

Britain: Potters Bar derailment highlights deterioration in rail safety

Tony Robson
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“I travelled by rail yesterday and what I would say to people is, all the measures are being put in place to ensure it is as safe as it possibly can be. This would appear to be a one-off, unique event, affecting this particular set of points. It’s not a generic problem that applies across the railway network.”

—*Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Transport, on the Potters Bar derailment.*

“We are sick and tired of being told how safe the railways are. It is little consolation to those who have lost their loved ones and suffer recurring trauma of having survived such carnage. Recommendations that are not implemented, endless costly inquiries and technical reports are no excuse for government inaction.”

—*Carol Bell, who survived the 1997 Southall train crash, speaking in the aftermath of Potters Bar.*

The May 10 train derailment at Potters Bar has entered the roll call of towns and suburbs whose names have become synonymous with the disasters that have befallen the rail network since privatisation in 1994. Britain’s fifth major train disaster in as many years claimed the lives of seven and injured 67, leaving ten people in hospital, including some on the critical list.

Speculation as to whether the line had been sabotaged, or the complacent quoting of statistics, presenting safety on the railways in a favourable light compared to road travel, are aimed at avoiding an examination of the necessary lessons to be drawn. There is already enough evidence to show that the Potters Bar derailment was entirely preventable. That pre-emptive steps were not taken is entirely put down to privatisation, which has produced a fragmented network and allowed the profit motive to undermine basic safety standards.

The West Anglia Great Northern London to Kings Lynn service had set off at 12.45pm with 151 passengers on board. By the time it had cleared the suburbs of London, the train had reached a speed of around 90 mph. As it approached Potters Bar, it had picked up a speed of 100 mph. The fourth carriage derailed at a set of points some 150 metres south of the station. The points changed direction just after the first three carriages passed over them. The first three carriages remained upright and came to a halt 400 metres north of station, still on the down fast line. The last carriage careered off the tracks, slewed sideways, slid along the track passing over a bridge and only stopped when it became jammed under the canopy of the platforms at Potters Bar station. As the sides of the train hit the bridge, pedestrians and motorists below in the town’s main street were pelted with debris from the underside of the carriage and the bridge structure. According to one account, a car had been “sliced open like a tin can”. The gauges in the fourth carriage suggested that it had rolled several times before coming to a halt.

The ages of those killed ranged from a 25-year-old student to an 80-year-old great grandmother. The majority of those who died were in the fourth carriage, although falling debris from the bridge caused one fatality. Maria Eliot, a local volunteer who attended the scene, explained, “It was a

horrific sight. There were limbs scattered all over the place.” In scenes disturbingly reminiscent of the 1999 Paddington crash, a local supermarket became a makeshift field hospital for the injured and traumatised.

Further fatalities were avoided by the actions of the train driver. Having brought the train to rest, he protected the line from oncoming trains by placing track circuit clips on the adjacent lines.

Tarpaulin was immediately erected around the points, suggesting that this was where the attention of the investigation would focus. By May 14, investigators announced that they had found four nuts missing from the points, with two sitting “neatly” underneath one stretcher bar and another two lying untidily near a second bar. It was ruled out that these could have worked free.

Railtrack, the main rail infrastructure company, immediately passed the buck to Jarvis, the private maintenance contractor responsible for the track where the derailment occurred.

Railtrack’s chief executive, John Armit, criticised the policy of contractors sub-contracting the work to other companies, which had meant an increase in casual labour and lack of qualified staff. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* spot checks carried out by Railtrack found that only one in 20 track workers were in receipt of the necessary safety certificates.

However, the chief executive has opposed plans to bring more of the maintenance work back under the direct control of Railtrack, on the premise that it was only the contractors that had the necessary know-how to manage labour intensive work.

Jarvis stated that they had inspected the track on May 1 and then again only a day before the derailment. The company claimed that the inspection team on May 1 had discovered two nuts lying by the side of the points and had re-attached them. Claims of such an unusual discovery raised doubts about the quality of the maintenance work and speculation over whether the account by Jarvis was reliable.

