

The Tragic Death of Ann Williams

The Background to the Accident

Ann Williams was born in January 1841 and was baptised on 21st February at St Michaels Church¹. She was the sixth child of David and Alice Williams and was their only daughter. The family's home was No.6 Cambridge Street, a typical terraced house in the area. The street ran westwards off Barton Lane (now Bruton Way) about 100m north of 'Barton Gates' (the crossroads where Bruton Way, Barton Street, Park Road and Eastgate Street meet). Post-World War Two redevelopment has radically changed this area and Cambridge Street now lies under the 'GL1' leisure centre complex.

Another difference was that running past Cambridge Street was two railway lines, the High Orchard Branch and the Gloucester & Cheltenham Railway. As these were crucial to events, a brief review of their history is worthwhile. The Gloucester & Cheltenham Railway was a narrow gauge horse-drawn tramway that opened in 1811 to carry bulk goods from the River Severn at Gloucester to Cheltenham. By 1840 it was owned by the Birmingham & Gloucester Railway Company (B&G), who in order to gain rail access to the docks, built a short spur from the tramway to their Gloucester station (which was located roughly on the site of the Bruton Way/Metz Way junction). This ran alongside Barton Lane with the junction being opposite Cambridge Street and it was completed and in operation by August 1841². It was not an ideal solution due to the tramway's poor loading gauge³, which limited the size of wagons and the loads they could carry. A further problem was that everything brought from the docks had to be transhipped across from tramway wagons to railway wagons. Despite these drawbacks, traffic on the spur grew and within four years it was carrying 45,000 tons of goods from the docks to the station⁴.

In early 1843 the B&G applied to Parliament for an Act to authorise a new standard gauge rail link from their station to the High Orchard dock, which was to be known as the High Orchard Branch⁵. As the Bill was passing through the House of Commons, the B&G leased itself to (then subsequently merged with) the Midland Railway. The Midland decided to go ahead with the High Orchard Branch and but with so many other commitments, it delayed the start of construction until 1847. Whilst the line was being built, a temporary standard gauge line was laid over the route of the tramway from the station to Spa Wharf, a tramway depot located at the corner of Brunswick Road/Park Road. From the outset, the Midland decided that this new line was to be worked by steam and the *Gloucester Journal's* report of the Coroner's Inquest into the accident provides details on how it operated⁶.

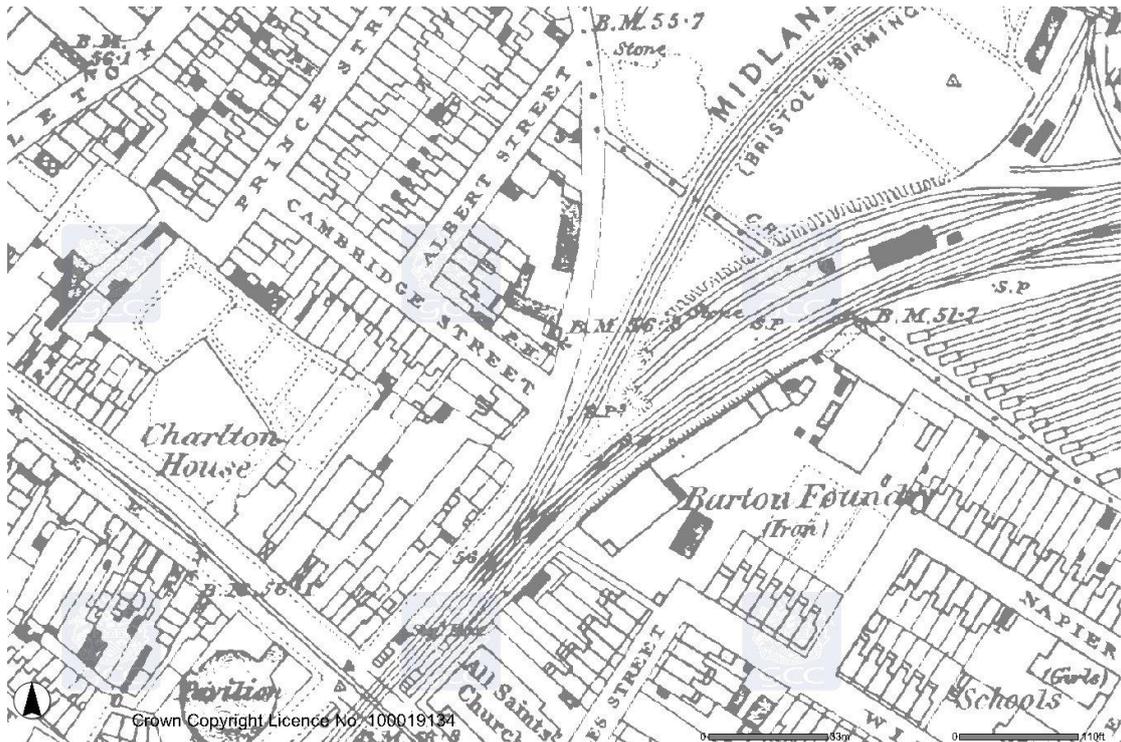


Figure 1: Cambridge Street 1881 Ordnance Survey Map

Firstly horses would haul wagons from the docks to the Spa Wharf tramway depot as per the tramway's usual mode of operation (typically one horse pulling one or two wagons). Once at the depot, the wagons were assembled into a larger group (or 'rake'), whereupon a steam locomotive would haul them on to the station's goods yard where the loads were transhipped into standard gauge railway wagons to be sent on to Cheltenham via the mainline railway. There was no set timetable for this service, which ran as required, typically eight to ten times a day. The Midland was aware of the public concern that the use of steam power on the tramway had created and took some safety precautions. As the tramway was unfenced and the train ran through open streets, it had two guards, one who sat on the front of the locomotive on the buffer and one who sat on a flat carriage behind it. Their job was to warn people – especially children - to keep clear. The most dangerous point on the line was deemed to be where the tramway crossed Barton Street. As the train approached, the front guard would jump off and run out into the road to signal the engine driver whether it was clear or if he had to stop. Although the train's top speed was only eight miles per hour (which was thought to be far too fast for safety by some commentators) the braking distance varied from about four to twelve yards, depending on the length of the train.

The Steam Locomotives

None of the accounts of the accident identify the locomotive or provide any information on what type or class it was. This is also the case for the Midland Railway's archives, as no records of the dispositions of locomotives survive for this early period in the company's history. Despite this, circumstantial evidence can identify some possible candidates⁷. When the Midland Railway was formed, it used the engines it inherited from its constituent companies,

including those of the B&G. In the early years most of these engines stayed in their former company areas, because they required experienced crews and engineers to run and maintain them, which could best be found in their old territories. Because of this it is fairly certain that the locomotives on the Gloucester section of the Midland network were those of the B&G. Excluding the latter's old broad gauge engines (which could not run on the track) this leaves a total of 52 locomotives, comprising 13 different types and classes⁸.

Not all of these locomotives however were suitable for working this section of railway. The two most important factors in deciding this were physical ones; the tramway's poor loading gauge and the tight track geometry. These restrictions meant that only short, small and light locomotives could operate on it. Of the B&G's locomotives, two stand out as being eminently suitable, No.33 *Evesham* and No.34 *Kempsey*. These were 2-2-0 engines that had been built in June 1842 by Edward Bury & Co. of Liverpool. Even by the standards of the day they were small, underpowered machines, weighing only about eight or nine tons and being just 10m long. They were renumbered when the Midland absorbed the B&G, with *Evesham* becoming MR 118 and *Kempsey* MR 119 in February 1847. These numbers were carried for just four months before they were renumbered again, with numbers 148 and 149 respectively. Being too small for most duties, they pottered around the Gloucester end of the line until being withdrawn in January 1854 and June 1852 respectively. They were subsequently broken up in June 1855.

These two engines were somewhat unusual because they had a mix of British and American steam locomotive design features – most notably an American style domed, circular firebox. It was probably due to this that they did not apparently possess ash pans. Ash pans were used to collect the solid waste of the firebox and without them, the hot ash and clinker simply fell onto the track-bed. The lack of an ash pan was not unique however and was not deemed serious enough to prohibit the locomotives from working, although it did preclude their use on the main line. Though we cannot be certain, all of the available evidence seems to point towards one of these two locomotives as being involved in the accident, although unless new evidence is found, we will never know for sure.

The Accident

At about 11.45am on Friday 24th September 1847, a goods train hauled by a locomotive left the tramway depot at Spa Wharf and began making its way along Park Road towards the Midland Railway station. As it trundled along, an irregular trickle of hot ash and cinders was falling from the engine onto the line, a feature that had already become an accepted - though not welcome - feature of the steam locomotives on the branch.

By noon, the locomotive had passed over the Barton Street turnpike and was heading towards the railway station. As the last wagon cleared the section in front of Cambridge Street, Ann Williams - who had been playing in the street - ran out and onto the track. The object of her attention was not the locomotive or the wagons it was hauling but some of the hot ashes that the engine had dropped. Fire exerts a powerful fascination on children and in the fortnight

that the engine had been working the branch, the local children had grown used to the hot ashes and cinders and frequently ran out to play with them. The situation was an accident waiting to happen and some children had had scares when items of clothing caught alight. Though no had yet suffered any injuries, this was about to change in the most horrifying way.

Whilst Ann was busy playing with a hot coal in front of her, she failed to notice that the rear part of her frock had trailed over another hot coal behind her and a moment or so later, her dress burst into flame. Screaming in fright and pain, Ann ran to the nearest house - that of Charles Harman - but the front door was locked. Still enveloped in flames, she started to run to another house but collapsed before reaching it. Help was on the way however as Mr Harman had witnessed the incident from his upstairs window. He ran down his stairs and sprinted out into the street and reached Ann at the same time as another adult, Sarah Holder. Together they were able to smother and extinguish the flames and then they carried her to her own house.

Ann's mother immediately sent for a local surgeon, Charles Clutterbuck, who arrived at the house at 12.30pm. He found that his patient had suffered "very severe burns"⁹ to both of her legs and thighs, her left arm and shoulder and the back of her neck and head. He dressed Ann's burns and remained with her but there was little else he could do except to try and alleviate her pain. Given the extent of her injuries it seems likely that Clutterbuck knew that she wouldn't recover and, in the event, he stayed with her until she died early the following evening. She was buried at St Mary de Lode Church the next day (Sunday 26 September), the officiating minister being James Buchanan¹⁰.

The Inquest

The inquest into Ann's death was held on Monday 27th September at the Prince of Wales Inn on Prince Street, Gloucester in front of the Coroner J Lovegrove, Esq. and a sworn jury. Lovegrove called just five witnesses to give evidence; Charles Harman, Mary Ann Carpenter (a 10 year old who had witnessed the incident in the same way as Harman), Sarah Holder, Charles Clutterbuck and lastly Thomas Knowles, the Superintendent of the Gloucester locomotive department of the Birmingham & Gloucester Railway.

As might be expected, Knowles came in for most intense questioning and he had to answer questions regarding the operation of the line and the lack of an ash pan, but he also faced a barrage of questions regarding the unprotected (i.e. unfenced) and dangerous state of the line. Knowles acknowledged that the failure to provide an ash pan was the cause of the tragedy and that this was to be rectified as soon as possible. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death, which was duly published in the *Gloucester Journal*:

"Verdict, accidental death, caused by the deceased's clothes catching fire from the falling of burning coke from an engine which plies between the goods department of the railway station and the Spa; and the jury unanimously of opinion that the engine should always have an ash-pan attached to it, that it should not be allowed to run on the said branch-line after dark, and that watchmen should be stationed at proper distances along the

said branch-line. And that the provisions of the act of parliament 8 and 9 Vic. C. 183, and the 47th section of the Railway Clauses Consolidation act, as read to us by the coroner, should be strictly carried out as regards Barton-street crossing, which is in the hamlet of Barton Saint Mary.”¹¹

The verdict was printed in full in an editorial that the *Journal* ran in the same issue that contained the report of the inquest. This article accused the Midland of negligence with regards to track safety pointing out that the company was in breach of its legal requirements on the issue. With classic Victorian melodrama it described what it termed Ann’s ‘martyrdom’, illustrating her piety with an account (as told by Clutterbuck) of how upset she had been that she hadn’t been able to kneel to say her prayers before being put to bed or how she feared that she would not be able to attend Sunday school. This attitude was contrary to the *Journal’s* usual stance on the railways and it was careful to point out that it only wanted to persuade the Midland “to pay due regard to public safety” in the hope that “the death of Anne Williams will be sufficient to induce a very much greater degree of caution and supervision.”

Ann’s death made national news as a report on the inquest was subsequently carried in *The Times* newspaper on the 5 October 1847. After this however little else was heard of this incident. The High Orchard Branch opened the following year and traffic on the tramway fell dramatically. Despite this the latter continued in operation for another decade before it closed in 1859. By this time a new railway, the Tuffley Loop (which linked the Midland Station to the Birmingham-Bristol main line) had been laid and for the first time, the lines passing Cambridge Street were properly fenced as per statute. Surprisingly a small stretch of the High Orchard Branch – where it crossed Park Road – remained unfenced but as far as is known no further incidents were recorded on it until the branch closed on 1 October 1971. Four years later the Tuffley Loop closed and in 1977, the railway lines running by Cambridge Street were lifted. This heralded the start of modern redevelopment, which subsequently swept away a place where one of Gloucester’s most tragic episodes had taken place.

¹ Parish register P154/14 IN 1/5 (Gloucestershire Archives).

² Awdry, W & Long, P, 1987 *The Birmingham and Gloucester Railway*, Alan Sutton, p246.

³ This is the necessary clearance required on either side and above a train so that it does not strike any part of the track, buildings or any other permanent way infrastructure.

⁴ Bick, D., 1987 (Second Ed.) *The Gloucester & Cheltenham Tramroad*, Locomotion Papers No.43 The Oakwood Press, ISBN 0853613362, p35.

⁵ This new branch had been the brainchild of the B&G and it was the latter that obtained the necessary Act of Parliament and finance for work on the branch to begin.

⁶ *Gloucester Journal*, 2 October 1847, ‘Child Burned to Death on a Railroad’. The original Coroner’s Inquest does not survive. (Gloucestershire Archives)

⁷ My thanks go to Peter Witts and Dave Harris of the Midland Railway Society who supplied much of the information on this subject.

⁸ These types and classes were (numbers in brackets): Forester (4), Norris (26), No.22 (10), Bury (2), No.33 & 34 (2), No.36 & 37 (2), No.35, *Surprise*, No.38, No. 23 and *Comet*.

⁹ *Op.Cit Gloucester Journal*

¹⁰ Parish register P154/12 IN 1/33 (Gloucestershire Archives)

¹¹ *Gloucester Journal*, 2 October 1847, ‘Railway Crossings’ (Gloucestershire Archives).