

Britain's latest rail disaster claims 13 lives

Tony Robson
2 March 2001

The latest tragedy on Britain's railways has so far claimed the lives of thirteen people and injured a further 76 passengers, nine seriously.

As rescue workers continue to search for bodies, a picture of events leading up to the crash, if not the cause, has begun to emerge.

Disaster struck in the early hours of Wednesday morning, when a Land Rover towing a Renault car on a trailer came off the M62 motorway at Great Heck near Selby, north Yorkshire just after 6am. The Land Rover veered off the road at the approach to a motorway bridge over the main East Coast rail line, travelled down an embankment and came to rest on the tracks. The driver managed to free himself and immediately used his mobile phone to ring the emergency services. However, his attempt to warn of the danger proved futile; the high-speed passenger train crashed into the stranded vehicle as he was speaking to the emergency operator.

The ten carriages of the Newcastle to London GNER passenger train, carrying around 100 people, remained in an upright position and continued moving for approximately half-a-mile before colliding with a freight train coming in the opposite direction. With the passenger train travelling at over 100 mph and the freight train, which was carrying 1,000 tonnes of coal, travelling at 60 mph, the resulting impact was devastating. Both drivers were killed instantly.

The front three carriages of the GNER train were separated from the rest, with the first carriage finally coming to rest almost vertically, resting upon the second, whilst the third ended up in a field amongst scattered debris. One carriage was completely flattened and the train only narrowly missed knocking down houses sited near the track.

Fire fighters and ambulance crew had to contend with driving sleet and the early morning darkness as they attended the crash scene. Trauma teams from hospitals

in nearby York, Hull, Leeds and Pontefract were called out to attend the victims, while fire crews attempted to free those still trapped. Amongst the carnage and confusion, members of the clergy delivered the last rites to the dead.

One survivor described how the top of the buffet car was sliced off completely. A local resident who lives just 200 yards from the railway line told the *Evening Standard*: "We were woken up by a horrible, weird crunching. All I could see was a mass of piled-up carriages lying just outside the village and the front of a freight train."

With the investigation into the incident still in its initial stages, many questions remain unanswered. Some reports spoke of a tire blow out causing the Land Rover to leave the motorway, triggering the rail crash. Others have speculated that the driver of the Land Rover, 36 year-old Gary Hart, may have fallen asleep at the wheel. Relatives said Hart was "inconsolable with grief". His stepfather Martin Taylor told the BBC that Hart was finding it difficult to comprehend what had happened, "We are trying to cope, but to see all those people killed in that way, a film director couldn't make it up."

Most media reports spoke of the "fluke" character of the accident and the tragic timing of events: had the Land Rover gone onto the track just minutes later, the deaths would have been avoided.

Closer scrutiny reveals however that the crash was not simply the product of an ill-fated coincidence. In this case, scrutiny has fallen upon the Highways Agency, which is responsible for the regulations governing the strength, location, inspection and maintenance of the road barriers on Britain's motorways.

The Agency have said that in compliance with current regulations, the crash barriers stretch 30 metres either side of the Great Heck motorway bridge, and are built

to withstand the impact of a 30 ton vehicle travelling at 70 mph. This can hardly be any comfort to those who experienced the Selby crash, however, given the fact that the Land Rover veered off the road before it reached the barrier and still managed to maintain a trajectory that took it down the embankment and into the path of an oncoming train.

According to one estimate, it would only cost £20,000 each to extend crash barriers to 100 metres either side of Britain's 230 motorway bridges that cross over rail lines.

The Health and Safety Executive has said that in the past three years there have been 29 incidents of road vehicles coming off bridges or through fencing on to railway tracks. Two of these were struck by trains, with the last fatality in a similar accident being in 1996.

In the wake of a series of fatal train accidents that have cost dozens of lives, the private companies running Britain's railway system have faced intense criticism for lax safety standards. Before all the relevant facts have been established in this latest incident, the railway infrastructure companies and the train operating companies have been quick to seize upon the culpability of the Highway Agency to absolve themselves. Their relief that the immediate cause of this tragedy has not been the problems associated with the privatisation and fragmentation of the railways is all too palpable. GNER chief executive Christopher Garnett said, "I don't think this was a day about rail safety".

However, regardless of the specific responsibility in the case of the Selby crash, this latest tragedy highlights once again the need for an integrated and rationally planned transport system, in which the needs and safety of the travelling public take priority over the profits of the transport industry.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact