

Brief correspondence with R.A.I.B., 7th February, 2023

For the attention of Mr. S. Johnson, Principal Inspector.

Dear Mr. Johnson,

Nearly a year ago, I wrote to you about Llangennech and you were kind enough to reply.

Since then, for the exercise, I have put down my thoughts in more detail on Llangennech and Carmont for the railway's web pages.

It is getting on for 30 years since I left B.R. but I have never stopped thinking of myself as part of the industry. An old boy used to say: "Once a railwayman, always a railwayman."

For this reason, I found going through your reports very trying, especially Carmont, where lives were lost. The exercise is not one I plan to do often, you may be glad to hear.

You are hardly likely to take notice of anything that I have said, but as I am mildly critical of the branch in places I feel it only fair to let you see it. You will acknowledge, I hope, that I have only one interest and that is the pursuit of rail safety.

If I were empowered to make one change, it would have to be that in the course of a driver's training he was advised: "There will be occasions when you must judge for yourself how to proceed."

My approach to personal safety is rather old fashioned. I have survived nearly 50 years in building and engineering, working alone with statistically the most lethal tools and equipment, and unguarded woodworking machinery. Apart from steel toe-capped boots, a vizor when grinding and insulated handles when working with live electricity, I have never bothered with any protection. However, I am always acutely aware of the danger. I hasten to add that I have a rigorous attitude to the safety of others.

In contrast, railway staff and contractors toggled up for work often give the impression of being quite desensitized. I have witnessed the most appalling behaviour by men who have been trained, briefed and given every protection.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges

Dear Colin,

Many thanks for the email. Unfortunately Mr Johnson has retired from the RAIB, so I am replying in his place.

I read your attachments with interest. I hope you will forgive me if I do not respond to them in full. However, as regards your point on driver judgement of speed. As you will have read in the Carmont report (paragraph 247) it is normal practice for drivers to operate trains at the maximum permitted speed where this is practical, safe and in accordance with train operators' professional driving policies. The latter may require drivers to adopt more 'defensive' driving styles in some circumstances, such as in conditions of low adhesion in the autumn leaf fall season.

A driver's decision about the safe speed to adopt is also underpinned by an assumption that the infrastructure manager will give appropriate notice and warning if trains cannot be safely operated at the maximum permitted speeds. This could take the form of an instruction to drive at caution from a signaller, by means of lineside signage (such as emergency and temporary speed restrictions), operating notices and radio broadcasts. In the case of the Carmont accident, there was no instruction given to the driver and no evidence that either the driver, or the signaller, were fully aware of the risk posed by the heavy rainfall.

As regards your point on protective equipment. It is the case now (and perhaps always has been) that a combination of equipment, training, awareness and leadership are needed to keep staff safe. Indeed the Chief Inspector commented in our last annual report that 'In the years to come the focus should be on developing the infrastructure and technology, along with safety behaviours and leadership skills in the workforce, that are needed to keep people safe from trains'. My thanks once again for getting in touch.

Your sincerely,

Andy Lewis

Deputy Chief Inspector