Railtrack is reliant on a high degree of outsourcing. Jarvis, along with Balfour Beatty, First Engineering and Carillion Rail, have contracts to maintain 80 percent of the network. Sub-contracting by the big four has led a plethora of some 3,000 subcontractors.

Jarvis has promptly assembled a handful of rail experts in an attempt to add some veracity to the claims made by its executives that the crash was the product of “sophisticated sabotage”. The initial response of the national media was to report this claim uncritically.

Rail experts not on the company pay roll, however, have questioned such claims. In an interview to Carlton TV’s *London Tonight*, Roy Bell, former director of British Rail signalling and an expert on points, said, “The chances of it being sabotage are almost nil. It would be one of the most difficult places to commit sabotage that you could think of. You’re right in a main line where you could be run down by a train, and in close proximity of a busy station where you can be observed.”

Bell also ruled out the possibility of the bolts working themselves free and placed the blame squarely at the feet of a poor maintenance regime.

The interim report of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) concentrated on the defects with the points. After four days of investigation, the HSE found no evidence of driver error or signal faults. On the issue of sabotage the report merely states, "HSE has found no evidence at this stage to support the speculation in the press about vandalism or deliberate damage having contributed to the derailment, though until the root cause is found, this cannot be ruled out."

Jarvis hit out at the HSE for not following sabotage as a major line of inquiry. In response, the HSE has gathered an international team of experts who are carrying out an exhaustive study of the points and other equipment. The *Sunday Telegraph* quoted an HSE spokesperson that said, "Jarvis are claiming that it was sabotage, but we have no evidence to support that. Jarvis examined photographs; we are examining the actual points."

Tony Thompson, a former British Transport Police superintendent, who now coaches police officers in disaster management stated, "Their stance is very defensive and putting the blame on everyone else. It is appalling the lack of sympathy for what the bereaved and injured are going through."

Jarvis's shares initially fell by around 40 percent.

Within days of the crash there was evidence that track faults had been highlighted by rail workers and a passenger. The *Daily Telegraph* claimed that a commuter wrote to the HSE in March complaining about the track. Kevin O'Neill also wrote to Railtrack after travelling with a GNER engineer on one journey in which the train violently jolted. He recalled the engineer stating, "If that is not a derailment waiting to happen, then I don't know what is."

Railtrack responded three weeks later by telephone, when O'Neill was told that they did not have sufficient staff to examine the track and he was asked if he "could pinpoint the trouble spots for them." O'Neill explained that this would not be possible, as he was not an expert and the train was travelling at around 100 mph at the time.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has also stated that two of its members reported problems in the vicinity, including loose and rusty bolts. Railtrack claimed to have no record of any complaints.

Transport Minister John Spellar has described Jarvis as "a very responsible and respected controller." What does the record show?

May 4, 2002—Jarvis fined £7,000 for "unsafe practice during railway maintenance work" after nearly running over several track workers with an engineering train. HSE railway inspector Anthony Woodward stated, "The company's failure to manage the arrangements properly led to people who were not competent being expected to do jobs they were not able to properly discharge."

December 19, 2001—Jarvis track side worker killed on the same line where the Potters Bar derailment took place. The death of the 31-year-old worker is the subject of a formal independent inquiry.

July 1999—Jarvis fined £7,000 after a track worker lost an eye in Dumfries, Scotland. The company had failed to carry out a risk assessment and had insufficient staff working on the track.

March and July 1999—Jarvis found responsible for two separate derailments of freight trains and was handed a £500,000 fine by the HSE because it had "failed to check the track before trains were allowed to run, exposing employees and passengers to risk of injury."

Secretary of State for Transport Stephen Byers immediately claimed that the Potters Bar derailment was a "one-off." This was based upon a spot check of some 867 points nationally by Railtrack, which reported no similar defects. However, it transpired that other faults had been found. Bob Smallwood, HSE deputy chief inspector of the railways, played this down stating that a "handful, maybe one or two handfuls" of nuts needed tightening. Railtrack's study can hardly be taken as reliable, given the fact that they had made an initial mistake on the age of the points at Potters Bar. They have subsequently reported that the points were eight years old,

after originally claiming that they were new. All the points were supposed to have been refitted following the Hatfield derailment, which was caused by a broken rail.

