

## 'Maritzburg's most famous accident

Most 'Maritzburgers waking up to their *Natal Witness* on 18 August 1932 would have already felt the shock waves emanating from the event – and all its attendant rumours – of the day before, when a passenger train from Dalton, due in at 8.00am, 'crashed into and totally wrecked a special single-decker tramcar carrying between thirty and forty schoolchildren.'

The site of this long-remembered accident is today somewhat submerged. The 'upper road' from Botanical Gardens to town was separate from Mayor's Walk and ran behind the present row of houses on the Signal Hill side. It has long since been buried under extended sheds and marshalling yards. The tramline ran alongside the road, and crossed the Greytown line some hundred meters above today's railway bridge (the branch-line having itself been re-contoured in the late fifties, when a bridge replaced the Mayor's Walk level-crossing).

Eyewitnesses that morning noticed two trams taking regular commuters to town at about 8.00am in the direction of the crossing, guarded by swivelling gates and manned by an Indian gatekeeper. The first tram, a double-decker, went over successfully. But then the second tram, a single-decker travelling a short distance behind, was caught by the train and smashed to bits in sounds of 'crashing woodwork, breaking glass and the screams and shrieks of children'. The tram was 'tossed like a crumpled matchbox' to one side, its roof coming to land some 15 meters away. Most dramatic of all, the Garratt locomotive teetered and then went over on its side in a huge cloud of coal dust.

The first indication that residents of Mayor's Walk had of anything being amiss was (says the *Witness*) 'the sight of bleeding and limping children making their way, sobbing bitterly, to their homes'. The average age of the passenger complement was six years: thirty nine were declared injured, and nine seriously so. Parents who arrived at the scene and saw the pulverised condition of the tramcar – from which, says the paper, 'workmen were busy extracting shoes and scraps of clothing' – became hysterical, since they did not realise that many of the children had already been removed to hospital. One little boy was found alive with his head stuck in the wreckage and his feet in the air. Another rushed home and buried his head under his pillow. Another, on being extricated, shook himself, rummaged through his pockets, and asked 'where is my season ticket?' A few days later, the *Witness* announced the death from injuries of six year old Ronald Taylor. There were 'pathetic scenes' at the funeral, which was conducted by the Reverend Mort of St Peter's.

On the day of the accident rumours flew round the town. There were claims that municipal trams often raced trains at that point, that six children had been killed, that it was the gatekeeper's fault, that it was the engine driver's fault, but most of all – since the single-decker had been observed to accelerate before impact – that it was the tram-driver's fault. He, Mr J.B. Thomas, now lay at Grey's Hospital with a stricken back and under a cloud of accusation.

An official inquiry was mounted by the Department of Transport and started on 21 September. A few days before commencement the Tramwaymen's Union announced that they would have legal representation at the inquiry, suggesting that there was a touch of proletarian defensiveness in the city and a support-group for the driver. Thirty witnesses were sub-poenaed, and proceedings started with congratulations to the *Witness's* senior photographer, Mr Henry Murray, for the portfolio he arranged. The paper reported a 'divided' public: the tramwaymen were obviously out to withstand the tide of public sentiment. (For instance one of them, the conductor on the tram, Mr Cecil Stewart, wondered – under cross-question – whether the 'glare of the sun on the glass of the sliding door had not temporarily blinded the driver'.)



*THE LEVEL CROSSING FROM THE TRAMWAY LINE. The ill-fated car approached down the line from the Botanical Gardens and was struck at the crossing at the right-centre of the picture. The Garratt articulated locomotive is seen at the left, half buried in the railway bank.*

Most of the evidence turned on whether or not the gatekeeper, the Indian Tibhoo, had followed correct procedures. Some said that he held up a furred flag, some an unfurred one, some that it was red, some that it was green, and some (like driver Thomas himself) that he had set the gates against the train and not the tram. But this latter detail proved to be very much a minority interpretation. Reading between the lines seventy years later, one can see that it was the accumulating testimony of juvenile witnesses that swung the case against Thomas. Eventually very few had any doubt that the gates were closed against the tram. Thus, for instance, the testimony of two young cousins cycling on the road alongside at the time of the accident: fifth former Providence Eileen Thompson and her cousin Noel Desmond Clarence, one day to be Principal of the Uni-

versity of Natal. Miss Thompson 'noticed that the road gates were closed, and that the Indian stood where the lines intersected, and that he was holding an unfurled red flag'. At the moment of impact she 'saw the gatekeeper jump aside and run to his hut...'. Likewise the young Desmond Clarence noticed the closed gate and the unfolded flag.



*CLEARING THE WRECKAGE. On the right is one of the bogies of the tram-car wrenched from its fittings. In the foreground is the cow-catcher of the locomotive which struck the tram and was torn off. The rear tender of the engine, lying on its side, is shown at the side of the picture.*

The newspaper of 22 September reports the interrogation of Driver Thomas himself, lying on his bed on a verandah at Greys' hospital, his face 'flushed as though with a light fever', and giving his evidence, says the report, in a 'firm if somewhat subdued voice'. (This is about as near as the *Witness* gets to trading on 'revelation'. Was it out of respect for the *sub judice* principle that not a single leader was written on the crash in all these weeks? We get instead cosy editorial chat on the centenary of Walter Scott, a writer whom 'only those sodden with the gin and jazz standard' fail to appreciate.) Driver Thomas must have realised that blaming the gatekeeper was no longer the way to go; he rested his case on the braking procedures for municipal trams. The cause of the accident was a twenty yard skid, 'barring which he could have stopped in time'. He had been travelling at the regulation rate of between ten and twelve miles per hour, at which, if there had been no skid, he could have stopped the tram in two car-lengths.

He still maintained, however, that the gate been open to him. When it was Gatekeeper Tibhoo's turn to deny this, he added a spicy detail that, twenty years later, would have ignited political fire, but in 1932 apparently caused no stir. Tibhoo reported that, as Thomas crossed the intersection he shouted at him: 'Move aside you black coolie...!'

Mr R.G. Forbes, superintendent operating for Durban Municipality, rapidly became the technical spokesman for the case. He had no doubt that the engine driver, Mr Wainwright, 'did everything in his power. It must be remembered that all the events took place in less than thirty seconds...'. And he had no doubt that the gatekeeper was free from blame, and had 'closed both road gates and went with a red flag to face the ap-

proaching tram...'. (Incidentally, when Forbes, under cross-question, told one of the commissioners, 'Mr Morris', that the gate could not have physically stopped the tram, I presume that he was addressing Harry Morris KC, who, in the past months, had been the key figure in the trial of the 'Maritzburg couple Tollputt and Mollalieu for the murder of taxi-driver Arthur Kimber. Morris's ballistic expertise was to make him even more famous at the trial, in Nairobi in 1941, of Sir Henry Broughton, charged with the murder of the Earl of Errol.)

The majority of the Board of Inquiry found the tramcar driver to be entirely responsible. It is interesting to note however that the City Council's representative, Councillor G.C.Jolliffe, returned a minority report. One can only speculate: did the council suspect that some blame did attach to braking procedures after all?

The final piece in the saga is best summarised in the 1933 *Report of the General Manager of Railways and Harbours*. It seems that, following the majority decision of the Public Inquiry, a charge of culpable homicide was in fact laid against Thomas, but that 'the Jury returned a verdict of not guilty...'.

#### REFERENCES

*The Natal Witness* for August and September 1932

*Pietermaritzburg Corporation Year Book*, 1933

*Report of the General Manager of Railways and Harbours*, 1933

BILL BIZLEY