

The Meldreth & Melbourn Railway Station Footbridge

The present footbridge was erected for the electrification of the line from Royston to Cambridge; the old bridge having been dismantled in 1987 when it was 100 years old, because it was too low for the wires. It came to be built in 1887 as a result of a distressing accident at the Station on Friday 11th June 1886, which cast a gloom over both Villages. At that time, the public footpath across the fields from Meldreth to Melbourn, crossed the line on the level at the end of the two platforms before they were lengthened. It was well used, especially by children going to and from school.

On the previous day, **Edith Mary Brushett**, 14, and her sister **Kate Louisa**, 12, had come down from London, as they had many times before, to stay with their Aunt, **Mrs Negus**, in Melbourn, where they were well known and regarded. A friend, also from London, was due to come down on the train due at 12.40pm on Friday and the sisters set out to meet him.

As they crossed the Meads to the Station they would have seen a considerable number of excursion passengers on the down platform, waiting to go to Cambridge to see the Australian Cricket Match and they would have started to run when they heard a train coming. Unfortunately this was not the stopping train, but the express due at Cambridge at 12.30 and running 12 minutes late.

Kate must have outpaced her sister, because she crossed the line safely and was on the platform when the express passed. Fortunately she did not see her sister struck by the engine and carried more than 70 yards down the line and left lying in the four-foot way of the down road. Edith was quite dead and fearfully cut about.

An Inquest was held the next morning by **Mr C W Palmer**, County Coroner, at 8.00am in the Railway Tavern at Meldreth. **Messrs Andrew Howard** (foreman), **Henry Tonson**, **Edward Hale**, **Ivit Farnham**, **Frederick Thurley**, **Daniel Blott**, **Amos Warren**, **John Sharp**, **Samuel Woods**, **James Adams**, **William Smith**, **William Butler** and **William Chamberlain** were sworn on the jury. **Mr Warr** (Locomotive Dept), **Inspector Rogers** (Detective Dept., Kings Cross) and **Mr Perkins** (Station-master) were present for the Great Northern Railway Company.

Albert James Brushett, son of **James Richard**

Brushett, a cheesemonger living at 59 New Cut, Lambeth and brother of the deceased, was also present. He gave evidence that his sister was a little deaf.

Joseph Blows of Shepreth said he was labouring in a field by the Station and said he saw the girl running into danger and called to her to stop, but she did not do so. He ran along the line and, with **Joseph Pateman**, a platelayer from Shepreth who also gave evidence, helped to bring the body up to the Station. Joseph confirmed he heard the gong sound, denoting the approach of the train and he heard the driver whistle.

Samuel Watson of 44 Pembroke Street, Copenhagen Street, Islington, London, said he was the driver of the 11.10am fast train from London which was non-stop from Hitchin to Cambridge. He had opened the whistle in the usual manner a hundred yards from the Station and upon entering the platform, 40 yards from the crossing, he saw a young lady in the act of crossing. He gave two or three sharp beats on the whistle to attract her attention but she took no notice and kept on straight across. He said it was impossible to stop the train but, of course, he shut-off steam and applied the brake and stopped the train as soon as possible. He explained to the jury that, although his train was about 12 minutes late, he was not allowed to run at excessive speed to make up time.

After hearing the evidence, the Coroner said no blame attached to anyone as far as he could see but he did question whether, as it was a dangerous crossing, anything could be done about it.

Inspector Rogers pointed out that the crossing was a public footpath and the GNR could not legally lock the gates to a footway. He also said that the Company had found that when footbridges had been erected, the public often chose to ignore them. The Coroner said he could confirm what Inspector Rogers said about footbridges, but he did not believe the Company could be blamed for locking the gates, even if it was not perfectly legal. Inspector Rogers said the GNR would be prepared to do anything reasonable to save lives.

The jury returned a verdict that the deceased was accidentally killed by a passing train and that there was no blame attached to anyone. However, they added a rider that the Company be recommended to

provide means of locking the gates at the crossing when fast trains were approaching and it was recommended this should be done from the signal-box.

The GNR gave the matter urgent attention and decided against locking the gates. Instead, on the 26th June, the Engineer submitted to the Ways and Works Committee a plan for an Iron Footbridge, to serve as a public footpath across the Railway as well as give a means of access from one platform to the other. He estimated the cost would be £300 including the foundations. The Committee met on 1st July and resolved to recommend the Board to sanction this expenditure. The Company also decided to order footbridges for Bingham (Notts) and Willoughby (Lincs) and tenders were invited. On 3rd March 1887, the GNR accepted the tender of W Richards & Sons of Leicester for all three bridges; the cost of the one at Meldreth & Melbourn being £142.12s 2d.

At the time of compiling these notes the writer had not established where Edith's body was laid to rest. Information will be gratefully received. May her soul Rest In Peace.

These notes have been compiled (a) from the Report of the accident and Inquest in The Herts & Cambs Reporter and Royston Crow for Friday 18th June 1886 which can be seen on film at the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, County Hall, Hertford SG13 8EJ and at Royston Library; also at the Royston Museum and (b) from the Great Northern Railway Company Ways & Works Committee Minutes at the Public Record Office, Kew TW9 4DU. Information from Mr Graham G Rayner of Royston and the assistance of other members of the Great Northern Railway Society is also gratefully acknowledged.

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