The *Daily Mirror* newspaper carried its own investigation exposing the chronic state of rail maintenance. Using evidence from photographs taken by a trackside worker for Balfour Beatty, it showed that on a short stretch of ten-mile track between London's Liverpool Street to Colchester there were 30 defects in the track that could have fatal consequences. These ranged from missing safety clips that hold the rail in place, missing bolts, cracked sleepers and eroded ballast as well as worn out rails.

The tragedy last week was only ten miles south of the site of another fatal derailment, at Hatfield in October 2000. Poor maintenance by private contractors was proven to be the cause of this crash, which claimed four lives.

Even if the exact problem at Potters Bar was not replicated anywhere else on the network, this would hardly be sufficient to give the railways a clean bill of health. The shortage of skills, the casualisation of the workforce and the undermining of safety standards by profit hungry contractors is all too apparent. The most likely cause of the Potters Bar derailment was indeed sabotage—not by some disgruntled former employee, but the reckless policy of privatisation introduced by the previous Tory administration and continued by Labour. There is no other way of describing the process by which private contractors compete with one another to lower maintenance costs.

One only has to look at the contracts that exist between Railtrack and its contractors. The IMC2000 contract was brought in to replace the RT1A. The latter was based upon a flat fee for maintenance, whilst the former pays incentives for maintenance work being completed ahead of schedule or if it keeps track closures to a minimum. This is the type of contract in operation between Jarvis and Railtrack.

The search for cheaper labour has led to the erosion of the skills base. Railtrack admits to a shortfall of 1,000 engineers and 3,000 technical staff. The training budget has been reduced by three percent every year since privatisation.

Competition is also an impediment to any coordinated or integrated approach towards problem solving. It should be noted that Jarvis actually won the contract for maintaining the ECML after it was withdrawn from Balfour Beatty in the aftermath of the Hatfield derailment.

The growth of firms such as Jarvis has significance far beyond the rail industry. It was transformed from a small maintenance firm into the UK's largest, due to the outsourcing of public services to the private sector—a practice that was massively extended by Blair's government.

The Labour government extended part-privatisation into the national air traffic control system last July and is finalising the contracts for a Public Private Partnership on the London Underground tube network. Jarvis is part of a consortium—called Tube Lines—which is finalising arrangements with the government to maintain sections of the London Underground infrastructure under 30 year contracts. It has already emerged that contracts have been adjusted to reduce the amount of capital investment required by the private sector, in order to boost its profits.

Details of the lucrative terms of the contract have been leaked to the City and London's *Evening Standard* ran an article entitled, "The Tube profits bonanza", noting, "Tube Lines, expect to earn at least £1.1 billion—substantially more if targets are met—over the 30-year life of their concession, a huge return in City terms on their joint investment of £180 million. It equates to basic profits of about £300 million each for the companies.

"They also expect to get paid another £1 billion in 'consultancy fees' for seconding key engineering staff and services to Tube Lines projects.

"In addition Tube Lines has about £7.5 billion of construction and maintenance up for grabs. While it says these will go out to competitive tender, Amey and Jarvis expect to land a significant proportion."

The other consortium, Metronet, which includes Balfour Beatty, stands to make even larger profits. Some estimate profits of 50 percent, while Metronet claim that it will be between 10 percent and 20 percent.

The government and the rail industry have demonstrated their resistance to implementing the safeguards recommended by the official Inquiry into the Southall and Paddington trains crashes. One key proposal was for a reduction in the number of contractors involved in maintenance on the network and for Railtrack to directly manage the work. The other main proposal was for the introduction of Automatic Train Protection (ATP), which stops trains from passing red signals, to be introduced by 2010. The Government's Strategic Rail Authority announced recently that this would not be introduced until 2015, and then only on high-speed lines with slower routes taking decades to complete.

Pam Warren, who survived the Paddington crash that killed 31 people, commented in the wake of the Potters bar derailment:

"I expected to see the government, the rail industry, everybody, rushing around putting things right—well it just goes to show how naive I was. Obviously doing things, nailing things to the desk and getting it put right is not in these people's vocabulary."



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