



MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT

RAILWAY ACCIDENT

REPORT ON THE ACCIDENT

which occurred on

6th January 1961

at

STRANDE CASTLE OCCUPATION
LEVEL CROSSING

between

MAIDENHEAD AND COOKHAM

in the

WESTERN REGION
BRITISH RAILWAYS

LONDON: HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

1961

ONE SHILLING NET

SIR,

I have the honour to report for the information of the Minister of Transport, in accordance with the Order dated 16th January, 1961, the result of my Inquiry into the collision between a passenger train and a motor van that occurred at about 5.33 p.m. on 6th January, 1961 at Strande Castle occupation level crossing between Maidenhead and Cookham in the Western Region, British Railways.

The 5.26 p.m. Down steam passenger train from Maidenhead to High Wycombe, consisting of five coaches drawn by a bunker type engine with 2-6-2 wheel arrangement, was travelling at about 35 to 40 m.p.h. when it collided with a small motor van which was passing over the crossing. The van was of the 10 h.p. type, of fairly modern make; it was wrecked by the impact and was carried forward in front of the engine for nearly 200 yards until the train stopped. When examined afterwards both side windows were found to be closed. I regret to report that both occupants died as a result of the collision, one immediately and the other on the following day. The engine suffered minor damage only and the coaches were unharmed. There were no injuries to passengers or railway staff.

The emergency services were called promptly and the police, an ambulance, and the fire brigade had all arrived at the site within 12 minutes of the accident. The injured man, who had been trapped in the wreckage of the van, reached Maidenhead Hospital at 6.30 p.m. after being released by the fire brigade. The wreckage was cleared from the line and normal working was resumed at 7.45 p.m. In the meantime emergency arrangements had been made for buses to take passengers to their destination.

The evening was fine, though dark, and not windy.

DESCRIPTION OF LEVEL CROSSING

1. Strande Castle occupation level crossing is on the single track branch line from Maidenhead to High Wycombe (the Down direction), $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles beyond Maidenhead, and $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from Cookham. It lies between Cookham Down distant and home signals, the latter being about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile beyond the crossing. The line is level on the approach to the crossing from Maidenhead and curves gently to the right in a shallow cutting of about 18 in. depth. The ground falls away just before the crossing, where the railway is on an embankment about 7 ft. high, towards an underline bridge about 180 yards ahead.
2. The private road over the level crossing leads from a few houses at Strande Castle on the Up side of the line, where there is also a foundry and a caravan site, to the Maidenhead-Cookham main road, which runs close to the railway on the Down side until it passes under the line at the bridge. The private road is flanked by trees on the Strande Castle side of the railway, and it rises at a fairly steep gradient of about 1 in 11 from both sides to the railway crossing. It is in good condition from the main road to beyond the railway, which it crosses at nearly a right angle, and the surface of the level crossing itself is in excellent order. The gates are 11 ft. wide and swing away from the railway when they are opened. They are hung so as to close across the road by their own weight, and are held in this position by spring catches. No arrangements are provided, however, to hold them in the open position. The distance from the gate to the rail on the Up side (the direction from which the van approached) is 23 ft., and on the Down side 35 ft. The usual trespass and penalty notices had been provided, but the penalty notice on the Up side gate had been displaced and was found in the Up cess. There are additional notices within the gates on both sides of the line warning road users against stopping their vehicles foul of the track.
3. The crossing comes into view from a Down train at $\frac{1}{4}$ mile distance, and Down trains can be seen from the crossing when they are 320 yards from it. The visibility towards Cookham is greater. "Sound Whistle" boards are provided on both approaches to the crossing, the one on the Maidenhead side being 312 yards from it.

