

RAILWAY WORK, LIFE & DEATH

Revealing the working lives and accidents of British railway employees, 1911-15
www.railwayaccidents.port.ac.uk

What was it like to work on Britain's railways over 100 years ago? How were tens of thousands of employees injured or killed? Who were these people?

The 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project has been delving into these questions, creating an important new resource for anyone researching railway history, family history, labour history and many other topics.



In 1911 alone over 28,000 employees were injured or killed on the railways. The state department responsible for the railways, the Board of Trade, had been investigating some of these casualties since the 1890s, to find out what happened and to make recommendations to improve safety in the future. These reports are a fantastic resource, giving us plenty of detail about who was involved and working practices, as well as what happened. But it's often difficult to get hold of these reports, or even to find out what they contain.

Late in 2016, as a joint initiative of the University of Portsmouth and the National Railway Museum (NRM), the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project started to try to make these records more accessible and see what we could learn from them.

A team of NRM volunteers has been working through the Railway Inspectors' reports for the years 1911-15 (when the reports were temporarily stopped as a result of the war). They have done fantastic work, reading each report, extracting the key information and placing this in a spreadsheet. With the details standardised in a spreadsheet, they become easily searchable, making the information more accessible and useable.

Although at this stage the project is relatively small scale – when compared to the vast quantity of accident reports that were produced over the longer period, before 1911 and after 1915 – we've still documented 3,911 individuals involved in accidents.

Who will be interested in the project and its findings?

All sorts of people: railway enthusiasts, family historians, academics, those in the current railway industry, museums and archives professionals and more. There is so much detail in the cases that have been documented – we're confident that it will interest all of you, as well as take you beyond what you thought you were looking for and open up new areas you might not already have considered.

When you do make use of the resource, please let us know! There is a quick feedback form on the website, or you can send us an email (railwayworkeraccidents@gmail.com). The more we hear from you, the more we can do to tailor things to your needs – plus it helps us to make the case for continued support and that the project should be extended to include more cases.

What do we cover?

The ease of searching and level of detail in the spreadsheets are key advantages – hopefully you'll get answers to your questions, as well as generating new ones.

Obviously, we can only cover what was covered by the original reports, and that was a small proportion of the total accidents incurred by workers – perhaps 2 or 3%. However, that's still brought in nearly 4,000 individuals for the 4½ year period we've looked at. Within that, the spreadsheet details: date of accident, name of people involved, sex, age, location of accident, occupation, employer, time of accident, nature of casualty (fatal/ type of injury), type of accident and details, cause of accident, time on duty, and any recommendation for changes following investigation. This features accidents from across the UK - including, of course, what is now Ireland, as the period we cover (1911-15) pre-dates the formation of Eire/ Northern Ireland.

When will the data be available?

It's available now! See 'The Accidents' page of the project website. In addition to the spreadsheet, there's a wealth of information and detail on the project website, including regular updates featuring some of the cases and findings from the accident reports.

What next?

We want to extend our coverage, to the official worker accident reports for the post-1918 period and to include other sets of railway worker accident records – such as those produced by the railway companies themselves and the trades unions. This would really broaden the value of the resource. However, that is dependent upon willing volunteers helping transcribe details into the spreadsheet. So, if you would be interested in helping with this, please let us know!

Also, to make it more likely we'll be able to extend the project, we need to be able to show that what we've done so far has been valuable to you and that there's an appetite for more. We'd encourage you to send us your feedback on the resource when you've used it.

Get in touch

We want to hear from you: how has the project been useful to you? What have you found interesting, or that you didn't know before? What questions has the project sparked? What would you like to see us do next? Do you want to help with the development of the project? If you can contact us with your feedback and your questions, we will get back to you with some responses. See: www.railwayaccidents.port.ac.uk

Project people

We should start with the people who made the project possible: the NRM's volunteers. Without them, this resource wouldn't be available. They were excellent, and were ably supported by Craig Shaw, NRM Administration Volunteer. The project is being led by Karen Baker at the National Railway Museum, and Mike Esbester of the University of Portsmouth. The project has arisen from Mike's research, which has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK.