DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

RAILWAY ACCIDENT

Report on the Collision that occurred on 27th November 1971 at Sharnbrook

IN THE
LONDON MIDLAND REGION
BRITISH RAILWAYS

LONDON: HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
1972

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RAILWAY INSPECTORATE,
DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT,
2 MARSHAM STREET,
LONDON, S.W.1.
10*th July* 1972.

SIR,

I have the honour to report for the information of the Secretary of State, in accordance with the Order of the 30th November 1971, the result of my Inquiry into the collision that occurred at 19.25 on Saturday the 27th November 1971 at Sharnbrook, in the London Midland Region, British Railways, between a train of wagons loaded with excavated spoil and a stationary civil engineer's train containing a rail-travelling 12-tons crane.

Sharnbrook is on the route from London, St. Pancras, to Leicester. The spoil train, which was travelling south towards Sharnbrook along the Up Main Line and which was grossly overloaded, became out of control on the falling gradient and ran into the engineer's train at a speed of about 20 m.p.h. The weight of the spoil train drove the engineer's train forward about 30 yards where it collided in turn with another train of loaded spoil wagons. The nine trainmen who formed the crews of the three trains all escaped serious injury but four of them, listed below, sustained cuts and bruises.

T. H. Orton, age 49, the driver of the overloaded spoil train.
R. H. Turnell, age 44, Driver Orton's secondman.
A. D. Ballard, age 47, the driver of the engineer's crane train.
H. J. Patrick, age 32, Driver Ballard's secondman.

Two locomotives were severely damaged, one being completely derailed, and two brake vans and about a third of the wagons which made up the runaway spoil train were either destroyed or badly damaged. The Up and Down Main lines were in the Civil Engineer's possession at the time and all ordinary passenger and goods trains were being worked along the Goods lines; both Main lines and the Down Goods line were blocked by wreckage as a result of the collision and by some 250 tons of ballast and clay spoil. The signalman at Sharnbrook heard the noise of the collision from his box about 400 yards away and when the driver of one of the trains called to him that there had been a collision he at once took steps to prevent any trains from approaching along the Goods lines. An ambulance arrived within 25 minutes, followed by a fire brigade whose services were not, however, required but who stayed to provide flood lighting equipment for the assistance of the breakdown men. Two breakdown cranes were used to clear the derailed and damaged wagons and during the recovery work single line working for both passenger and goods trains was introduced along the Up Goods line between Sharnbrook and Wellingborough. The Down Goods line was re-opened to traffic at 06.15 on Monday the 29th November and the Up and Down Main lines were re-opened on Tuesday the 30th November at 04.00 and 18.20 respectively. Drizzle and slight rain was falling when the accident happened.

DESCRIPTION

The Site

1. Sharnbrook lies between Bedford and Wellingborough. Between Bedford (50 miles from St. Pancras) and Wellingborough (65 miles) there are three signal boxes, these being at Sharnbrook (56½ miles), Irchester South (62 miles) and Wellingborough Junction (64¾ miles). There are four tracks between St. Pancras and Wellingborough which, between Bedford and Wellingborough, are named Up and Down Goods and Up and Down Main in that order from east to west, the Up direction being southbound. It is permissible to use the Goods lines for passenger trains whenever necessary. Between Sharnbrook and Irchester South the Main lines and the Goods lines are on separate formations which for most of the way are at different levels, the alignment of the Goods lines having been sacrificed to secure easier gradients, and at one place the formations are almost half a mile apart. The accompanying diagram shows these details.

2. Both formations pass over a summit at approximately 59½ miles. From approximately 62½ miles the Main lines rise in the Up direction towards the summit at a gradient of 1 in 120, from where they fall for about three miles at 1 in 119 to Sharnbrook signal box. The Goods lines also ascend in the Up direction, from 64 miles, but on a gradient of 1 in 200, passing through a tunnel 1,860 yards in length and then falling towards Sharnbrook at a gradient of 1 in 160. At the top of the Sharnbrook Summit the Main lines are level for about 200 yards and there are gradient boards in the Down cess at either end of this stretch.

3. There is a double junction at Sharnbrook connecting the Main lines with the Goods lines, the points on the Main lines facing northbound traffic, and at Wellingborough the Main and Goods lines are connected at several places. There are crossovers between the Up and Down Main lines and between the Up and Down Goods lines at Sharnbrook, Irchester South, and Wellingborough but there is no provision at Irchester South for getting trains from the Main lines to the Goods lines or vice versa.

