Labour History **Research Note**

Railway Work, Life & Death: Exploring British and Irish Railway Worker Accidents, c.1890-1939

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Introduction

At 7.10pm on 20 January 1911, J. Reynolds was helping to marshal railway wagons into the correct order at Brindle Heath Junction, Salford, in England. He was struck by a wagon and thrown against another on an adjacent siding. A colleague "rushed to catch Reynolds, and he was able fortunately to prevent him from falling below the waggons [sic]." Reynolds lost a foot, but it could have been fatal. The state investigation into the accident determined that the site was "distinctly dangerous as the clearance is insufficient." Two accidents had previously occurred at the same location, including a fatality the year before. Staff had complained, so the local foremen knew the risks to which workers were exposed – but no changes were made. The state investigator concluded his report with the note that unless there were alterations "further accidents may be anticipated."[1]

Reynolds' case was just one of the 28,294 staff accidents on UK railways in 1911, amongst a workforce of around 600,000.[2] It was not particularly unusual – and therein lies its importance. Fortunately for us, it was also the subject of a state investigation, meaning that at least a cursory record of the accident remains. The brief report (stretching to half a page – lengthy, for an employee accident) still provides us with some illuminating detail about the nature of railway work and the structure of the industry at the time. We see how work was actually being carried out, and that the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company was unwilling to make alterations to either the site or the work practices: this no doubt reflected the economics involved. We see the unequal power relationship between staff and company, which refused to act upon worker complaints; and we are able to identify another unequal power relationship, as the state could not force the company to make changes. Finally, we can use the case to question how 'accidents' were defined at this time, if further cases were anticipated: deaths and injuries were to some a necessary and acceptable part of keeping the railway system operating.

The 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project (RWLD) is exploring occupational accidents, like that of Reynolds, involving British and Irish railway staff between the late 1880s and 1939. A collaborative effort, including working with volunteers, it is jointly run between the University of Portsmouth, the National Railway Museum and the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, with additional input from The National Archives of the UK. From the initial idea in 2015, this unfunded project has been developed and expanded – a great deal has been achieved, with more on the way in the coming years. At the heart of the project's first phase is the transcription, as fully as possible, of contemporaneous accident records.

A driving factor has been the personal. Whilst the overall annual employee casualty statistics have long been relatively easily accessible (being made available contemporaneously in state publications), accounts of individual accidents have been rather harder to access. This

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[1] *Quarterly Return of Accidents and Casualties as reported to the Board of Trade by the several Railway Companies in the United Kingdom during the Three Months ending 31st March 1911* (London: HMSO, 1911), 38.

[2] *General Report to the Board of Trade upon the Accidents that have occurred on the Railways of the United Kingdom During the Year 1911* (London: HMSO, 1912).

is significant. As we have seen tragically with Covid-19, particularly in the UK, large numbers of casualties are hard to comprehend – but put names and individual details to those cases and their impacts can more easily be felt and understood. One of the RWLD project's hopes is that we can focus on the human-level impacts of an industry which was so dangerous, and foreground the accident experiences of staff and their families. As will be discussed, this will bring a range of benefits to a variety of stakeholder communities.

Research Context

One of the increasingly important aspects of the project is the ways in which it is evolving to incorporate a range of approaches to the past. A few of these threads are worth highlighting here. The initial locus for the project was the history of occupational health and safety. This area has a long and international pedigree, associated in particular with both labour history and social history.[3] This has informed the project, but we are also drawing from and contributing to the growing corpus of work exploring accidents in modern Britain,[4] as well as the rather wider literature that explores state regulation or the history of health.[5] Much of this work has focused on single industries (mining has seen notable studies), but the railway industry has been relatively poorly served in the British context. The project therefore intends to provide another point of comparison, helping us understand better the nuances of occupational hazards and their variation across sectors.

The railway industry was one of Britain's largest sectors of employment for the period covered by this project. Yet most attention to date has been focused on nineteenth-century passenger accidents.[6] Railway workers are thus numerically significant in terms of national employment, and at the same time underrepresented in terms of research, particularly in the post-World War I period. [7] For various reasons, the state intervened in matters of railway safety,

[3] Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870-1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); John Burnham, *Accident Prone: A History of Technology, Psychology and Misfits of the Machine Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Breen Creighton and Neil Gunningham, eds, *The Industrial Relations of Occupational Health and Safety* (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985); Arwen Mohun, *Risk: Negotiating Safety in American Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, eds, *Dying for Work: Workers' Safety and Health in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Lucy Taksa, "Intended or unintended consequences? A Critical Reappraisal of the Safety First Movement and its Non-Union Safety Committees," *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 30, no. 1 (February 2009): 9-36.

