

MOTOR OMNIBUS ACCIDENT AT GREAT AMWELL IN 1913

By

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An accident occurred on the main road between Ware and Hoddesdon in Great Amwell during the evening of Saturday 2nd August 1913. The only vehicle involved was a double decker bus which toppled over on its side. In all five passengers were to lose their lives and many others wounded, some very seriously. The omnibus had been privately hired for a day trip to Cambridge for a group of workers from the Park Lane Nursery in Waltham Cross. They were on their way home from an enjoyable day out when the accident took place. Local people from the immediate vicinity as well as from Ware and Hoddesdon assisted in helping the injured and ensured the most seriously cases were transport to Hertford County Hospital. An inquest into the deaths was held at Hertford, spread over the following two weeks. This article explores the background to the accident, where and how it occurred as well considering the outcomes of the inquest.

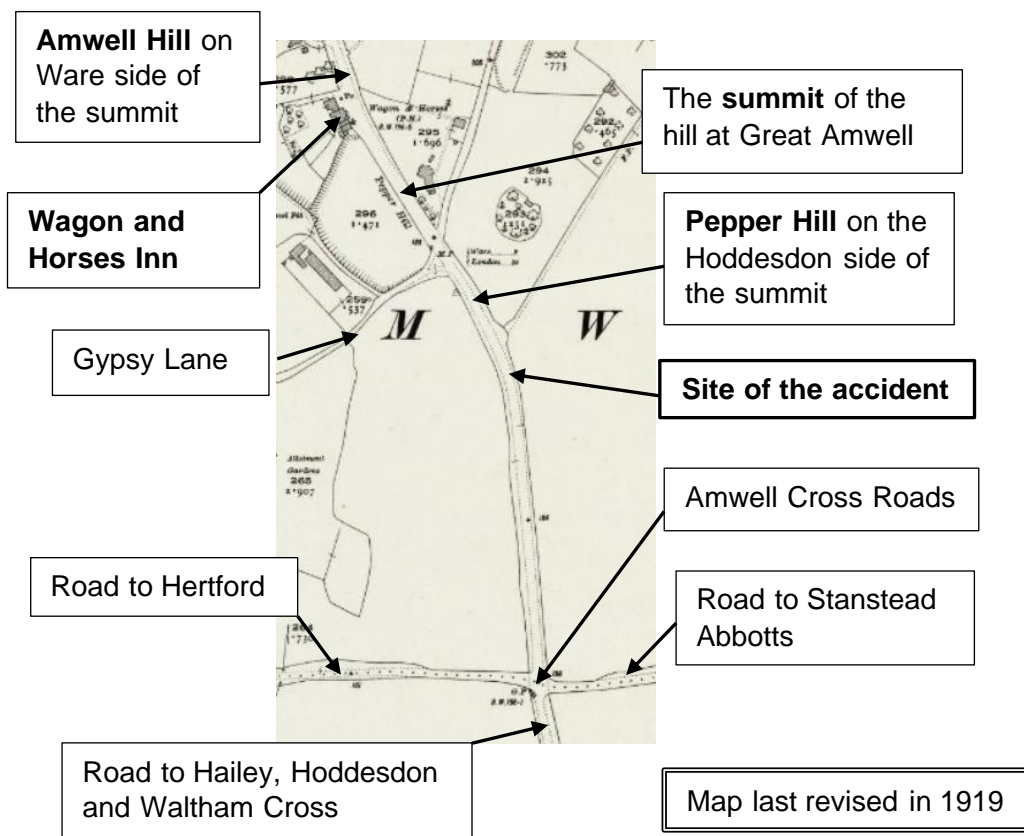
The morning of the 2nd August 1913 saw some 34 nursery workers employed at Mr William Joseph Hamilton's Park Lane Nursery in Waltham Cross assemble at their place of work in preparation for an annual outing, on this occasion to visit Cambridge. A double decker bus owned by the London and General Omnibus Company had been chartered for the day to take them there and back. Before departure and to mark the occasion, a photograph was taken of the group using the bus as a backdrop.



The above is the picture taken of the party of nursery workers before departure from Waltham Cross. The bus is typical of the time with an open top deck and enclosed lower compartment. There are 36 men standing in front of the bus rather than the 34 reported as being on the trip. The driver Ralph Cottard, in his white coat, can be seen seated at the front of the bus and presumably the conductor Charles Yates is the man standing on the steps at the rear. The title on the postcard "The Victims of the Broxbourne Motor Bus Accident. Aug 2 1913" was of course not the intended title when the photographer took the picture about 12 and a half hours previous to the accident. The reference to Broxbourne is of interest as the actual location of the accident was variously reported at the time as being at Broxbourne, Hailey and Great Amwell.