The Trains

4. For operating purposes the three trains concerned were given the numbers 9Z02, 9Z03, and 9Z04. The spoil train, No. 9Z04, which became out of control as it approached Sharnbrook from the north, was being hauled by Locomotive No. 1623, of Class 47 and of 2,750 h.p.; it had a Co-Co wheel arrangement and its weight was 117 tons. The train consisted of 61 wagons with a 20-ton four-wheeled brake van at either end; some of the wagons were of 13 tons capacity and others of 20 tons. Train No. 9Z03, with which No. 9Z04 collided, was standing with its locomotive, No. 5250 of Class 25, at its northern end. A brake van stood next to the locomotive followed by the rail-travelling crane, two crane runner wagons and another brake van. Train No. 9Z02 had Locomotive No. 101, of Class 45, at its southern end and 30 wagons behind it, all loaded with spoil and with a brake van at the rear. None of the vehicles in the three trains was fitted with continuous brakes and all three trains were being worked as Class 9 trains.

Train Preparation

5. Every driver and guard who works trains other than those conveying passengers is issued with a booklet called "Preparation and Working of Freight Trains" which includes loading tables showing the permitted train loads that have been calculated for each route according to the gradients and the various classes of locomotives. The booklet also shows how the total tonnage of a goods train is to be assessed; in general, wagons are all appropriately marked on their sides so that by walking alongside a train, traffic staff can calculate the tonnage or basic load as it is called. The booklet gives simple instructions on how to arrive at an arbitrary basic load in the case of wagons that have not been marked.

6. The Preparation booklet lays down that the guard must first calculate the weight of a freight train which he is about to work and then enter the details on a Train Preparation Form. He must next fill in a smaller form known as a Driver's Slip, entering the train load; both guard and driver must then satisfy themselves that the tonnage is within the maximum load that the locomotive which is going to work the train is permitted to haul over the route concerned. Besides being issued to drivers and guards, this booklet is distributed to all other staff connected with the loading and working of goods trains, but it is not given to Civil Engineer's personnel.

7. The loading tables which apply to the St. Pancras to Wellingborough line and its branches are comprehensive, except that at the time of the collision the maximum loads that it gave for various classes of locomotives working Class 9 trains between Sharnbrook and Wellingborough were only for the Goods lines; the Main lines were not provided for as far as Class 9 trains were concerned because, I was told, it was the practice in normal circumstances to work all Class 9 trains along the Goods lines.

Summary of Events

8. The Up and Down Main lines between Sharnbrook and Wellingborough were in the Civil Engineer's possession to enable permanent way work to be carried out on the Down Main line between 61 miles and 61½ miles. This work consisted of taking up 460 yards of permanent way, removing all the ballast and a layer of clay beneath it, blanketing with stone dust, laying new stone ballast and replacing the track; the drain along the cess also had to be reconstructed. The next 240 yards of track to the south was to have its ballast cleaned by means of a Plasser ballast-cleaning machine. 210 empty wagons were assembled beforehand in some of the Down sidings at Wellingborough, together with other wagons loaded with the necessary supplies of stone dust and stone ballast.

9. Possession of the Main lines between Sharnbrook and Wellingborough was taken at 12.00 on the day of the accident, the intention being to finish the work by 16.00 the next day, and the Civil Engineer's men began by working the ballast-cleaning machine along the 240 yards stretch of the Down Main line. Train No. 9Z02, consisting of the first 30 of the 210 wagons, left Wellingborough as soon as the possession was obtained and, travelling along the Up Main, it reached the work site at 12.50. The dirt discarded by the ballast-cleaning machine was discharged into these vehicles and the work was completed by 17.10, when the train was then hauled along the Up Main to Sharnbrook. The intention was to take this train as far as Bedford, from where it would be hauled in due course to a tip at Lidlington, near Bletchley; it could not be worked forward immediately, however, as the double junction at Sharnbrook was in almost continuous use to get passenger trains to and from the Goods lines, and it was still on the Up Main line at Sharnbrook when Train No. 9Z04 approached at 19.25.

