



SOUTH WILTSHIRE CORONER'S INQUESTS



CODFORD

Herbert Wells 5th February, 1915

Man Killed by an Express Train at Codford

Mr F. A. P. Sylvester, Coroner, held an inquest at Codford Railway Station into the death of Herbert Wells, who was employed at the Camp and was knocked down and killed by a train at Codford.

Mr Hinton was chosen foreman of the jury.

At the outset the Coroner asked if there was any rule about people walking on the line.

PS Zebedee replied: It is a common practise, sir.

Chief-Inspector Ackland, of Westbury, who was present on behalf of the Great Western Railway Co., said the Company had warning boards fixed at every station and that was all they could do. Men had simply been cautioned in the hundreds.

The Coroner: Have any of them been summoned?

Chief-Inspector Ackland: No, sir. We try to avoid doing that.

Richard Dixon said he knew Herbert Wells, who had no fixed address, and was employed as a labourer at Corton Camp, as he, the witness was. He and deceased and another man named Tom Spencer went to Salisbury on Saturday.

The Coroner: What did you do there?

Witness- Richard Dixon: We spent a few hours in our own way in shopping, and had a drink, of course. We came back to Codford by a train leaving Salisbury at 9.30, but it was more like 10 o'clock when it left, but I am not certain. We alighted here and were walking down the line to Corton. Wells walked on the left of the railway and we were on the right. We were all outside the line. I noticed a train approaching and told my friend Spencer. I said, "stand up here and I'll see after Soldier."

The Coroner: You called deceased "Soldier"?

Witness: Yes. I sang out "For God's sake, man, stand where you are." I could see it was dangerous for him to cross the line, but he walked straight in front of it as he started to come over to us. I saw the train hit him.

The Coroner: And did you go across to him? Reply: No.

The Coroner: You called out to him as the train was approaching? Reply: Yes. I told him to stay where he was, and instead of doing so he commenced to walk across to me in front of the train.

The Coroner: He was quite safe where he was? Reply: If he remained where he was he would have been all right.

The Coroner: He should have seen the train coming towards you? Reply: Yes. I saw it a hundred yards away. But I think there was some wood left out in the four-foot, and I think that had something to do with it. He got on to that and he did not know where he was going, because it was pitch dark.

The Coroner: What did you do? Reply: Our first thoughts were to report it to the camp. We did not do as we ought to have done. We ought to have come here but we did not do so.

The Coroner: Did you see him actually knocked down by the train? Reply: Yes, sir.

The Coroner: Did you see anything of him after the train had gone over him? Reply: No, not until Sunday morning, when we came here first thing to report it to the station-master.

The Coroner: You did not look to see whether he was injured? Reply: No, we had seen enough.

The Coroner: You went on to Corton? Reply: Yes, sir.

The Coroner: What time did you come here on Sunday morning? Reply: About 7.15.

The Coroner: You came straight to the station-master? Reply: Yes.

The Coroner: Was Wells sober when this happened? Reply: I can't say he was drunk, but he had had a good drop.

The Coroner: That means he was drunk, if I understand the language? Reply: No, he was capable of looking after himself.

The Coroner: He had had a tidy bit? Reply: Yes. We were not sober or we should have reported it ourselves. We meant to report it at the camp, but we found them in a worse state than we were.

The Coroner: Who was in charge? Reply: There is a man in charge of the huts, but it's no use talking to him when he is sleeping drunk. There is no other authority there after working hours. A murder could be committed and it would not make any difference.

The Coroner: How many men are there? Reply: I can't say.

The Coroner: Roughly? Reply: I have no idea.

The Coroner: Two or three hundred? Reply: Two or three hundred?

The Coroner: I mean at your particular camp.

A juryman: There were about fifteen hundred, I heard.

Witness: They are coming and going all the time, and a rough estimate would not cover it.

The Coroner: And most stay there all night? Reply: Yes, in the huts.

The Coroner: And Saturday afternoon is off for everyone? Reply: Yes ; that's the only time we have ; we work Sundays.

The Coroner: Is there nothing for the men to do? Reply: That time is permitted for us to do a bit of shopping. We can get nothing about this neighbourhood, and that time is allowed for us to go to town.

The Coroner: What amount of drink had Wells had? Reply: That's a funny question. I can't answer that. It is no use me trying to put any measurement. He is a man used to drink, and a man who can carry some drink.

The Coroner: And there were a lot of drunk men at the camp? Reply: There was no drink there. We can't get drink there.

The Coroner: There were a lot of people under the effects of it? Reply: In our hut they were about half mopped, and they were asleep, and we thought it best not to mention anything.

Tom Spencer was next called, and said he was with the last witness – Richard Dixon. He had heard Dixon's evidence and it was all correct.

The Coroner: Had Wells seemed cheerful coming back in the train?

Witness – Tom Spencer: He was all right. We had had an enjoyable day.

The Coroner: So I would imagine.

James Haynes, of Frome, said he was a labourer working at Upton Lovell. On Saturday night he had been home to Frome and was returning to Upton Lovell. He was with others, and after leaving the station they were walking down the line to Upton level crossing when they saw a man lying in the 4ft way. They came back and reported it at the signal box.

PC Hillier said he found on Wells' body three postal orders and a letter addressed to his wife. These amounted to 6s 6d. On Sunday morning he found 9d in a pocket that had been dragged off. There was also some odd money, making 9s 2d altogether.

George Scattergood, a painter, of 182, Oak Street, Grimsby, said he knew Wells, who lived at 115, Rutland Street, Grimsby, and was a painter. He was once a soldier.

Dr Lewis said death was due to fracture of the skull. Wells' right arm and leg were severed, and his left foot was almost severed.

The Coroner produced two letters which had been found on the body. One was addressed to deceased's wife. There was nothing in them to throw any light on the occurrence, and he did not propose to read them out unless the jury desired him to do so. Wells was sending some money home.

Mr Pope, the stationmaster at Codford, said he received information of the occurrence on Saturday night at about 11.20.

The Coroner: Have you had much trouble with people walking on the line? Reply: Yes.

The Coroner: Have you ascertained which train this was? Reply: Yes. It was an express which passes here. It went through at about 10.30 that night.

The Coroner: Was there any mark on the engine? Reply: We wired to Salisbury at once and asked them to examine the engine, and the driver said he knew nothing about it.

The Coroner: You have had trouble with people on the line? Reply: Yes, sir.

The Coroner: What are your instructions? Reply: To order them off.

The Coroner: Do you order them off? Reply: Yes, frequently, and then they will make as if they are going round the road, but directly my back is turned they go across the fields and get on again.

The Coroner said that undoubtedly the deceased was accidentally killed on the railway. Many of these men went off on a Saturday afternoon; there was nothing for them to do in the camp, and no provision was apparently made where they could buy necessaries of life, and consequently they went to the nearest town, where they indulged too freely. There was no doubt about that. When they came back it was a common practise for men to walk down the line to get to their camps, but that was a practise which the railway company should see very clearly must be dealt with severely and must be stopped, or else there would be other cases like that very soon. Some of the men were not responsible, and the warnings were not likely to be of much effect. He thought that the railway authorities would see that it must be clearly understood by the men that if they were on the railway a prosecution would follow, with a penalty. That was the only way to stop it. It was a dangerous practise for men half, if not wholly, in a drunken condition and unable to look after themselves. The other two men with the deceased were, he supposed, satisfied in their minds that he was killed, but they did not know clearly what they were doing, and consequently nothing was heard of that occurrence until later on. The man from Frome was in a condition to know what to do, and he promptly and very properly reported it to the station authorities.

The jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death."

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