

Inquest - Daniel Combes 1920



On Friday afternoon in last week Mr F H Trethowan, Coroner for South Wilts, held an inquest at Chicksgrove, near Tisbury, in connection with the death of Mr Daniel Combes, aged 88, a farmer residing at Quarry Farm, who was unfortunately killed on the previous day when passing over the railway on a level crossing.

His hearing was defective and he apparently did not hear the train approaching until it was too late to get clear. He was killed on the spot.

At the inquest there was a jury, and others present were Inspector Hoskison (police department), and Mr W Baggs (permanent way inspector) who represented the London and South Western Railway Company.

John Combes, farmer, of Fovant, gave evidence of identification, and stated that he last saw his father alive on Thursday morning. He was then just as cheerful as usual, and he had absolutely no worries.

Witness was informed of the accident during the afternoon by one of the farm hands, who was sent to Fovant for that purpose. His father was not very careful in looking about him when crossing the line and witness had spoken to him on this point. Of late years the wicket gate, which was provided at the crossing for foot passengers, was not locked when the main gates were closed.

Harry Howell, of Tisbury, a platelayer on the London and South Western Railway, said that on the day of the accident he was working on the line about 200 yards from the gates. At about 2.49pm he saw Mr Combes going across the line from the down road side.

At the same time a train came round the bend, it would be about 50 yards away when Mr Combes commenced to cross the railway, and he was about to step over the last rail when the engine struck him. He must have been killed instantaneously. The train was the 12.30pm express from Exeter to London. The body was removed from the line, and witness went for the police and the doctor. It was impossible for him to give any warning.

Replying to a juryman, Mr John Combes said his father's hearing was a little defective, but it could hardly be said that he was deaf.

James Bowles, of Devizes Road, Salisbury, the driver of the train, stated that he did not see anyone on the line when approaching the crossing and it was not until his arrival at Salisbury, when he examined the engine, that he realised an accident had taken place. He then concluded that a person had been knocked down. He reported the matter at once. Even if he had observed Mr Combes it would have been impossible to pull up in time, as the train was travelling at 55 miles an hour.

Thomas Gould, gatekeeper at the Quarry Gate crossing, said the wicket gates could be locked when a train was approaching, but he had received no definite instructions to keep them locked. It was left to his discretion as to what to do, and if there were people about as a train was approaching he locked them, otherwise he did not. He had occupied the position of gatekeeper for seven years, and he had previously warned Mr Combes to be more careful when crossing the line. When he first came he kept the gates locked, because he thought the old gentleman was not sufficiently cautious, but he complained, and told witness he was quite able to take care of himself.

Answering a question put by the Foreman, witness said he was the only man employed in the box. He commenced his duties at 5.30am and continued until dark.

Dr Ensor, of Tisbury, who examined the body after its removal to the house, said it was badly mutilated and death must have been instantaneous.

Summing up to the jury, the Coroner said this was a terribly sad case, and it was very painful to think a man of 88, and in full possession of all his faculties, should have come to so violent an end. He was sure the jury would wish to express their deep sympathy with the relatives.

With regard to the wicket gate, it could, of course, be locked, and had it been locked the accident would not have occurred. From his knowledge of the law he did not think there was any statutory duty on the part of the gatekeeper to keep it locked. It was not a question of criminal negligence. If the jury wished to make any recommendation to the Railway Company with regard to the crossing they were at liberty to do so. The gatekeeper apparently thought there was a certain amount of danger, but Mr Combes did not like the gates being shut and apparently he complained about it.

A juryman said he thought the level crossing gates ought to be better controlled. On no other railway in England was the control in this respect so loose. On the Great Eastern Railway, whenever a train was approaching, the gates were always locked, and people had to wait until it had passed.

A verdict of "Accidental Death," was returned, the jury adding a recommendation to the Railway Company that greater care should be taken to keep the gates locked. They exonerated the gatekeeper from all blame.

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