

Remembering the past – 100 years after one of the UK's most fatal railway staff accident

September 26, 2021



Under the Protection of a “ Look-out ” Man the Gang Works in Safety.

The centenary of one of the UK's worst railway track worker accidents will be remembered on Sunday 26 September 2021.

Dr Mike Esbester, Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Portsmouth, has been investigating the tragic accident in Bristol as part of the '**Railway Work, Life & Death**' project; a collaboration between the University of Portsmouth, the National Railway Museum and the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick. The project researches accidents involving British and Irish railway staff that occurred before 1939.

Dr Esbester says: “A hundred years ago, railways were amongst the most dangerous places to work. In 1913 alone there were around 30,000 casualties, including around 500 deaths. Today, track workers are much better protected but there are still ongoing issues. Tragically, there has already been a track worker fatality this year – which is one too many.”

On the morning of 26 September 1921, six men went to work and didn't come home. This particular accident took place near Stapleton Road station in Bristol, on the Great Western Railway. An eight-man

team of track workers was hit by a passing train and only two survived. The group didn't hear the train coming. Investigations at the time blamed the leader of the gang, saying he should have appointed a look out. Sadly, even as late as the 1950s appointing a look out to protect track workers was optional. As a result, many more men would lose their lives whilst earning a living on the railways.

Dr Esbester says: "These were all local men and between them they left five widows and seven children. An eighth child was born in 1922, as the widow was pregnant at the time of the accident. The injured man was the uncle of one of those killed. One of the other men who was killed had been in an accident at the same location in 1916, in which he and another man were injured and a third worker was killed."

The men who died were: Charles Edmonds (49), George North (47), Charles Oakhill (51), Joseph Barrett (58), Arthur Hobbs (24) and Stephen Francis (34). Charles Hobbs (42) was injured.

Dr Esbester adds: "Remembering is important and helps us to understand the human impacts events like these have on ordinary people's lives. It enables us to see these people not as a statistic but as individuals. Uncovering the untold stories of these everyday workers helps us relate to our ancestors.

"Today, working on the railways is much less risky. Statistically it's now much safer but there continue to be accidents and improvements are still required. It's not an issue that's gone away despite the progress made by the industry over the last 100 years."

Dr Esbester and the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project have been working to ensure the men of Stapleton Road are remembered. This weekend they will be mentioned at St Peter's church in Pilning, where four are buried. Network Rail and the Railway Chaplain covering Bristol are releasing a recorded tribute to the men. In the longer term it's hoped that a plaque will be installed at Stapleton Road station.

Photo credit: Railway Work, Life & Death project