

The Runaway Train

by Joe Coughlan.



The Last Train from Birr to Roscrea 1960

On 19th July 1910 two trains carrying between them over 800 passengers collided on the Roscrea to Birr line injuring over 400 people – 76 of them seriously.

At 8.44 that morning a special train with 10 carriages left Birr to take pilgrims to Queenstown (Cobh) in Cork to join many others at the boat for a pilgrimage to Lourdes. There were about 750 people on this train, many of them clergy. Before the train left Birr the driver checked the vacuum brakes and found a slight leak. He repaired this temporarily and carried on to Roscrea. The train arrived in Roscrea and was standing at the Birr platform which was the opposite side to the station house. There was a large group of passengers from Roscrea waiting to join the special so the station master Mr Hayes decided to add four more carriages to accommodate these. The head porter Mr Deering uncoupled the engine and pulled away to the siding and connected the carriages. They then proceeded to link up these with the other carriages and when they were shunted together the 10 carriages started to move away down the line towards Birr. Birr line had a gradual decline for about 4½ miles. Mr Deering the porter then ran back to the rear van and along with Mr Byrne the guard they both tried to apply the handbrake but it failed to stop the train. In the meantime the 9.15 regular train from Birr had left with driver Tim Broughan and guard Dan Shortt along with about 50 passengers unaware of what was happening. The runaway train gathered speed and was travelling down the line at 30mph.

Meanwhile on the runaway the smoke from the Birr engine could be seen coming towards them and Mr Deering tried in vain to apply the handbrake while Mr Byrne stepped out on the running board and began to wave a red flag. The stationmaster Mr Hayes who had also boarded the train stepped out on the other side and was waving his straw hat wildly. When the driver of the up train saw what was happening he immediately brought the train to a halt and began to reverse when the collision occurred at Fanure. Many people had seen what was about to happen and had jumped from the train before the collision and had suffered broken legs and arms and other injuries. Although the impact was severe it was greatly reduced by the driver's swift action.

The impact demolished the first four carriages of the runaway completely and it was the passengers in these four carriages who suffered most of the serious injuries. The passengers in the other six suffered mainly cuts and bruises. The passengers included some nurses and doctors who came to the assistance of the injured. The monks from the monastery came to the assistance with other first aid equipment. When the news reached Roscrea, doctors, nurses and other helpers were sent down on the special train. Help was also sent from Birr including members of the Leinster Regiment who were stationed at Crinkhill .

The day after the crash an official from the railway company started to visit the injured in Birr and Roscrea and offered sums between a crown (25P) and £20 in compensation. At that stage there were 76 injury claims paid out but many more followed and the final number was 492. The final compensation payment was £52,676 pounds.

Mr Tim Broughall whose swift action in stopping the train probably saved many lives was given 100 pounds in railway shares which was a huge amount of money at that time.

After this accident all the braking systems on all the GSW railway trains was upgraded.

The picture above shows the last engine to run on the Birr line. This picture was taken in September 1960.