

Memories of Pitsea train crash 18 April 1961

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I applied for a job on the railway at Pitsea and presented myself at Pitsea station where I was interviewed by the station master. He offered me the job on condition that I passed the medical. On 18 April I travelled up to Paddington to have the medical and returned on the train from Fenchurch Street to Pitsea at about 10.30 a.m. having been passed fit. I nearly missed the train as it was just leaving the station. I had to run to get on it.

Just as the train was approaching Pitsea, at the part of the line that runs parallel with Sandon Road, just before the bridge over the High Road. British Rail were carrying out repairs on one of the lines so only one line was available. This was because they were upgrading the track ready for the change over from steam trains to diesel. The chap was changing the points over by hand. When you change the points you are supposed to lock them before a train can pass. The locking device had not engaged and the train came hurtling along the line and tripped the points.

The locomotive was derailed and landed on its side with steam and smoke everywhere and the carriages telescoped into each other, with debris flying everywhere. I was woken up by the sound of the train going over the sleepers and in slow motion I saw the carriage wall in front of me getting closer and closer. I thought I was still dreaming as I said to myself 'Carriage walls don't move'. It came closer and closer and pressed my legs up against and under the edge of the seat. I felt no pain; my brain was too taken up with thinking it's not happening. When I did realise it was real, it hurt like hell.

Everything went quiet for what seemed like an age but must have been just moments. The first thing I heard was a child screaming for its mum. The lady in the coach opposite me had both her legs very badly broken and was losing a lot of blood. She was in a bad way.

The step to get into the carriage which on those coaches was a long plank of wood, had been ripped off and was sticking out like a gang plank. I managed to get through the door and fell on the plank which saved my life as it would have been a big drop down the embankment. My legs were very badly torn and broken.

It only seemed like moments before people were coming out of their houses to help with blankets and water and so on. The Vange fire brigade were the first on the scene and doctors were going about with hypodermics in their hands.

They rushed me off to Southend hospital where I had to have seven operations and bone grafts on my legs over the next two years. At one time I thought that I would lose my leg, and the doctors

said even if they could save it, I would never walk again. I was unhappy with the prognosis and worked really hard on my physiotherapy to be able to get the use of my legs back.

There were 50 or 60 people injured, some of them seriously, and 2-3 that died. Some of the sights that I saw were horrendous.

Some years later I needed to go for a ride on the train and asked my mother if she would come with me, as I was feeling really nervous. We travelled up from Pitsea to Fenchurch Street and had a cup of tea and then caught the train back on the other line. Just as we were coming into Shenfield the train came to an abrupt halt, which really spooked me, and a paperback book fell off the luggage rack and landed on my lap. The title was 'Death is Nigh'. I was shaking like a leaf and took the hint and got off the train and came home by bus. I felt a gibbering wreck. Still today whenever I smell the smoke from a steam engine I can taste and feel everything that happened.

I did go back to working on the railway at Pitsea and was responsible for an accident which took place there a few years later. Just to the right of the crossing was a little building where the crossing attendant used to shelter. I was working on shunting coal wagons along the sidings close to the level crossing one evening. The wagons weighed a ton, and with a couple of tons of coal on them were very, very heavy. I said to the engine driver 'Come up to the wagon and just give it a slight nudge' and it would run along the slight slope into the siding and I would go alongside and put the brake on when it was in place. The driver gave the wagon an almighty push. It flew down the track and tripped over the crossing points and the wagon shot up in the air like a ping pong ball and came down on the little hut. Splat. There was coal everywhere. We thought we must have killed the crossing man as the hut was completely flattened. Just then he appeared out of the bushes shouting 'What the h....s happened?'

He had been relieving himself in the nearby bushes. There was an enquiry and we were told that we should always have the wagons hitched to the engines when moving them to give us 100% control. Health and Safety was not such a big thing in those days. It is a lesson we never forgot.