HISTORY OF STRANDE CASTLE LEVEL CROSSING

4. This level crossing has not been free of accidents in the past, and it is used by the public to an extent which was never intended at occupation crossings. Furthermore, there is an alternative route to the houses and the caravan settlement from the main road after it has passed under the railway, by Lightlands Lane, a private road which, if brought into public use, should enable Strande Castle level crossing to be closed, at least to vehicular traffic. I therefore asked at my Inquiry for a brief history of the level crossing and of the steps taken by the Railway to restrict its use, and for a census of traffic over it. Mr. Cookson, the Assistant Civil Engineer, Western Region, advised me in the following terms:—

"Strande Castle Level Crossing carries an occupation roadway provided under the terms of the Cookham Inclosure Award of the 15th January, 1852. In 1938 it was being used as an

access to ground used as a camp site and in 1943 the Commission took legal advice and that advice was that the Railway authority could not take exception to the extended user of the crossing which would follow development of the adjoining property. A similar advice was given in 1952. In about 1955, in connection with residential development, an alternative access now known as Lightlands Lane was widened and made up to a limited standard.

The caravan site is in a field adjoining the river at Strande Water and as difficulty was being experienced at the crossing in March 1958 a meeting was held with the owners of the land to the east of the crossing (towards the caravan site), the Local Authorities and the Commission to explore the possibility of Lightlands Lane being made up to the standard required for adoption as a public roadway. Due to the cost involved and the unwillingness of the land owners to contribute, this did not materialize. In February 1960, the Berkshire County Council made an official approach to the Commission for a contribution towards the cost of making up Lightlands Lane, and an offer was made by the Commission. In August last year the Commission were represented at a meeting of the Planning and Local Authorities called by the Divisional Road Engineer to discuss a planning application which had been received for development of a new caravan site to accommodate 60 caravans; this would replace the existing site of 45 caravans served by the level crossing also the Iron Foundry to which it gave access. You, Sir, were present at that meeting. In the light of legal advice referred to, and as it appeared clear that the planning development would not involve any increase in the use of the crossing the Commission agreed not to raise any objection to the issue of planning permission, subject to conditions. (The conditions were that the foundry was to be demolished and that the Developers were to give a written undertaking that caravans would be taken over the crossing only by arrangement with the Railway). These conditions were conveyed to the Berkshire County Council in writing on 15th September last. At the meeting referred to the County Council representatives made it clear that it was not possible to proceed with the proposed adoption of Lightlands Lane as the owners did not wish it to be made up and there was no means of compulsorily doing so.

In November 1960 the Solicitors acting for the Developers of the proposed caravan site approached the Commission for a contribution towards the cost of the making up of a new access to the rear of and parallel to, Lightlands Lane. (This also would obviate the use of the level crossing). A similar offer was made to the Developers in the form of a possible contribution. It is understood that the Developers are anxious to purchase from Cookham Rural District Council Field No. 469a on the Ordnance map (required for the new access road) and following a meeting with the Developers' Solicitor on the 10th January, a letter has been addressed to the Clerk of the Rural District Council in support of the Developers' case for the purchase of the field. In the meantime the County Council had proceeded with the issue of outline planning consent to the new caravan site subject to conditions required by the Commission. These are referred to in the proposed agreement between the Developers and the County Council and it is probable that the Commission will also be a party to the document. The Developers have also made application to increase the number of caravans on the new site to 89 and outline planning permission for this development has also been granted subject to the opening up of an additional means of access to the site, and the level crossing being abandoned."

5. I also asked Mr. Cookson to outline the Railway's interpretation of their obligations in regard to occupation level crossings, and he stated as follows:—

"We have to provide gates which will generally close of their own accord. They are installed in such a way that they tend to fall to. We have to maintain a reasonable surface, we are not entitled to lock the gates, and we have to endeavour to see that the user of the occupation crossing complies with the request that the gates should be shut after use, and we do endeavour whenever we find any wrong user to take this up with the person entitled to the occupation right."

6. A census of traffic taken at the level crossing on the 27th and 28th January, 1961 showed a total of 30 passenger and 9 freight trains or engines per day which pass over the crossing between the hours of 6 a.m. and midnight, and about 90 motor vehicles and 200 pedestrians and cycles between the same hours. The peak road traffic between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., was 11 vehicles and 20 pedestrians and cycles.

EVIDENCE

7. The course of the accident was clear. As the train approached the level crossing Driver D. L. Quarterman and Fireman E. C. Jackson were on the right and left hand side of the engine respectively looking forward to see the Down home signal for Cookham station. Driver Quarterman had sounded a short blast on the whistle at a little used level crossing a short distance before Strande Castle crossing, and a long blast at the "Sound Whistle" board for this crossing as he approached it at 35 to 40 m.p.h. He emphasized that this was his invariable custom because of the amount of road traffic and the frequent occasions on which drivers of trains saw vehicles crossing the line as trains approached. He said that he saw the home signal change to clear. He continued his evidence as follows:—

"... When passing the 'Sound Whistle' board I could see some lights among the trees on the Up side of the crossing.