10. At about 12.20 Train No. 9Z03, conveying the rail-travelling crane, left the sidings at Wellingborough and was propelled along the Up Main line by Locomotive No. 5250, arriving at the work site at about 13.00. The continuous welded rails were cut at the place on the Down Main where the clay was to be dug out and they were then shifted onto the sleeper ends of the Up Main, after which the sleepers were removed and put down temporarily along the Up Main four-foot way. Digging machines known as traxcavators had already been brought to the site, having travelled over intervening fields from the nearest highway. This train left the work site at 17.10 and reached Sharnbrook at 18.30 with Locomotive No. 5250 still at the rear, drawing up behind Train No. 9Z02 where the train crew then waited; it was intended, as soon as the signalman could arrange it, that the train should be hauled along the Down Goods line back to Wellingborough where it would then be available when the time came to replace the permanent way.

11. Train No. 9Z04, with 61 empty wagons, left the Wellingborough sidings at 15.35 and arrived at the site of the engineering work at 16.30, by which time it had become dark; Train No. 9Z03 which was then still there was drawn ahead to make room for it. The 61 wagons were positioned alongside the 460 yards stretch from which the track had been removed and the digging machines, supplied by contracting firms and worked by drivers that the owners had sent with them, then began the task of excavating the formation bed and filling the vehicles with ballast and clay, which was very wet. By 18.50 all 61 wagons had been filled and the train was taken forward, towards Sharnbrook; it was the intention that this train, too, should be worked to Bedford and, in due course, to the Lidlington tip but it began to get out of control soon after it had passed over the Sharnbrook Summit and it struck Train No. 9Z03 shortly afterwards.

12. The engineering work still had to be finished, despite the blockage of three of the four tracks at the Sharnbrook end, and this was done by filling the remaining 119 wagons with spoil, shunting them from the Wellingborough end and back and then replacing the track in the normal way. It was because of this shunting that the re-opening of the Main lines was considerably delayed.

EVIDENCE

13. The engineering work at 61 miles was in the charge of *Mr. M. L. Pearce*, an area assistant engineer, who told me that he had held a meeting on the 5th November to plan the operation. In addition to various engineering staff who attended in order to assist him with the arrangements for providing the necessary manpower, plant and materials, two movements inspectors in the Operating Superintendent's Department were also present and they contributed by making provisions for the possession of the lines, the working of the spoil trains to and from the site and the rostering of the necessary train crews.

14. Details of the various trains of spoil and permanent way materials were worked out, together with the times at which they were to be taken to and from the work site, and these particulars appeared in the weekly traffic circular which was issued on the 24th November. The circular stated that the train which was later given the number 9Z02 would consist of 30 wagons and that Train No. 9Z04 would consist of 60 wagons with a brake van at either end. In addition, the circular stated that the two following spoil trains were also to consist of 60 wagons each, and that all four spoil trains would be hauled by Class 45 locomotives.

15. Mr. Pearce said that after he had estimated in the course of planning the work that the amount of dirt and spoil to be removed would need 210 wagons and that the ballast-cleaning men would require 30 of them, he had decided to have the remaining 180 at the site in three successive trains of 60, since a 60-wagon train would more or less span the whole of the 460 yards of excavation and enable all four traxcavators to work at once, filling them with the minimum of wagon shunting. He had no knowledge of the booklet "Preparation and Working of Freight Trains", the Civil Engineer's staff, as already stated, not being issued with these regulations, nor did he know the capacities of the various types of locomotives, and he relied on the movements inspectors who attended his meeting to consider all matters connected with the working of the trains and to advise him accordingly; neither of the inspectors raised the question of the maximum loads that were permitted along the Wellingborough to Sharnbrook line, however. On the day of the accident Mr. Pearce arrived at the site at about 11.35 and the work was begun at the appointed time and went ahead according to schedule until the accident occurred.

16. *Mr. T. Trussler*, a permanent way section supervisor, also attended the meeting held on the 5th November and confirmed that neither of the movements inspectors raised any questions about the working of the 60-wagon trains loaded with spoil from the Sharnbrook Summit to Sharnbrook signal box. On the day of the accident he carried out duties at the site of the work from the outset and supervised the removal of the permanent way and the work of the traxcavators, telling the guard as soon as Train No. 9Z04 was filled that it could depart.