[4] Roger Cooter and Bill Luckin, eds, *Accidents in History: Injuries, Fatalities and Social Relations* (Atlanta: Rodolphi, 1997); Tom Crook and Mike Esbester, eds, *Governing Risks in Modern Britain: Danger, Safety and Accidents c.1800-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

[5] Peter Bartrip, "State Intervention in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain: Fact or Fiction?" *Journal of British Studies* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 63-83; Peter Bartrip and Sandra Burman, *The Wounded Soldiers of Industry, Industrial Compensation Policy 1833-1897* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jamie Bronstein, *Caught in the Machinery: Workplace Accidents and Injured Workers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor, "Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c.1930-1970s," *Labour History Review* 69, no. 2 (2004): 135-51; Victoria Long, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory: The Politics of Industrial Health in Britain, 1914-60* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); Catherine Mills, *Regulating Health and Safety in the British Mining Industries, 1800-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010); Paul Wiendling, ed., *The Social History of Occupational Health* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

[6] Paul Fyfe, "Illustrating the Accident: Railways and the Catastrophic Picturesque in the *Illustrated London News*," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 61-91; Ralph Harrington, "Railway Safety and Railway Slaughter: Railway Accidents, Government and Public in Victorian Britain," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 2003): 187-207.

[7] Mike Esbester, "Administration, Technology & Workplace Safety in the early Twentieth Century," *Jahrbuch für Europäische Verwaltungsgeschichte* (*Yearbook of European Administrative History*), 20 (2008): 95-117; Audrey Giles, "Railway Accidents and Nineteenth-Century Legislation: 'Misconduct, Want of Caution or Causes

virtually from the inception of the industry. This included the early 1840s mandate that passenger accidents be reported to the newly formed Railway Inspectorate. Investigations by Railway Inspectors have produced copious reports into accidents, though the only significant study of these reports remains that by Jack Simmons – and this does not cover investigations into employee accidents at all.[8] Leah Leneman's research into worker accident records in other industries demonstrates the value of both quantitative and qualitative analysis of accident reports.[9] Thus there remains a significant opening, both in terms of as-yet untapped primary research sources and in terms of the existing historiography.

Given the focus on individual accident reports, it is becoming increasingly clear that dialogues about what 'types' of history we can do with this material, and how we should approach this, are important. As well as thinking in now-traditional ways about 'history from below', micro-history has great possibilities in combining sensitivity to people, place and moment. This involves engaging with local history and family history, and particularly with researchers beyond higher education. Indeed, as will be discussed, this has brought some of the most fruitful collaborations of the project to date. The project emerged at a very interesting time for this type of joint enterprise, as over the last five years or so there has been growing momentum for greater cooperation across perceived disciplinary boundaries, championed from within the academic community by the likes of Tanya Evans, Peter Hobbins and Laura King.[10] This has crystallised in the 'Historians Collaborate' movement, an attempt to provide a meeting point for historical researchers regardless of background, institutional affiliation or methodological bent, and to encourage understanding and co-working.[11] Our project has from the outset tried to facilitate and practice this open approach, involving as many stakeholder groups as possible.

Julia Laite's work has brought together some of these aspects (micro-history and family history in particular) and connected with a final broad area: digital humanities.[12] Within the fields of transport and mobility history and labour history, we have perhaps been slower to respond to the possibilities and challenges of digital scholarship. Indeed, it appears our project is unusual in these fields in seeking to harness the power of 'citizen scientists': volunteers who will help order large quantities of material and share in the production of new data. This draws on the 'Zooniverse' model of crowd-sourcing,[13] which, although originating from science, has increasingly been applied in innovative ways to arts and humanities projects (for example, the "AnnoTate," "Ancient Lives," "Operation War Diary" and "Letters of 1916" projects). The methodological issues and advantages of this approach to historical research are now being

Beyond their Control'?" *Labour History Review* 76, no. 2 (August 2011): 121-42; Ewan Knox, "Blood on the Tracks: Railway Employers and Safety in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain," *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 12 (Autumn 2001): 1-26.

