Severe weather on Boxing Day 1962 caused frozen points at Crewe and trains to bunch up on the main line from the north. A driver tried to obtain instructions at a red signal, but the telephones were dead. He drove his train on, failing to see a train standing ahead; 18 people died in the collision.

The Christmas period has always brought heavy traffic to the railways, even though today British Rail does not normally operate trains on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. But in 1962 trains were running on 26 December, and all were well loaded. Boxing Day that year was on a Wednesday, and many passengers were returning home during the evening ready to restart work on the following day, since the trend of taking several days' holiday at Christmas had not yet developed.

During the late afternoon, as darkness fell, several trains were heading south on the West Coast main line towards the great junction at Crewe. One of them, the 4.45pm from Liverpool Lime Street to Birmingham, had joined the West Coast line at Weaver Junction. It was electrically hauled as far as Crewe, following the commissioning of the second stage of the West Coast electrification at the beginning of that year. But the main line from Scotland would have to wait another decade for the overhead catenary, and in 1962 Anglo-Scottish trains were mostly diesel-hauled. Steam locomotives were still used on some services, but on that afternoon, the Mid-day Scot, the 1.30pm Glasgow - Euston express, was hauled by a heavy 1-Co-Co-1 diesel locomotive, then known as a Type 4 (but later as Class 40).

The weather was cold that Christmas, heralding one of the coldest winter periods for some years, with heavy snow in many parts of the country up until the early weeks of 1963. The severe cold during the afternoon of Boxing Day caused points in the Crewe area to freeze, and by the time it was dark, around 4pm, trains were heavily delayed, with staff struggling to get salt and oil to the point switches in order to free them.

Bad weather backlog
On the West Coast main line from the north, trains were beginning to bunch up in such a way that they were being stopped at signals approaching Crewe. Following trains were then being checked and stopped at signals further back, and with periods of slow running from signal to signal, yet
more trains behind were being delayed and stopped. This domino effect meant that by the time the 4.45pm from Liverpool approached Winsford station, seven miles from Crewe, it had to reduce speed ready to stop at signal number C1114, about 7 mile ahead.

As part of the electrification of this route, the signalling had been modernized with four-aspect colour-light signals, track circuiting, and equipped with the automatic warning system. But to keep costs within limits there was no centralized signalling control centre, and signals and points were controlled from the existing old-style signalboxes, which had been retained, with their lever frames adapted to work the new signals.

**Automatic signalling system**

Through Winsford station there were just two tracks, an up and a down line carrying all traffic. But south from Winsford to Crewe there were four tracks, from east to west known as the up slow, up fast, down fast and down slow lines. Winsford station signalbox controlled the points where the two tracks became four and on the up line there was a colour-light signal WS289, which controlled the split from one up line into two. The next signals, 7 mile ahead, were carried on an overhead gantry C1 (for Coppenhall Junction) 114 for the up fast, and 116 for the up slow line. Another 7 mile on was another pair, C1110 for the fast line and 112 for the slow line. Normally these signals worked automatically, and all had lineside telephones to their controlling signalbox, which in this case was Coppenhall Junction. The down line signals, which were from 250 to 500yd away from the up line signals, also had telephones, but these were to Winsford station signalbox.

The 4.45pm from Liverpool was braking as it passed Winsford signal 28 and 29 at 5.26pm, ready to stop at signal C1114. The driver telephoned to the signalman, as required by the famous Rule 55, and was told to wait until the signal cleared. After a while the signal cleared to single yellow, and the 4.45pm train went forward to stop at signal C1110. But here the lineside telephone was not working, because a switch on the telephone at C1114 had not returned to normal after the earlier call, and all the up telephones on this section were on a common circuit. The secondman on the electric locomotive then called the Winsford signalman from the down line telephone 230yd away and, after he had checked with Coppenhall Junction, was told to wait for the signal to clear.

Meanwhile, the 1.30pm from Glasgow (the

**Taking risks**

When very cold weather caused points to freeze at Crewe, trains from the north were delayed and started bunching, stopped at signals further back.

The driver of a Liverpool - Birmingham train telephoned the signalman at Coppenhall Junction for instructions and he was told to wait for the signal to clear. When it did, he drove his train to the next signal. But a switch in the telephone did not reset properly, so that when the secondman and driver of the following Midday Scot tried to telephone the signalman they could not get through.

Instead of trying another telephone 500yd away, the Midday Scot’s driver took his train forward past the red signal without finding out if the line was clear. He drove too fast and hit a standing train ahead, killing 18 passengers and injuring 34.

![Image](image-url)

**Key**

- 4.45pm Liverpool - Birmingham express
- 1.30pm Glasgow - Euston express

A The last coach of the Liverpool - Birmingham train was driven partly through the seventh. Surprisingly, the back of the eighth coach, with the passenger compartments, stood up well to the collision, because the buffers of the Midday Scot diesel locomotive (seen extreme right) hit the buffers of the coach.
would he been trying to telephone for at least five minutes. In the three remaining minutes, the train had restarted, accelerated, and reached the back of the standing train '13 mile ahead. That meant an average speed of 15mph and an impact speed of about 20-25mph.

Colonel McMullen held the Mid-day Scot driver responsible for the accident; for not using one of the down line telephones; for not ensuring the line was clear to the next signal (which he could not ascertain in the dark); and for running too fast. Although the 4.45 train's oil tail lamp did not shine brightly against the strong electric light of the signal beyond, the signal itself was obscured by the silhouette of the standing train when a following train got within about 100yd of it.

Mid-day Scot), which passed Winsford station at 5.51pm, had come to a stop at signal 114. The secondman could get no reply on the telephone, nor from the adjoining telephone for signal 116. Instructions said that any other nearby signalpost telephone should be tried, but the down line telephones were nearly 500yd away. The Mid-day Scot driver decided to carry on slowly to the next signal. He was allowed to do this, according to the rules, under clearly defined circumstances, but had to ensure that the line was clear to the next signal, and travel slowly, ready to stop short of any obstruction. And he had to stop at the next signal, regardless of the aspect shown, to report his actions.

The Mid-day Scot went forward. The driver said later that as he could see signal CJ110 ahead at red, he went no faster than 5-6mph. About halfway to the signal, it changed to single yellow, but the driver did not accelerate, as he intended to stop at the signal. Suddenly, his secondman shouted 'Stop!', and about a coach-length away was the back of the standing 4.45pm train.

It was too late: the heavy diesel ploughed into the back coach and pushed the whole of the front train forward, the two trains eventually stopping about 250 ft apart. But the damage had been done. There were about 300 passengers on the 4.45pm train. Eighteen lay dead or died later, and 34 others, including the guard, were seriously hurt, all in the back two coaches of the 4.45. But why had the Mid-day Scot driver not seen the back of the train ahead, nor its oil tail lamp showing a red light?

Colonel D McMullen, the inspecting officer, had no doubt that excessive speed was a factor. The Mid-day Scot had passed Winsford station at 5.51pm. Yet, just 10 minutes later, it hit the back of the 4.45pm train. It had taken two minutes to stop at signal 114 and the driver and secondman would have been trying to telephone for at least five minutes. In the three remaining minutes, the train had restarted, accelerated, and reached the back of the standing train '1/4 mile ahead. That meant an average speed of 15mph and an impact speed of about 20-25mph.

Colonel McMullen held the Mid-day Scot driver responsible for the accident; for not using one of the down line telephones; for not ensuring the line was clear to the next signal (which he could not ascertain in the dark); and for running too fast. Although the 4.45 train's oil tail lamp did not shine brightly against the strong electric light of the signal beyond, the signal itself was obscured by the silhouette of the standing train when a following train got within about 100yd of it.

**Recommendations**

The inspecting officer, Colonel D McMullen, blamed the driver of the Mid-day Scot for the collision. The driver had ignored the rule regarding the use of another telephone on the opposite line, he had failed to make sure the line was clear, and he had driven too fast. Neither he nor his secondman were sufficiently alert.

Colonel McMullen also criticized the delay in calling the rescue services, which occurred because a signalman and a station booking clerk did not realize how serious the accident was.

His recommendations included a more precise definition of when a signal can be passed at danger, training in driving a train at low speed under caution, and the development of an electric flashing tail lamp as used by some railways on the European mainland.

Despite criticizing the driver's failure to use the telephone on the opposite line, Colonel McMullen thought that such use could itself create a new risk, and said that this rule should be withdrawn. He rejected proposals for train to signalbox radio links as too costly and complex, and said that signalpost telephones were normally reliable. He considered that the chance of simultaneous failure of signals and telephones was remote.