17. The guard in charge of Train No. 9Z04 was *S. E. Beever* who told me that he reported for duty at Wellingborough at 15.20 and found his train standing ready for him in a Down siding; shunters had already marshalled it, with 61 empty wagons instead of 60 and with a brake van at either end. Locomotive No. 1623 was attached and the train left at 15.35; when it reached the work site the loading of spoil was commenced and while this was in progress Beever went along the wagons, assessing what the load was going to be when every wagon was full. He did not write down the details as he passed from wagon to wagon but added them up mentally and arrived at a total of 1,366 tons; he then entered this figure on a Driver's Slip which he handed to the locomotive men. He knew that the gradients on either side of the Sharnbrook Summit were 1 in 120 and 1 in 119 on the Main lines, and he was also aware that the loading tables did not give any figures for Class 9 trains on this part of the route but he considered that if he assisted by applying the hand brake in his van the driver would be able to control the train down the 1 in 119 gradient to Sharnbrook, and when the driver's secondman said he would travel in the leading brake van and apply the hand brake there also, Beever felt satisfied that all would be well. The train duly left the site, Beever occupying the rear brake van, and it passed over the summit at about 10 m.p.h. but by the time it was approaching Sharnbrook signal box it was travelling at about 20 m.p.h., the collision occurring at this speed. Beever was not hurt when the train struck the train in front and at once went back to protect the Up Goods line, not knowing then, in the dark, whether it was obstructed or not.

18. *T. H. Orton*, the driver of the 61-wagon spoil train, told me that he also knew that the loading tables did not provide for Class 9 trains over the Sharnbrook Summit on the Main lines; nevertheless, when he received the slip from Guard Beever giving the load as 1,366 tons he felt satisfied before leaving the engineering site, when the secondman said he would work the hand brake in the leading brake van and the guard said he would do the same at the rear, that his locomotive would be able to control the train. After passing over the summit, however, he realised that the brakes were not keeping the train in check and that he would be unable to stop at the red light and the detonators which he knew would be on the line ahead, at the end of the engineer's possession a quarter of a mile from the Sharnbrook home signal, where he was required to halt and wait until a handsignalman gave him the signalman's permission to proceed. He then noticed the tail light of a train in front of him and as his locomotive ran over the detonators he jumped from his cab, fortunately falling onto soft ground and escaping with bruises.

19. *R. H. Turnell*, Driver Orton's secondman, said it was his suggestion that he should travel in the leading brake van and apply the hand brake there. He began to screw on the brake as soon as the summit was passed and although he was satisfied that it was working properly he soon began to suspect that the train was out of control and realised that this was so when the driver began to sound long blasts on the locomotive horn. When the collision occurred this brake van was flung off the Up Main line and across the Down Goods line; Turnell was not unduly hurt, however, and was able to scramble out. He had a fortunate escape as the first sixteen wagons that had been behind his van mostly overturned and all piled into a heap of wreckage.

20. *A. D. Ballard*, the driver who had propelled Train No. 9Z03 from the engineering site, said that he and his secondman, *H. J. Patrick*, had occupied the leading cab of Locomotive No. 5250 in the direction of travel and that they were still sitting there, waiting for Train No. 9Z02 to draw ahead, when Train No. 9Z04 ran into their locomotive from behind, throwing them both to the cab floor. He attended to Patrick who at first appeared to be rather badly hurt, and then went to the Sharnbrook signal box to report the accident.

21. *Mr. G. F. Hornbuckle*, an inspector in the Nottingham Division, said he was one of the two movements inspectors who attended the meeting that Mr. Pearce called on the 5th November. He said he dealt with matters such as the times certain signal boxes would need to be open, the selection of men to act as the Persons in Charge of the engineering possessions and the arrangement of handsignalmen. It did not occur to him to ascertain whether or not the 60-wagon trains of spoil would be within the capacities of their locomotives when descending from the Sharnbrook Summit, nor did he give this aspect any consideration when the weekly traffic circular was distributed. In addition, he told me that although his Division extended southwards from Nottingham as far as the 54th mile post, which is about two miles to the south of Sharnbrook, he was not familiar with this part of the Main line and had not appreciated the severity of the gradients on either side of the Sharnbrook Summit. Mr. Hornbuckle was not in the locality when the engineering work was begun, having instructed a district inspector to attend.