As we came up to the crossing the headlamps suddenly appeared through the Up side gate and shone across the track. I then heard a crash and a cloud of steam enveloped the front of the engine. I did not feel the impact on the engine. The regulator was already closed and I applied the brake and before the train came to a stand the steam heating was shut off.

We came to a stand with the engine just the Cookham side of the bridge and my Fireman and I got down from the footplate and saw a car wedged under the front of the engine. I contacted the Guard who was riding in the front coach and we could see from the Guard's headlamp that a man was in the wreckage of the car. I immediately sent my Fireman to 'phone for the Police and Ambulance, both of whom arrived within a very few minutes. Shortly afterwards the Fire Brigade also arrived and they cut away part of the car to free the man. After telephoning for the ambulance the Fireman advised the Cookham Signaller from the telephone in the Station Yard. After the car had been released a Fitter arrived from the Running & Maintenance Depot and he passed the engine fit to run to Shed. After drawing the train into Cookham Station we ran round and returned to Maidenhead with the coaches.

After the train had come to a stand I noticed that the engine headlamp was still alight."

8. In response to further questioning Quarterman was strongly of the opinion that the road vehicle came through the gate on to the line without a check, judging from the movement of the headlamps, though he could not see the vehicle itself. He did not then have time to sound the whistle again before the collision happened. Quarterman's evidence about the engine headlamp was confirmed by signaller F. F. Fulker, who had seen it from Cookham signalbox as the train approached the crossing.

9. Fireman E. C. Jackson on the left hand side of the engine did not see the car lights at all, but he noticed that the level crossing gate on his side was open just before the collision took place. He confirmed his driver's evidence in regard to speed and to the long blast on the whistle, and emphasized from his own experience the concern felt by enginemen about this level crossing. He added that he was able to telephone so quickly for the emergency services because he remembered from past observation where the nearest call-box was placed.

10. The evidence of passenger Guard A. W. T. Martin generally confirmed that of Quarterman. Martin further described the arrangements made to detain passengers and conduct them to buses.

11. Station Master A. P. Stringer of Cookham said that he arrived at the scene of the accident at 5.45 p.m. He described the special arrangements made thereafter for passengers to reach their destination. He also mentioned the constant difficulties he had experienced in trying to keep the gates at the level crossing closed. His evidence in this respect was confirmed by Permanent Way Inspector H. Shackelford and by Ganger R. A. J. Watson, who both said that they had met with obstruction and rudeness when they tried to get the names of persons who propped the gates open and left them in that position. Watson also said that on occasions lorries were driven through the gates after passing over the crossing, forcing open the spring catches and frequently damaging them, because drivers were disinclined to get out and open the gates by hand.

12. In regard to the manner of driving the van on to the crossing, and the familiarity of the van occupants with local conditions, I ascertained from the Berkshire Constabulary that statements from members of the public who were in the vicinity at the time, and from persons who knew the deceased, showed that both men lived locally and used the crossing regularly, and that on this occasion the gates were propped open and the van travelled on to the crossing without stopping.

13. I was also informed that police action was taken in 1953 after a fatal accident, against persons misusing the crossing, and that a temporary improvement was effected, but only for a short time.

CONCLUSIONS AND REMARKS

14. So far as the accident itself, with its tragic consequences, is concerned it is clear that no blame lies on the railway staff. Driver Quarterman was alert and sounded the whistle properly as his train approached the crossing; he had no chance of avoiding or preventing a collision. The action taken by the train crew thereafter was prompt and proper, and the quick response of the emergency services was most satisfactory.