[8] Jack Simmons, "Accident Reports, 1840-90," in Jack Simmons, *The Express Train and Other Railway Studies* (Nairn: Thomas & Lochar, 1994): 213-33.

[9] Leah Leneman, "Lives and Limbs: Company Records as a Source for the History of Industrial Injury," *Social History of Medicine* 6, no. 3 (1993): 405-27; Leah Leneman, "Workmen's Compensation at the Wemyss Coal Company 1906-1924," *Scottish Economic & Social History* 13, no. 1 (May 1993): 43-55.

[10] Tanya Evans, "Genealogy and Family History" in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018): 175-85; Tanya Evans, *Fractured Families: Life on the Margins in Colonial New South Wales* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2015); Laura King, "Living with Dying," accessed 29 May 2020, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/; Peter Hobbins, "An Intimate Pandemic: Community Stories," accessed 29 May 2020, https://www.rahs.org.au/an-intimate-pandemic-community-stories/. See also: "Family Historians, Collaboration and a New History from Below Methodology," accessed 29 May 2020, http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/family-historians-collaboration/.

[11] See "Historians Collaborate", accessed 29 May 2020, www.historianscollaborate.com.

[12] Julia Laite, "Schooners and Schoonermen, My Grandfather and Me," *History Workshop Journal* 87 (Spring 2019): 251-61; Julia Laite, "The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age," *Journal of Social History* (2019: https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy118).

[13] "Welcome to the Zooniverse," accessed 29 May 2020, https://www.zooniverse.org/.

worked through, with a developing base of experience and publications from which to draw and inform the RWLD and other history projects.[14]

Project Origins

The way in which the RWLD project developed has been crucial in shaping its direction. My doctoral and subsequent research has explored cultures of accident prevention in the British workplace and beyond, with a significant focus on the railway industry. As a result, I had been aware of some of the vast body of staff accident records that existed, though a great many more have emerged in the course of detailed searching for the project – and through happenstance. It was clear that there was far more material than a single researcher could ever hope to cover, and that the material contained within the records would be of interest to a wide range of people. Speaking at a 2015 conference held at the National Railway Museum (NRM), York, which brought together family historians, academics, curators and others, I outlined some of the possibilities of the sources for research as well as floating the idea of a collaborative methodology. This was sufficiently well received that I was able to develop the idea, with the support of the NRM and involving family historians.[15] This collaborative ethos has remained at the heart of RWLD.

Initially we started as a joint project between the University of Portsmouth and the NRM: with Karen Baker, NRM Librarian, as the project co-lead. We spent around a year developing the project, considering its questions, the methodology, ethics (all discussed below) and other factors. It no doubt helped that I had an established relationship with the NRM through my time as a postgraduate at the Institute of Railway Studies,[16] but the timing was also fortuitous. At this point, in 2016, a small team of volunteers at the NRM had finished their existing project and were looking to move on to something new. Offered the opportunity to join RWLD, they did so with enthusiasm. Intended as a proof-of-concept, we set out with a limited range of source material; within a year, this was completed and publicly available, and the volunteers were asking for further records. Whilst the intention had been to use the pilot project as a springboard for a funding application, at the risk of losing the time of our willing and expert volunteers, we decided to launch the second phase.

Throughout all of this, discussions had been ongoing with the Modern Records Centre (MRC) at the University of Warwick, Britain's major repository of trades unions records, including for the railway unions. They came on board – with Helen Ford, MRC Manager, as a second project co-lead – and an extension to bring in trade union records started in 2019. Finally, we have been working with The National Archives of the UK (TNA) to bring accident records produced by railway companies into the project, championed by the Transport Records

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[14] Tim Causer and Melissa Terras, "Crowdsourcing Bentham: Beyond the Traditional Boundaries of Academic History," *International Journal of the Humanities and Arts Computing* 8, no. 1 (April 2014): 46-64; Mia Ridge, *Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2016); Sally Shuttleworth, "Old Weather: Citizen Scientists in the 19th and 21st Centuries," *Science Museum Group Journal* 3 (Spring 2015; http://dx.doi .org/10.15180/150304).

[15] Many have helped, but Jackie Depelle has been particularly supportive, and I would like to acknowledge her assistance.

[16] Amongst other things, this relationship produced an online exhibit in 2014: "Caution! Railway Safety Since 1913," accessed 29 May 2020, https://www.railwaymuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/caution-railway-safety-1913.

Specialist, Chris Heather. In both cases, dedicated teams of volunteers have been doing excellent, in-depth work with the primary sources.

In some respects, we have been a victim of our own success. The interest and willingness to get involved from institutional record keepers has meant that we have ended up running a large-scale project without direct funding – though of course, the time of the volunteers and the in-kind support from our respective institutions is a huge commitment, and not to be downplayed. The challenge has been that at the institutional level we are all trying to fit project work in alongside the formal requirements of our day-to-day work. For those of us working in higher education institutions, projects are typically valued (and recognised in workloads) according to the amount of funding they attract; for those in the museums and archives sectors, whilst projects like this can be valued (and fortunately for us, they are), it is still a challenge to find time and money against a host of other competing public-facing demands. This has meant that a more strategic approach to seeking financial support has been difficult to implement. For all those considering crowd-sourcing, at whatever scale, this would be a lesson: it has been, and remains, thoroughly worthwhile, and is producing excellent resources, but it takes huge amounts of time, energy and patience. To make the work manageable and sustainable, securing funding is vital – if difficult. As it stands, the project is a labour of love for those involved.

Project Aims and Sources

Given we have a large quantity of potentially useful information within the staff accident records, the project's key objective has been making this detail easily accessible and searchable. The sources were available in hardcopy at the relevant archives but not digitally. In addition, if the records were catalogued, it was not down to individual level; without any sort of finding aid or index it was virtually impossible to locate specific cases or to start to analyse the data for trends. As a point of principle, we wanted to ensure that as many people as possible could find out about the vicissitudes of railway work, so transcribing the relevant records as fully as possible has taken centre stage. As a part of this, making the contents of the records freely available is important – not least because we are reliant upon the efforts of volunteers. All of this will contribute to a wider aim of encouraging research into railway labour and of raising awareness of occupational risks faced by employees.

The initial phase of collating and transcribing data now looks as if it will stretch into several years, given we estimate we have around 70,000 individual cases in the files. This will develop into a more analytical period, as we become able to identify trends. As project leads, we had a number of research topics we expected the data to be able to address, but as we edge towards co-production with volunteers and those interacting with the project, we anticipate and encourage further questions. The records give us insight into the nature of railway work (including what actually happened in practice); the incidence of occupational casualty; relationships between state regulators, employers, employees and unions; and how understandings of occupational health and safety might have altered over time. The long run of data will make it possible to understand changes and continuities over a 50-year period.

For family historians, the data is name-rich – providing often precise details about an individual ancestor's movements, day-to-day job and accident(s) – as well as providing wider social history context which they may be interested in discovering. For local historians it becomes possible to see how the railways and their staff interacted with particular locations

and communities. For museums and archives, RWLD unlocks holdings which are currently uncatalogued. This allows these institutions both to efficiently answer queries from researchers and to make holdings more accessible for independent research, as well as to use the stories contained within their records in future exhibitions and content. For rail enthusiasts and the general public, our project is providing new insight into the history of the railways, an extremely popular topic in the UK and Ireland, and internationally. It challenges people to consider not just the technological and engineering achievements, but the social impacts of the railways, and to go beyond a narrative which is frequently viewed through rose-tinted spectacles. Finally, we hope that the data will be of value for the current railway industry, by providing context for the present, as well as a non-threatening medium through which to access and discuss current safety-related issues. It allows the possibility of learning from the past, including by re-discovering institutional memory and by being reminded of past solutions to problems.

At present we are drawing from three types of accident record, all produced by industry institutions. First, the NRM volunteers are working with the records of state accident investigations, undertaken between 1900 and 1939 (with a World War I induced gap from mid-1915 until mid-1921). These reports are brief – typically no more than a page at most, but sometimes only a few lines of detail. They give core factual details (name, age, grade, date, location) and a short account of the accident, any attribution of responsibility and any recommendations for changes. The limited number of state inspectors investigating staff accidents meant that only approximately three per cent of cases were investigated, so clearly there is a huge gap here.

That gap is in part filled by the trade union records, though obviously they only cover union members. The MRC has the records for the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (becoming the National Union of Railwaymen, NUR, from 1913), which include cases where staff or their dependents required legal help, or received some form of benefit or assistance (for example, compensation following an accident, or support via the orphans' fund). The key interest is financial, as the Union was keeping a watch on its liabilities. Across the seven datasets coming into the project from the NUR there is plenty we will learn both about the moment of accident and ill-health and about provision for its aftermath.

The final run of data comes from the records kept by the railway companies themselves, held at TNA. Legally, after 1877 the companies were required to report accurate statistics of work-related accidents to the state (from which it was decided which cases the state inspectors would investigate). This produced a vast run of records, only a small percentage of which survive, mainly for the period after 1897 when changes to the law meant most railway staff became eligible for automatic compensation. There are strong regional variations here, for as-yet unclear reasons: South Wales is particularly well served, for instance. Much of the detail captured in these reports is similar in format to that found in the state reports, but far more cases are recorded. For the companies whose records survive, we believe they document all accidents, making it possible to do detailed analysis for at least some companies.

One great advantage of these three data sources is the different coverage they provide. We will never be able to find details of all railway employee accidents: they were far too numerous (over 840,000 between 1889 and 1939).[17] However, we will gain a much better cross-section and coverage by combining sources. A further advantage is that we will be able

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[17] Figure aggregated from the General Reports to the Board of Trade/ Ministry of Transport on Accidents on Railways, 1889-1939.

to triangulate some cases across the different sources. We already know that there are some individuals who feature in all three types of data; we gain different information from each and might be able to see differing interpretations (for example, of responsibility for accident) by the source producer. This will help to expose issues around power in the workplace. As will be noted in the conclusion, there are further sources it might be possible to incorporate into RWLD in the future, extending the project's value.

Methodology and Results

Given the subject matter, an ethical approach is particularly important. This has involved ensuring no harm is done to the volunteers involved in the project, as well as to those named in the reports or their descendants. All of the data featured in the project is a matter of public record, though there are still considerations around making this more easily accessible at a distance rather than in the archive. We are aiming for a nuanced and sensitive approach to the accidents, remembering at all times that each case represents an individual, who had family and belonged to a number of communities. Recognising the sacrifice made by the workers and those around them is vital; ensuring the names of those involved are known is therefore fundamental to the project. We have yet to receive any concerns about making this information freely available. Indeed, we have received favourable feedback about the fact that we are doing this, including from the descendants of those involved. Whilst as a project we are careful about treating those named with respect, we cannot control how users of project data will respond, other than reminding them to be mindful that these were real people. Finally, we work with our volunteers to prepare them for the material they will encounter (written reports only; there are no images in the original sources) and to support them. We are aware of the possibilities for vicarious trauma and have protocols in place to minimise this as far as possible. Ultimately, of course, volunteers and users are able to step away from the project material at any point if they so choose.

Volunteers are at the heart of the project: without them none of this would be possible, and we are extremely grateful for all of their hard work. We have tried to avoid an imbalance of power so far as possible, at the very least by recognising the potential problem. One means of doing this is by sharing in each other's expertise – not simply assuming that volunteers follow and project leaders lead (though of course they do, institutionally and in terms of providing support and resources where feasible). It has been truly enlightening to learn from the volunteers, who bring such a range of expertise. For example, some have detailed understanding of railway terms and operations, and some are able to use family history methodologies to track individuals over time and explore their wider life stories. We've tried to put this ethics of sharing into practice via a co-production approach, working with volunteers to determine mutual research avenues and to support each other's research. This has been more feasible with the volunteer teams based on-site at archives (the MRC and TNA) and more of a challenge with the NRM's volunteers, who are based remotely. We have produced an induction session and materials and then provide ongoing assistance as required. For the NRM team, a central figure is the volunteer coordinator, Craig Shaw, himself a volunteer. Craig facilitates the remote working: including sending out and receiving materials electronically, collating and undertaking a first level of data cleaning.

In all cases, volunteers are transcribing the records from the original document (or a pre-existing electronic version, if remote) into a standard spreadsheet. This brings consistency

which will make for easier searching and analysis of the data. Unlike large-scale crowd-sourcing projects and open-source wikithons, we are operating with relatively small numbers of volunteers, known to us directly. This was a pragmatic decision, not least as the cost of producing digital images needed for Zooniverse was prohibitive. Given the small numbers of volunteers, each record is only transcribed once, rather than multiple times to determine an agreed version. As far as possible, this is compensated for in multiple stages of data checking and cleaning. We had to strike a balance between 'gold standard' transcription and getting the work done in a reasonable timescale. We have asked volunteers to transcribe everything in the company and union records (as they are shorter) and virtually everything in the state accident reports (which are longer). Once we are satisfied a run of data is ready, we are making it public through the project website.[18] Volunteers are also encouraged to pursue research into any cases they see fit – some have wanted to do this, but for others transcription has been sufficient. Building an inclusive space where the volunteers have the freedom and support to explore as much or as little as they wish has taken effort from all, but it is very significant.

One important aspect of our methodology has been the drive to build links with a diversity of communities who might be interested in the project. Part of this has been direct, via dissemination to and engagement with stakeholders: publishing in print and online in locations germane to academics,[19] family historians, local historians and others; working with the societies and associations of these groups; and going to their events to make presentations and take a project stall. One outcome of this was the project's participation in the 2019 'Transcription Tuesday' event. Run by family history publication *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*, members of the public helped transcribe around 3,000 trade union records in a single day.[20]

Whilst admittedly capturing only a subset of those interested, the project's Twitter feed (@RWLDproject) has been enormously valuable in interacting with a rich variety of people and organisations, and has resulted in working with the current rail industry regulator, family historians, other academic projects and more. Twitter, in particular, takes time, but for us has been extraordinarily useful. All of this has encouraged a deeper engagement with a diversity of researchers, and led to work with the 'Historians Collaborate' movement to promote the benefits of cooperation as widely as possible.

Given we're only part-way through the project's initial intention of making the data more readily accessible to a public audience, what follows is a cautious summary of the position in mid-2020. Volunteers have transcribed around 6,500 accidents to individuals, and we are currently working on cleaning perhaps another 20,000 cases to an appropriate standard. The data has been downloaded world-wide, with around 66,000 website views (helped by the weekly blog post, no doubt), and the project has 2,500 Twitter followers. None of these are guarantees of genuine engagement, of course, but they are indicative of the project's wide reach. We have made presentations to, and worked with, all the stakeholder communities we expected would be interested (family historians, local historians, rail enthusiasts, academics, the current rail industry) as well as writing for their publications.

Plenty of cases have emerged from the records which cast light on worker experiences. Three points will suffice, by way of example. First, the data offers insights into the relationship

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[18] "Railway Work, Life & Death," accessed 29 May 2020, www.railwayaccidents.port.ac.uk.
[19] See Mike Esbester, "Digital Disasters: Crowd-Sourcing the Railway Accident," in *Transport and its Place in History: Making the Connections*, ed. David Turner (London: Routledge, 2020), 207-28.
[20] "Exploring the Transcription Tuesday Railway Accident Records," accessed 29 May 2020, http://www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/blog/exploring-transcription-tuesday-railway-accident-records.

between gender, work and transport: it prompts us to think about why so few women were represented in the accident records and the systematic structures which kept them in less dangerous roles and which expected men to trade their health and safety for paid employment. Another significant theme is the mismatch between working practices as specified by the companies or even the state, and as carried out on the ground, under pressures of time and economy. Tacit knowledge and worker skill were clearly significant. Finally, occupational disability appears in the data – not just where it was caused by accident or ill-health, but also in cases where previously injured staff were re-employed in different roles, or continued to work with impairments such as deafness in environments where hearing was essential, such as amongst moving trains. In these cases, we can link the individual with much broader, systemic issues that are core to labour, social and disability history.

The project work is certainly paying off for stakeholder groups. The goodwill generated and the willingness shown by a great many people to get involved has been phenomenal. Institutions are making active plans to use the accident material in their public-facing work. We regularly feature guest blog posts from members of the public who have found RWLD and made use of our resources in their research. Academics have regularly commented on the value of the project and its inclusive approach. And perhaps most heartening of all, the volunteers are clearly enjoying and benefiting from the project, keeping on with the work (for many, over several years now) and doing their own research which we've featured on the project blog. Recently one volunteer, Philip, noted: "Having been interested in the railways all my life, the project has been a unique insight into both the rules and the reality of working practices on the railways." This is a satisfying testament to the ways in which the project is working.

Conclusions

We still have a lot to do in the data-collation phase of work: perhaps as much as two-thirds of the extant accident records require transcribing and preparing for release. In the immediate term, then, we will continue to document cases with the volunteer teams at the three contributing institutions (Covid-19 and inaccessible archival material notwithstanding). We will carry on submitting funding applications, too, as ultimately external funding would allow us to put the project on a more formal and secure footing. We have been making contact with other projects in allied areas, to explore links and potential collaboration. One such project is "Living with Machines," run by the Alan Turing Institute and the British Library, examining the potential of machine learning by using digitised newspapers from the 'long nineteenth century,' including a focus on industrial accidents.[21] Another is the "Piston, Pen and Press" project, exploring how Scottish and northern English workers engaged with literary cultures between the 1840s and 1910s.[22] Finally, the "Addressing Health" project is looking at ill-health in the Victorian and Edwardian Post Office, and how employer and employees responded to the challenges posed.[23] All three of these projects are adopting similar innovative methodologies to explore topics akin to that of RWLD – and all three have proven very receptive to the possibilities of collaboration.

