

Kilsby Tunnel in Use

Much has been written about the Kilsby Tunnel under construction; to redress the balance, here are some tales of the tunnel in use, taken direct from newspapers of the day.

Early days

It's mainly the bad news that makes the headlines, so we might expect a string of gloomy reports about the early years – and sure enough:

Northampton Mercury 10 Mar 1838:

"... about seventy yards of the railway tunnel at Kilsby fell in on Monday last. Fortunately the labourers were absent at the time, and no accidents occurred."

Leicester Journal 26 Jun 1846:

"...fire at Kilsby Tunnel, from the falling sparks emitted by the engine, which set fire to the luggage placed at the ... "

Stirling Observer 02 Jul 1846:

"... through Kilsby Tunnel, on its way to London, took fire, and some of the passengers were, for some time, in great peril."

Derby Mercury 31 Mar 1847:

"... the Kilsby tunnel, at a quarter to six o'clock, when the axletree of one of the wagons broke, and threw the train into disorder. ..."

London Daily News 22 Jul 1847:

"... in the Kilsby tunnel, set fire to the straw of a cattle truck, in which was a Hereford bull belonging to Mr. Newman, ..."

Northampton Mercury 24 Jul 1847:

"... in Kilsby Tunnel. The poor animal was roasted alive, and a boy in the truck narrowly escaped the same lamentable fate."

Worcestershire Chronicle 01 Sep 1852:

"As a goods train was passing through the tunnel an ox jumped out of an open truck, ..."

Hereford Journal 06 Oct 1852:

"... the Kilsby tunnel, on Wednesday last, crushed in a most frightful manner. Nothing remained of his head except a tuft of hair ..."

Bucks Herald 06 May 1854:

"... On Tuesday evening week, as a detective officer was conveying a prisoner by train from Birmingham to London, in passing through Kilsby Tunnel ..."

Leicestershire Mercury 06 May 1854:

"... in the Kilsby tunnel, between Rugby and Crick. The officer who had him in charge heard his wooden leg strike the door as he fell from the train ..."

Oxford Journal 23 Sep 1876:

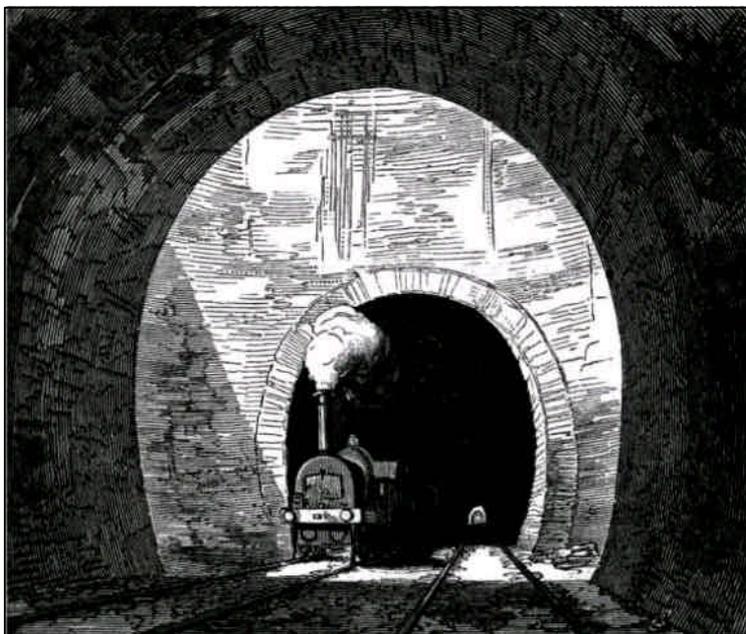
"... through the tunnel when an axle of the wheel of one of these trucks broke, and caused 20 trucks and the brake van to leave the line, which was torn up..."

Bucks Herald 18 Jan 1879:

"... end of Kilsby tunnel, a train ran through the pack, killing two, and injuring several hounds. Baron Rothschild's staghounds ..."

Northampton Mercury 09 Nov 1894:

"... through Kilsby Tunnel fell upon the straw of a bullock truck in the train behind. In this truck was a famous heifer. The boy in charge ..."



An early sketch of a train passing through the tunnel

Coventry Evening Telegraph 25 Jul 1901:

"... through Kilsby tunnel, early on Wednesday morning, sparks from the engine alighted on some trucks laden with petroleum, and there was a tremendous explosion ..."

Derby Daily Telegraph 20 Jan 1906:

FATAL FALL FROM EXPRESS

"...in Kilsby tunnel, about six miles from Rugby. The address indicated she was travelling to Princethorpe Priory, an educational establishment for Roman Catholic ladies ..."

Lichfield Mercury 26 Jan 1906:

"... When the London express arrived at Rugby at 4:47 a carriage door was found open, and a search resulted in finding the body ..."

"At the George Hotel, Kilsby, on Saturday evening, Mr. Davis held inquest on the body of Mdlle Lily Yolande Marie Rochaid (19), daughter of Count Rochaid of Sans Souci, Dinard, Ille-et-Vilaine, France, whose dead body was found terribly mangled in Kilsby Tunnel ... "

A Royal Visit

In view of this fearsome string of calamities – variously due to flying sparks from the engine, signalling failures, open carriage doors, faulty wheels or axles – you might think that Queen Victoria would have flatly refused to use such a dangerous transport. Indeed, this was certainly a view widely held in the late 1800s, as this extract from my book "At that Particular Time" illustrates:

"I was Edith Mary Emery," said my companion, "before I became Mrs Howes. I was born in 1909 ... my mother was a cook at Wolverhampton Refreshment Rooms before she married. I've got a photograph here of a supper they prepared for Queen Victoria when she came to Wolverhampton in the 1890s – and I was told that Queen Victoria wouldn't travel through Kilsby tunnel for anything, I don't know whether the thought of it frightened her, but they say she had to be taken to Wolverhampton without going through the tunnel."

At the time when I heard this story (1991) I had no easy means of checking whether it was true. Now, thanks to the newspaper archive website, I can prove that the Queen was made of sterner stuff – at least, she had been prepared to chance it when she was younger, in November 1843. A pioneering train journey by young Victoria to meet Sir Robert Peel made headlines throughout the country, with specific reference in the newspapers to the Queen's train halting at Wolverton Junction, where Her Majesty alighted, before passing through the Kilsby tunnel with her carriage illuminated by special oil lamps lit by the guard, "casting a pale yet effective light into the saloon".

So much for the 1890s story handed down by Mrs Howes' mother; always check your facts whenever possible.

However, Victoria might have thought twice about it if her journey had taken place nine years later, in 1852, when a dreadful incident made headlines from Land's End to John o' Groats. Kilsby Tunnel, although constructed to allow dual-line traffic, was initially equipped with only a single-line track. This was always a potential hazard, as we see in this report from the Rugby Advertiser dated June 1852:

"A collision of a fatal character took place between a ballast train and a coal train in Kilsby Tunnel on Monday afternoon. It appears that about 11:00am a ballast train from Birmingham entered the tunnel, and the 11:50am coal train Rugby to Fenny Compton left the former place at the proper time, and on being signalled that there was not any other train in the tunnel, it entered and proceeded at its usual pace. On arriving at the centre, the driver of the coal train perceived that there was a train ahead of him, and he had scarcely time to shut off steam and reverse his engine, and, together with his stoker, to jump off, before a frightful collision took place. On some of the trucks of the ballast train, which was stopped in the tunnel at the time of the shock, were seated a number of workmen proceeding to a portion of the line to work. Most of them were thrown out of the carriages by the collision, and more or less injured. One poor fellow named Williams was found jammed in between some of the carriages and frightfully mutilated. He was conveyed together with some of his injured companions to Coventry, but he expired shortly after his arrival at the hospital. It was found that his vertebrae was dislocated, and his back broken in two or three places, besides other frightful injuries.

Whether from culpable negligence or from what circumstances the two trains were permitted to be in the tunnel on the same rails at one time has not yet been ascertained. But the company's orders in that respect are at the same time most simple and most rigid:

'In the Kilsby and Watford tunnels there are special signals, and a policeman stationed at either end, to signal to the other train. When any train enters the tunnel it is the duty of the policeman to signal to the other train, and not to let another train pass into the tunnel till such signal is received.'



This picture of the south portal shows the policeman's hut

By some extraordinary circumstances one or other of these signals, or both, was not given. The coal train was allowed to enter the tunnel, and hence the collision. Both constables were suspended, and are in custody, and close investigation is to be made, as their instructions were most explicit, and printed and stuck up in the policeman's box at each mouth of the tunnel. These facts were established at an inquisition held on the body of Williams at the King's Head, Coventry."

Finally in 1879 the line was enlarged to allow two-track working in the tunnel. So Queen Victoria would have been safe enough going through the tunnel in the 1890s (as long as she remembered to keep her carriage door shut and look out for flying sparks).

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August 2012