

7th Battalion Royal Scots

Quintinshill 22 May 1915

Robin Nelson

It's not a town, it's not a village and it's not a farm. Search the Ordnance Survey maps and all you will find is a bridge of this name where a minor road from Gretna passes under the West Coast Railway. Nearby is the River Sark, the border between England and Scotland. That's it, nothing more yet Quintinshill is a name famous for all the wrong reasons.

For it was near this bridge on 22 May 1915 that the worst railway accident in the history of the railways of Britain took place. 227 people died and 246 people were seriously injured. A fierce fire that engulfed the wreckage accounted for most of the fatalities.

A view of the site of the crash can be had from the overbridge about a mile to the north. It's a rural scene and, apart from the overhead electric wires, little seems to have changed over the intervening one hundred years. But there has been one change of significance. The signal box with the name of Quintinshill has gone. It was a signal box of importance controlling the movements of passenger and goods trains on this busy line with down and up loops available to allow faster trains to pass slower moving traffic.

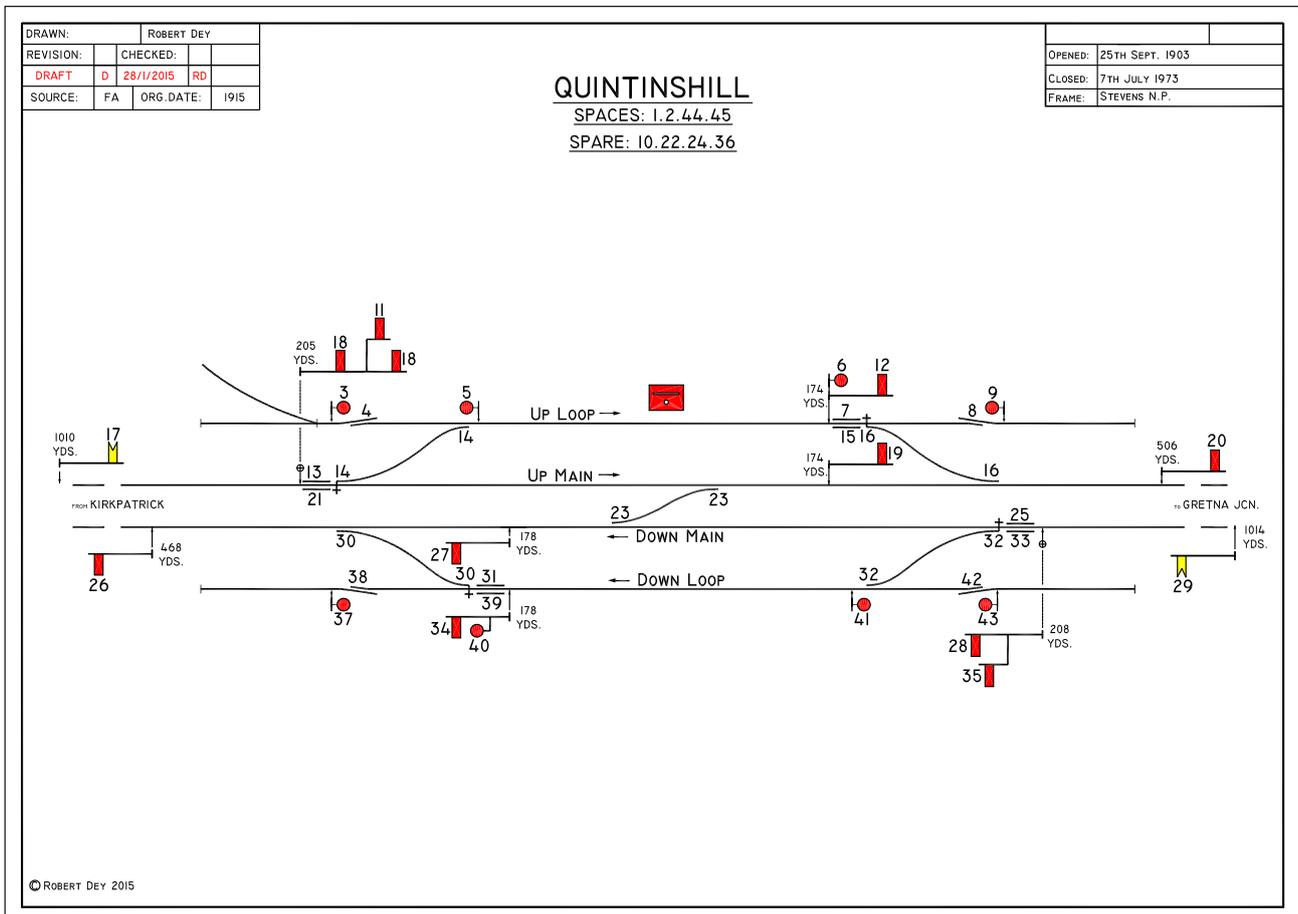


Quintinshill signal box was commissioned in 1903 and lasted until 1973 when electrification and re-signalling of the WCML resulted in the power box at Carlisle taking over control of the line.

Britain had been at war with Germany for nearly a year by this time and the resulting increase in train movements was significant. The ships of the British Grand Fleet, all fired by Welsh coal, had moved to Scapa Flow resulting in a steady flow of coal trains from the Welsh mines to Thurso. The Caledonian Railway's main line

from Carlisle was hard pressed to accommodate these extra trains.

George Meakin, the night shift signalman at Quintinshill, was nearing the end of his shift on Saturday 22 May and deciding how best to deal with an imminent conflict of train movements. The 4.50 am goods from Carlisle Yard was an hour late and would have to



be held in the down loop awaiting the two overnights from London, each running some thirty minutes late. There was also a train of empty coal wagons heading south but as Carlisle Yard was full it would have to be held in Quintinshill's up loop. And, if this was not enough, Carlisle had despatched the 06.10 all stations to Beattock ahead of the two expresses assuming that it would be put into the down loop at Quintinshill.

The Caledonian Railway had not yet introduced centralised control of traffic and signalmen were required to organise moves that best suited traffic conditions.



The conflagration at Quintinshill on 22 May 1915 following the collision of the south-bound troop train with the stationary local passenger train which had been shunted on to the up main line to be in turn hit by the Glasgow sleeping-car train. Two hundred and twenty-seven people died, most of them servicemen bound for Gallipoli.

Contemporary press photograph



A Caledonian signal box equipped with Tyer's block instruments. The lower plunger is operated to send 'line clear' to the neighbouring signal box. The upper plunger is operated when the neighbouring signal box sends the bell code for 'train entering section'. The glass panel above the plungers protects two miniature semaphore arms which operate in conjunction with plunger operation. Sending line clear causes the bottom arm in the sending instrument and the upper arm in the receiving instrument to lower. Acknowledging 'train entering section' by the upper plunger restores both miniature semaphore arms to the horizontal position.

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An already occupied down loop was not a problem to Meakin. It happened every now and again. Using crossover points number 23 to transfer the local to stand on the up main line until the expresses had passed was an acceptable alternative.

Actually, Meakin should have been on his way home by now as shift changeover was at 6am. However, day shift signalman James Tinsley who also lived at Gretna was a poor time keeper, not that anyone was bothered. A bit of forgery by his mate could hide this. Every train movement at a signal box is recorded in a ledger known as the Train Register. Bad time keeping would be obvious from the hand writing but that could be simply dealt with by Meakin recording all movements on scrap paper leaving Tinsley to transfer the details from 6am onwards to the Register. He arrived at 6.30am and by train. Roger Kirkpatrick who was the Gretna signalman had told him that the local would be stopping at Quintinshill thus saving him the walk of about a mile. His first task on arrival was to enter missing times in the Train Register book.

Meakin pulled the points lever number 23 to allow the slow to cross to the up main. Now he could give 'train out of section' to Gretna for the slow followed by sending 'line clear' for the first of the expresses. 'Line clear' was then requested and received from signalman Sawyers at Kirkpatrick. A few minutes later the Edinburgh bound express passed Quintinshill.

All was well, or was it? Meakin's professionalism had ensured no delay to the overnight trains but now a lack of professionalism would result in disaster. Tinsley was filling in the Train Register and, just as he completed this, fireman Hutcheson arrived in the box. His task was to remind Meakin of the presence of his train on the up main, sign the Train Register and ensure that a collar had been placed on lever 18, the signal that protected his train. A collar is a visual reminder and also prevents operation of the lever. He signed the TR book but failed to see that lever 18 lacked a collar. He returned to his locomotive. Time was now 6.38am.

Tinsley took charge of signalling trains and Meakin retired to a chair in the corner to read the newspaper that Tinsley had brought. In the meantime, the Welsh empties had arrived in the up loop enabling train out of section



The locomotives of the double-headed sleeper train on top of the wreckage of the troop train.

to be sent to Sawyer at Kirkpatrick. He should have then immediately sent train on line to Sawyer, a requirement known as 'blocking back'. This serves as an additional safeguard to protect a move such as had occurred with the Beattock slow. He failed to do this and, at 6.42 am, signalman Sawyer requested and received 'line clear' for a troop train bound for Liverpool Docks.

Irregular, but not life threatening. Driver Francis Scott would have seen Quintinshill's distant signal at caution and brought his train to a halt at signal 18. He certainly would have been puzzled by the presence of a passenger train just ahead. Scott's train had left Larbert, near Falkirk, some two hours earlier conveying 500 officers and soldiers of the 7th Battalion of the Royal Scots to Liverpool Docks where they would embark for Gallipoli.

Now the fatal action was taken. Tinsley requested and received line clear from Roger Kirkpatrick at Gretna. Up line levers 18, 19, 20 and distant

clear' for the Glasgow sleeper. This was given and, following permission from signalman Sawyer at Kirkpatrick, Tinsley pulled the levers for down line signals 28, 27, 26 and distant signal 29.

Why did Tinsley readily signal the troop train with the Beattock train sitting on the up main line right outside the signal box? In the subsequent enquiries, he freely admitted this extraordinary lapse of memory. And he had travelled on that very train! Meakin, deep in his newspaper, remained oblivious to Tinsley's errors.

At 6.48 am, the troop train appeared travelling at 60mph and collided with the locomotive of the stationary passenger. Dreadful, but worse was to follow. The Glasgow sleeper had passed Gretna at speed. There was time to throw the down line signals to danger



The two locomotives involved in the head-on collision: Caledonian Railway 4-4-0 No 121 and CR 4-6-0 No 907.

signal 17 were pulled for the troop train. Neither the driver or fireman of the slow train noticed the signal arms dropping to the proceed position. At the same time, Gretna requested 'line

but both signalmen were too stunned to react. At 6.50 am, the two locomotives of the sleeper hit the wreckage of the troop train, rode up and over the carriages of the troop train.



The process of clearing up the mess attracted much attention from the public.



On 9 April 2009 'Royal Scot' No 46115 Scots Guardsman was working the down 'The Great Britain II' from Preston to Glasgow at Quintinshill where the layout is much the same except the crossover has been repositioned and is only used occasionally. Dave Hall

Twelve of the twenty-one carriages in the troop train were ancient. Wooden-bodied, wooden-framed and gaslit. A lethal combination with the hot coals pouring out of the fireboxes of the locomotives of the Glasgow sleeper. Within minutes, the tangle of shattered carriages was blazing furiously. Help arrived remarkably quickly but getting near the soldiers trapped in the wreckage was impossible. Three hours passed before the Carlisle Fire Brigade arrived and a further twenty-four hours were needed to extinguish the blaze.

Two hundred and twenty-seven people died that day and a further two hundred and forty six were injured. There were eight fatalities in the Glasgow train and, remarkably, only two in the local train.

The driver and fireman had leapt to safety on seeing the troop train approaching and the guard, with commendably speedy reaction, had sprinted down the line waving furiously at the Glasgow train.

Four very badly burned bodies believed to be children but never identified were despatched to Glasgow and buried in the Western Necropolis. Driver Francis Scott and fireman James Hannah of the troop train were also victims.

Every death was a tragedy but the effect the on the 7th Battalion of the Royal Scots was traumatic: 214 deaths and everyone a local lad from Leith. They had grown up together and enlisted together. With training completed, they were on their way to Gallipoli. Instead, there was a funeral and a mass grave in Leith's Rosebank cemetery. An impressive red granite memorial stone has the name of each

soldier.

On the Tuesday following the crash, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Druitt arrived in Carlisle's County Hotel to conduct the Board of Trade's investigation into the cause. He took evidence principally from the two signalmen and train crew. Senior managers of the Caledonian Railway also gave evidence but only to show themselves in a good light. The enquiry was adjourned that day never to resume and his report was issued three weeks later. No problems with a conclusion. Meakin, Tinsley and Hutcheson did not carry out their duties in a responsible manner. Yes, it was unfortunate that there were lightly built wooden gaslit carriages in the train and something should be done about it but, we are in the midst of a war

Shortly after, the Procurator Fiscal in Dumfries charged Tinsley with culpable homicide. As twenty-seven soldiers had died in Carlisle Infirmary, the Coroner held an inquest the conclusions of which were much the same as the Board of Trade's. Tinsley was then charged with manslaughter. A silly situation that was eventually resolved by leaving matters to the Scottish judicial system.

Now, comment appeared in the Dumfries and Galloway Standard inferring that Tinsley was not in good health and should not have been employed as a signalman. Symptoms indicated what we now know as epilepsy though little was known of this condition in those days. There was no reaction from either the Procurator Fiscal or the Caledonian Railway and the three men appeared in the High Court in Edinburgh. Lord Strathclyde agreed to Hutcheson being discharged

but Meakin and Tinsley were sent to prison. Tinsley's sentence was three years of penal servitude at Peterhead, a sentence appropriate for a hardened criminal which quite clearly he was not.

There was public reaction to the severity of the sentences resulting in early release for both men. Surprisingly, the Caledonian found jobs for both men even though they were of an age for military service.

Many books have been written on Quintinshill but a recent publication by Adrian Searle and Jack Richards – "The Quintinshill Conspiracy" – has put a different slant on the outcome of the investigations of the Board of Trade, the Carlisle Coroner and the Dumfries Fatal Accidents Enquiry. Under the Freedom of Information Act, the authors have accessed official papers. Basically, it suited both the Government and the Caledonian Railway to have the signalmen take the blame. Recent months had witnessed a succession of calamities with Flanders, Gallipoli and the sinking of the *Lusitania*. A train crash of this magnitude with suggestions of failings in higher management and the railways being stretched to the limit to meet war time demands was not something to be made public. Better to blame those nearest to the problem.

Quintinshill has not been forgotten. Every May 22nd, a memorial service is held at Rosebank cemetery. A memorial cairn was dedicated at Gretna in 1995 with a survivor, Rachel Nimmo, attending. Rachel, her father, mother and baby brother had travelled on the 6.10 am from Carlisle. Her mother and brother were killed but she and her father survived.