15. This accident is the fourth at the crossing within the past eight years, and to judge from the opinions expressed by witnesses about the way in which the crossing is used, it will not be the last unless some improvement in behaviour takes place or better arrangements are made. It has no doubt been difficult for the Railway to check the development of road traffic here, though it will be seen from Mr. Cookson's evidence that they have been alive to the position and have taken action to limit the use of the crossing by resisting land developments which would increase the road traffic. I hope that the present negotiations to enable the crossing to be closed will be brought to a successful conclusion, since this is undoubtedly the proper way of solving the problem, even if it should be found necessary to retain a foot right of way over the crossing. The detour involved in using Lightlands Lane instead of Strande road is short, and if the proposed alternative road were constructed it would be shorter still; this course may prove to be more attractive since the need to override the resistance by the frontagers of Lightlands Lane to it being made public will not then arise.

16. If arrangements cannot be made to close the crossing, matters should not be left as they are at present in view of the road use: I consider that a train warning device automatically operated by approaching trains should be installed here. A stop post and catch for each gate should also be provided to hold it in the open position since, for the lack of a proper way of doing this, a single handed driver of a road vehicle must improvise a prop for the purpose before he can use the crossing. I see no reason to believe that the provision of means of keeping the gates open will make road users less inclined than they are now to close them.

17. In the meantime, while negotiations are going on, I understand that further efforts are being made in co-operation with the police to obtain some improvement in gate discipline at this crossing.

18. This is only one of a great many occupation crossings where public use has developed over the years without a commensurate improvement in the standard of protection having been made. This problem has been ventilated from time to time in reports on accidents that have occurred at such crossings, and a comprehensive review was made of it by the late Lt. Colonel Sir Alan Mount in his report on the accident at Cross Drove occupation level crossing near Hilgay on the Ely-King's line, in which an express passenger train was wrecked, which occurred on 1st June, 1939. His summary of the action required reads as follows:—

“If action is to be taken to secure additional safety at Occupation type crossings, legislation may be necessary on a number of difficult issues, namely, to eliminate such crossings; to dedicate, equip and control them for public use; to restrict the adoption as public roads of occupation roads leading to such crossings; to require the use of padlocks and keys for fastening the gates; to apply warning equipment to indicate the approach of trains; and to prevent an increase of user in the absence of safeguards.”

His report then enlarges on the problems involved in the issues mentioned above.

19. After the war, and the reconstruction that was necessary in the succeeding years, the problem of occupation crossings where a public or semi-public use has developed was examined, but no solution was then found to the conflict of interests which arose over questions of liability and costs. There were about 750 crossings of this type when Colonel Mount wrote his report, and there is no reason to believe that there has been any diminution of road traffic at these crossings in the succeeding years. At most of them the only practical ways of providing appropriate standards of safety are either to control them as public crossings, or to provide warning equipment if circumstances permit this lesser protection. No statutory obligation rests on the Railways to accept the financial or legal burden which such action would require, and there is little hope of the users accepting the cost of protection willingly.

20. Though the records do not yet show any significant increase over the years in casualties arising from accidents at such crossings, the chance of an accident is ever present. The danger to the road vehicle and its occupants in a level crossing accident is obvious; it should also be borne in mind that the risk of derailment and serious damage to the train, which may be carrying a great number of passengers, becomes greater as the years go by, not only on account of the increase in numbers of motor vehicles and tractors which will use the road over such crossings, but also on account of the lighter construction of multiple unit diesel and electric train sets which are now coming into general use. These must suffer far more in a collision and be more likely to become seriously derailed with consequent danger to life than the steam train drawn by a solid engine with an axle loading nearly three times as great. The standards of protection at occupation crossings where public or semi-public use has developed, compare ill with those at many public crossings where road traffic is no greater, and I hope that ways will be found to ensure that they are given protection on their merits.

21. The problem of curbing the increase in the number of such crossings is another matter. Constant vigilance by the Railways to check the growth of road traffic at such crossings is necessary, and they are fully aware of the need for it. The provisions of the Town and Country Planning General Development Order 1950, Section 9, which require a local planning authority to consult with the Minister of Transport before granting permission for development which is likely to increase road traffic over a level crossing, will also help materially, provided that they are fully appreciated. It might be advisable to draw the attention of local authorities to the significance of Section 9 of the Order to ensure that due consultation will always take place before permission is granted to any development which may result in a material increase in the volume of road traffic using a level crossing.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

W. P. REED,

Colonel.

The Secretary,
Ministry of Transport