about whether he knew there was someone behind him but the Oakeys followed him over the crossing.

The 10.50 pm. Norwich to March Down passenger train, running under clear signals, was sixteen minutes late. Driver G R B Ewles said that visibility was fair, he could see the signal lights at a distance of about half a mile and was running at about 50 m.p.h. On approaching Second Drove he saw the outline of a lorry move over the crossing in front of his train and he judged that he narrowly missed hitting it. Almost immediately his fireman Garrett cried out that he had been struck on the head, and collapsed. Ewles applied the brake and then saw what appeared to be a motor car on the buffer beam of the engine. He immediately got the gatekeeper to telephone to Black Bank signal box and block both lines. He then noticed the headlights of a freight train on the Up line and sent Garrett, who had by that time recovered, with a hand lamp to stop it ; Guard Lubbock also ran towards the approaching train, the driver of which saw the hand signals and applied the brakes, but was unable to avoid striking the car which was slightly foul of the Up line.

The Oakeys were killed instantly and their funeral was at St Leonards on 6th January 1950.

So how did this come about?

Here are some of the instructions for operating the crossing:

Before the gates are opened for Road Traffic the person in charge of the Crossing must satisfy himself or herself that no train is approaching, and it is safe for the road traffic to pass over the Crossing.

The gates must be kept closed and padlocked when not required for road traffic. All Crossing Keepers and Gatekeepers and Staff employed to relieve them must be in accordance with the pamphlet entitled "Examination of Crossing Keepers as to their duties" and receive competency certificates.

Instructions for operating the crossing were kept in the gate keepers hut.

So who was to blame?

Lorry Driver Walker for opening the gates himself? Walker said that as he approached the crossing he had not seen the lights of a car following his lorry and denied having told anyone that he had seen them. He could not remember ever having found the gates locked at night. In the daytime they were opened by the attendant, but at night Walker had sometimes opened them himself, particularly when he saw no light in the gate house. He added that he often used other crossings, particularly Main Drove, the gates of which were always locked at night.

Mr. Dawson, the stationmaster at Black Bank and Mrs Larham's supervisor? It was his custom to visit the crossing once a week in daytime and he was certain that, up to three weeks before the accident, an instruction on the working of the gates had hung on the wall of the gate hut. He had often seen Mrs. Larham but he had not visited the crossing when she was on duty.

Mr. R. A. Sell stationmaster at Black Bank from 1945 to 1948? He was quite satisfied that the instruction was hung in the gate hut. He had visited Second Drove crossing regularly but never at night nor when Mrs. Larham was on duty ; he had, however, seen her on occasions in the gate hut, and was quite certain that she knew that the instruction was there. He admitted that he sent in the two subsequent annual competency certificates without having examined her.

Mrs Larham the crossing keeper? It was her practice to lock the gates only in foggy weather ; she was aware that some people did open the gates and let themselves over the crossing but she did not know that Walker had ever done so. She had always kept the gates locked until, three to four years ago, the staples were drawn ; the matter had been reported and suitable action was taken, but after that she did not lock the gates. She could not remember the issue of any instruction on the working of the crossing and did not know that there was one in the gate hut, which she seldom entered ; she was reluctant to admit that she knew that the gates should have been kept padlocked. Nor could Mrs. Larham remember ever having been examined in rules by any stationmaster since she was appointed 20 years ago, but she would not deny that she might have been examined.

The conclusion.

It fell to Colonel D. McMullen to investigate the accident and this is what he found.

The accident was also due in no small measure to the lax supervision of Mr. Dawson, the stationmaster, and of his predecessor, Mr. Sell. It is significant that the practice of leaving the gates unlocked has developed since Mrs. Larham's last examination by Mr. Sell in 1946.

It was most unwise of Walker to open the gates, and I feel sure that he was aware that a car was following his lorry. He himself only just avoided being involved in an accident, and if he

had thought for an instant he must have realised the danger in which he would place the motor car that was behind him.

Mrs. Larham disregarded the instructions for the working of the crossing in her failure to keep the gates padlocked, and she must bear full responsibility for the accident. The instructions could not be misunderstood and I am satisfied that they were correctly exhibited and that she was aware of them. She had kept the gates locked for the first 16-17 years of her service and I have no doubt that she knew it was her duty to do so, moreover she was reminded of this duty when examined by stationmasters up to 1946.

So Mrs Larham gets the blame. What was her punishment? I don't know. But as is so often the case the it the blameless who pay the price, as Colonel McMullen says in his report "The driver of the wrecked car had his view blocked by the lorry, and, in following it over the railway, had every right to assume that the attendant was present and that it was safe to cross".