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[21] "Rethinking Research to Illuminate the Past," accessed 29 May 2020, https://livingwithmachines.ac.uk/.
[22] "Piston, Pen & Press: Welcome," accessed 29 May 2020, https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/.
[23] "Addressing Health," accessed 29 May 2020, https://addressinghealth.org.uk/.

In the longer term, we will be able to answer the research questions already posed about railway worker occupational safety and health (a woefully neglected topic in the sector), as well as identifying additional questions that require attention. One particular advantage of RWLD is that we are beginning to piece together a long run of data, enabling important analysis across time and enabling us to trace both individual life stories and the geographies of accident and ill-health. This would be greatly strengthened by the inclusion of sources currently outside the scope of the project. In terms of archival sources, there is material relating to Scottish and Irish accidents we have thus far been unable to access, but which would be important for improving our geographic coverage. The sources we have access to are all in some way 'institutionalised' (be it company, union or state), so the workers' voices are either absent or filtered through official channels. Oral history sources and autobiography would offer us some chance of rectifying this absence (particularly for the later years of our interest).

Being able to piece together whole life stories would be a fantastic opportunity to put occupational accidents and ill-health in their widest possible perspective. With sufficient technical skill and funding, it would be possible to link the project datasets with others, such as civil registration documents (births, marriages and deaths), maps and newspapers. We know there is a huge desire to get involved from wider communities of interest – notably rail enthusiasts and family historians. They frequently have details of accidents to staff that are otherwise undocumented. In some cases, these include personal recollections of family members who had accidents or the impacts of those accidents on family life. Finding a means to integrate their evidence into the project would not only continue to democratise what we are doing, it would be an invaluable aid to our understandings of railway worker accidents and their long-term legacies. As well as widening the range of contributors, improving dissemination is desirable. This would create a positive feedback loop, which would hopefully bring further contributions. Institutional enthusiasm exists at international, national and local level for outreach events such as exhibitions, providing funding can be sourced to make them happen (a big ask, admittedly). Further possibilities for digital outputs that are more active – GIS mapping of the accidents, for example, or an app which would allow you to explore the cases and those involved whilst using the current railway network – would also be a benefit to users and researchers alike.

Finally, in an ideal world the project scope would be enlarged in two key ways. First, the clear connections with disability histories are pressing. This would mesh with the desire to look at life stories and put the moment of the accident, or rather longer-term *moments* of ill-health, into greater context. What happened *after* disability might be more significant in the life course than the cause of the disability. Second, we have many of the surviving UK and Irish records coming into the project but we have yet to place these in a broader international context. Comparative work drawing in the similar records known to exist in Australia and New Zealand, and which no doubt exist for the USA too, would be invaluable.[24] Could we also explore how occupational health and safety was played out in another colonial and former-colonial context, that of India? These comparators would give us fresh insight into the national specifics of railway labour as well as revealing commonalities, and could be tremendously

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[24] André Brett's work on Australian and New Zealand railway history is particularly impressive and offers some useful possibilities. See, for example, "Floods and Railways in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of History* 53, no. 2 (2019): 5-31; "'Particularly Offensive': Smoke, Fire, and the Environment of the Steam Railway in New Zealand Prior to 1914" (paper presented to the New Zealand Historical Association conference, Wellington, 2019).

powerful in helping us towards a deeper understanding of the lives and misfortunes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century railway staff.

Keywords

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This research note introduces the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project, which explores accidents and ill-health amongst British and Irish railway workers from the late 19th century to 1939. Drawing from state, railway company and trade union records, the project is making details of the working lives and accidents of railway employees more easily accessible. The note describes the collaborative impetus behind the project, and the crowd-sourcing methodology used, including the importance of working with volunteers. It shows that focusing on individual cases, at scale, is extremely revealing about the nature of work and the dangers of one of the largest employers of its time. It hopes to encourage others to engage with crowd-sourcing and co-creation, as well as to make use of the resources being produced.