22. *Mr. J. A. Doggart* told me that he was the other movements inspector who attended Mr. Pearce's meeting, and also that he was the district inspector who was detailed by Mr. Hornbuckle to be on duty in connection with the engineering work. He said that the district to which he was allocated extended northwards from Sharnbrook through Wellingborough to a signal box just to the north of Kettering; he had been doing his present duties only four months but had worked in the district some twenty-five years. At Mr. Pearce's meeting he dealt with matters such as the provision of train crews, and although he, too, appreciated that trains of spoil were going to be worked 60 wagons at a time from the work site to Sharnbrook and thence to Bedford he did not think to question whether such loads were too great for the route. He seemed to be of the opinion that an entry in the engineering programme, which was put before him at the meeting and which said that trains loaded with sixty wagons of spoil were to be hauled from the site to Bedford by Class 45 locomotives, was in fact an authority for such loads to be worked.

23. On the day of the accident Mr. Doggart started duty at 10.00 and satisfied himself that the train crew arrangements were in order and that the 210 wagons stood correctly marshalled in the sidings at Wellingborough. He then went to Wellingborough Station signal box and was there when possession of the Up and Down Main lines was taken at 12.00 by a permanent way supervisor. Next, he went to Irchester South signal box where he was able to speak to Mr. Pearce by means of a temporary telephone that had been installed; Mr. Pearce asked him to remain at the signal box in order to supervise by telephone the working of the various trains to the engineering site, and Mr. Doggart did so. He was still there when, at 19.25, he heard the "Obstruction Danger" bell signal sent from Sharnbrook and, being aware that an Up passenger train was approaching along the Up Goods line, only 300 yards away under cleared signals, he ran out with a hand lamp and succeeded in attracting the attention of the driver, who stopped at once.

24. In due course after the collision the two brake vans which had been attached to Train No. 9Z04 were examined by a rolling stock inspector, *Mr. W. Paul*, who told me that the van which had been immediately behind Driver Orton's locomotive, No. 1623, was so badly damaged that it was not possible for him to give any opinion on the brake's condition. The brake on the van at the rear, however, was found to be in good order.

25. *Mr. B. L. Swain*, a senior technical officer, said that he examined Locomotive No. 1623. He had been unable to test the brake by operating it, due to the damage to the cabs at either end and the equipment within them, but the locomotive's tyre profiles were virtually new, the locomotive having been in traffic only some three weeks after repairs in Crewe works. The brake gear on the bogies was in good condition and discolouration of the brake blocks indicated that a heavy application had been made.

Discussion

26. An inspection of the wagons which had formed Train No. 9Z04 revealed that had Guard Beever made a more accurate calculation of the load, using the methods described in the "Preparation and Working of Freight Trains" booklet, he would have arrived at a total of 1,484 tons; his estimate of 1,366 tons was thus short by 118 tons. Moreover, because the material with which the wagons had been filled was water-logged and heavy, as many of the wagons as possible were made fit to travel and weighed; 27 of them were found to be overloaded by a total of 30 tons and if all 61 wagons had been overloaded to the same degree the total weight of the train would have been about 1,560 tons, or about 1,600 tons when the weight of the two brake vans was added.

27. The maximum safe load for a Class 9 train hauled by a Class 47 locomotive along the Main lines between Wellingborough and Sharnbrook was obtained after the accident from the Chief Mechanical & Electrical Engineer of the London Midland Region who laid down a limit of 600 tons, and Train 9Z04 was, therefore, about two and a half times heavier than it should have been.

Conclusions and Recommendations

28. The collision occurred because the weight of Train No. 9Z04 was seriously under-estimated and because insufficient steps were taken to brake it on the falling gradient of 1 in 119 on which it became out of control. According to the "Preparation and Working of Freight Trains" booklet it was Guard Beever's duty to ensure that his train was not overloaded. Although his loading tables did not provide an appropriate figure for the route, he knew that the gradient down to Sharnbrook was 1 in 119, which was steeper than any other main line gradient with which he was acquainted, and he could have used his loading tables to guide him. The maximum load of a Class 9 train worked by a Class 47 locomotive southwards towards Sharnbrook along the Goods lines, on which the gradient from the tunnel to Sharnbrook signal box is 1 in 160, would have been 1,210 tons, and on another route over which he regularly worked, where there are gradients of 1 in 133 and 1 in 132, only 990 tons. If Beever had looked at these figures he might have realised that a train of 1,366 tons, as he believed his load to be, and which he would have recorded as 1,484 tons had he made his calculations more carefully, was far too heavy to descend a 1 in 119 gradient under the control of one Class 47 locomotive, and had he then consulted the driver or Mr. Pearce steps could have been taken to work the train to Sharnbrook in safety. Either half the wagons could have been taken away at a time or a suitable number of hand brake levers could have been pinned down before the 61 wagons descended the gradient, by which means the train could have been kept under effective control all the way to Sharnbrook signal box. There was no need for hurry. Although the arrangements in the weekly traffic circular laid down that Class 45 locomotives were to work the trains the substitution of Class 47 motive power made little difference; on the Goods lines between Wellingborough and Sharnbrook a Class 45 locomotive is permitted to haul 1,230 tons, compared with 1,210 for Class 47.

29. Driver Orton was obviously uneasy about the weight of the train but he should not have allowed his secondman to travel in the leading brake van for the purpose of applying the screw hand brake. His secondman's place was with him on the locomotive, in accordance with Rule No. 132, and instead he should have asked Guard Beever to secure some of the wagon hand brakes. Rule No. 131 lays down that every guard must, where requested by the driver, fasten down a sufficient number of wagon brakes before descending a steep gradient, and the collision would doubtless have been avoided had Driver Orton acted accordingly.

30. Section Supervisor Trussler was responsible, amongst other things, for seeing that the wagons were correctly loaded at the site by four track chargemen working under him. Had every wagon been loaded with no more spoil than it was authorised to carry it is just possible that Driver Orton might have been able to keep the train under control, although it would still have been heavily overloaded. It was necessary, however, to see that every wagon was well filled by the traxcavators as Mr. Trussler had only 180 vehicles available for the spoil and there was little if any room beside the line to dump surplus clay in the event of the excavation work being unfinished after all the wagons had gone. At the same time, he appreciated the need to avoid overloading but he had nothing to guide him except his personal judgement and a quality which was described to me as "experience" and in the circumstances in which he was working I am inclined to regard the overloading as excusable.

31. Part of the responsibility for the collison must rest with the two movements inspectors. Having gone to Mr. Pearce's meeting for the express purpose of organising movement matters, they failed to discuss the train loads although they apparently dealt competently with every other detail concerning the running of the crane and spoil trains. Mr. Hornbuckle's lack of knowledge of the line and its gradients in the locality of Sharnbrook, which was within his area, was not to his credit; diagrams of the gradients were available in his headquarters and he could have referred to them.

Recommendations

32. Steps have been taken in the Nottingham Division to avoid a repetition of such an accident; all traffic circulars which give details of the working of engineer's ballast, spoil and other trains, which are invariably in the Class 9 category, now make it clear that the loadings set out in the local loads tables must be

strictly observed, and provisions are being made to ensure that the Class 9 loadings are available in cases where the printed load tables do not show them. There are, however, routes on other parts of British Railways with loads tables that do not include a table of Class 9 loadings and I recommend that the drivers and guards of all Class 9 trains, whether they be engineer's trains or goods or mineral trains in ordinary traffic, should be provided with the maximum loadings, together with any special conditions that must be observed, for their trains along the routes concerned.

33. I also recommend that some simple means should be devised whereby engineer's men who are loading wagons with heavy and sometimes wet spoil may fill the vehicles to capacity but without overloading them. Mr. Trussler said his method of deciding that a filled wagon was not overloaded was to satisfy himself that there was room between the spring buckles and the sole bar for two finger widths but I do not consider such a practice to be very reliable and if the fingers themselves are actually used a certain amount of risk is incurred. It is, however, essential to avoid overfilling and it is to be hoped that men can be given some ready system for ensuring that their wagons are loaded correctly.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

C. H. HEWISON.

The Permanent Secretary,
Department of the Environment.

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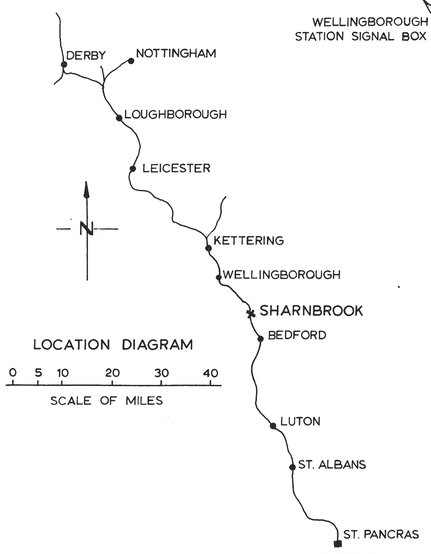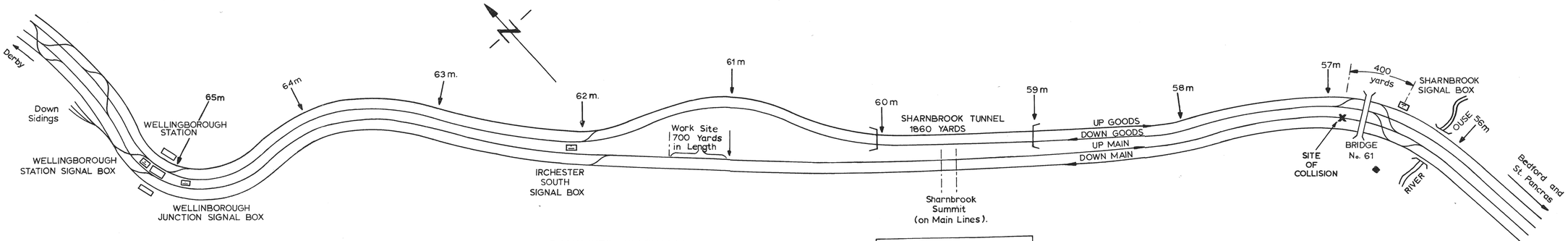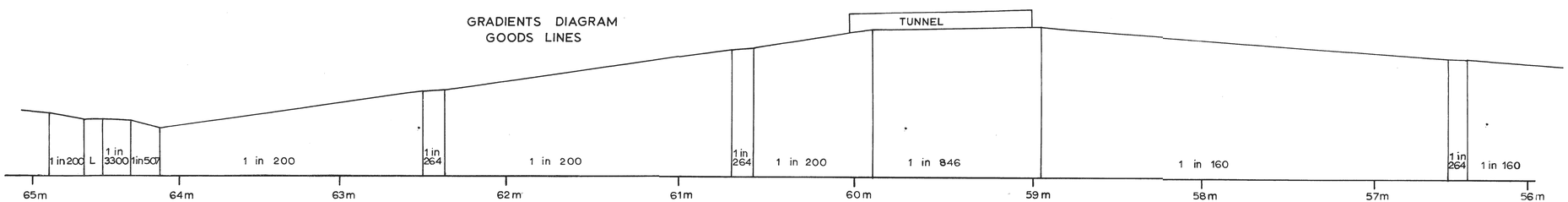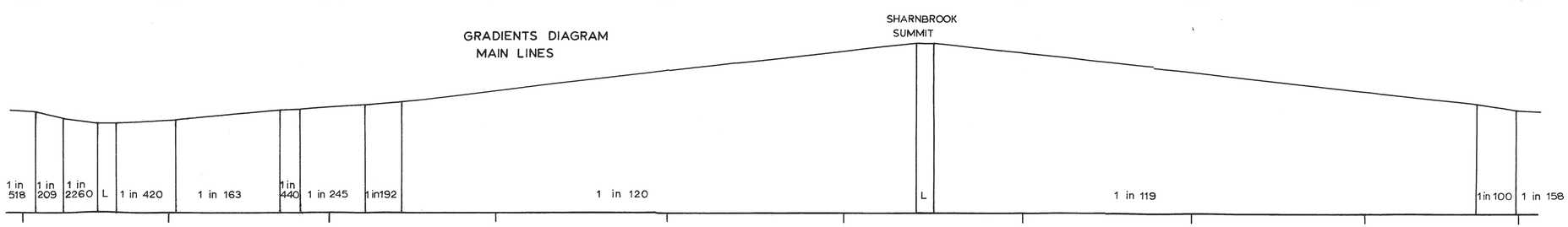
COLLISION AT SHARNBROOK 27th NOVEMBER 1971