After an enjoyable day in Cambridge the party set out on their return journey at about 5.30 pm. It was recorded that four of the members did not board the bus in Cambridge for the journey back home. This meant that there were 30 of the group on the bus on its fateful journey plus the driver and conductor. The bus stopped for a few minutes in Ware High Street where the driver discovered the lights were not working properly. It was of course by this time well after sunset and with no street lights along the road between towns it was probably a good thing that the buses of the day could only comfortably manage between six and ten miles per hour. The bus set off from Ware about 9.30 pm heading towards Great Amwell. Having climbed to the top of the hill at Amwell the bus began to descend down the other side. The road in those days on that stretch was narrow with trees overhanging the roadway. The accident occurred on the right hand bend a short distance beyond the summit of the hill. The driver was to relate how he swerved to the right of the road to avoid a cyclist who was wobbling around in front of him and on turning back towards the correct side of the road the bus toppled over onto its side. The accident was recorded officially as having occurred at 9.45 pm.

GENERAL LOCATION MAP OF ACCIDENT



One of the first persons to come across the scene was a Mr Moxley a fellow nurseryman who had decided to go on the works trip using his own motorcycle and sidecar. He had been following on behind the bus but was not in sight of it when the accident occurred. However, he arrived at the scene shortly afterwards and found the bus lying on its right-hand side across the road almost completely blocking it. Many who had been on the open top deck were seriously injured and many others had fractures and bruising. Albert George Rogers aged twenty had been killed instantly when thrown from the top deck, breaking his neck as he impacted the road. He was quickly carried to the side of the road and covered with a coat. Many passengers were lying in the road unconscious or in pain being cared for by those less severely injured. Other more able passengers were making their first attempts to free those trapped in the lower deck saloon.

Having taken in the seriousness of the situation Mr Moxley set off back towards Ware as fast as he could, where on his arrival he informed the police and Dr Stewart. Meanwhile other travellers on the road began to help at the scene and go for help from Hoddesdon as well as the few houses close to the site of the accident. Mr Moxley also had a few moments to give a newspaper reporter a little idea of how serious the accident was before conveying Dr Stewart to the accident on his motorbike and sidecar. The reporter not surprisingly followed on behind albeit at a more sedate pace on his pedal bike. The reporter was to write that Mr Moxley had told him the accident was near Hailey Lane but he had found it himself to be; "just on the Hoddesdon side of the top of Pepper Hill". He related how he had passed many pedestrians walking out from Ware to help at the scene of the accident. When the reporter arrived at the accident Dr Stewart from Ware was working alongside Doctors West, Wells and Sturge from Hoddesdon to access the most injured and help where they could. Some passengers were still stuck in the lower saloon of the bus but more people had arrived and with lights provided by local residents they were being extricated. The injured had been moved to the side of the road to shelter under the hedge and out of the way of vehicles arriving to assist. It was at this point that the body of Albert Rogers was conveyed to Ware Mortuary and a message sent to Hertford County Hospital to be prepared for the arrival of a significant number of patients, some of whom were in a critical condition. The Doctors agreed among themselves that they could do little for many of the critically ill at the roadside and vehicles were arranged to take them as soon as possible to Hospital. Sadly, John Sabin aged forty-two was to die on his way to Hertford from severe head injuries.

Meanwhile back at the scene of the accident those who had taken charge were pondering how to find shelter for those less seriously wounded and organise the removal of the bus still blocking the road. It was Mr and Mrs Watson at Hailey Garage who were to step forward to both remove the bus to their premises and provide shelter for those not taken to hospital along with those who were looking after them. Travellers on the road and those locally who came to assist provided cars to move those more injured than others from the side of the road on Pepper Hill to Hailey. The least injured were soon to be conveyed to their homes in Waltham Cross by a variety of cars including one sent by Mr Hamilton the owner of the Nursery. Mr Watson was busy until the early hours of Sunday morning organising the righting of the bus and moving it under its own power to his garage. Mrs Watson's also hosted the doctors and helpers who tended to the injured providing hot beverages throughout the night to all. In addition, the Watson's allowed the use of their telephone, not just by the doctors, but also for those who had been on the bus to contact family and friends in Waltham Cross.

At the County Hospital in Hertford the staff worked all night to help the most injured from the crash. Despite their gallant efforts Frank Hayes aged 31 years passed away at 7.45 am some 10 hours after the accident. He was the third victim and died of "compression of blood on the brain" having not regained consciousness since he had been thrown from the top deck of the bus onto the road. Throughout the day on Sunday a stream of family and friends from Waltham Cross visited the injured being treated at the Hospital. On Monday morning the medical authorities issued a statement in which it listed those remaining in Hospital following the incident. There were thirteen names in all and it would appear the hospital had listed them in order of severity of their injuries without openly stating that fact. At the top of the list was Charles Shepherdley whose death occurred about 1pm on Wednesday 6th August. He had been admitted to the hospital about 11.30 pm on the Saturday night with concussion and a depression on the side of his head. There were no surface cuts but a fracture of the skull was suspected. He had never regained consciousness by the time of his demise. The second in the list was Jabez Rogers who on Friday morning the 8th August was stated by the hospital to be slightly conscious and improving. He was however to become the fifth and final victim of the accident. The adjourned inquest therefore restarted on Monday the 11th August with five deaths to take into account.

On Monday the 4th August two days after the incident the body of Albert Rogers was moved from Ware mortuary to the one at Hertford. The bus having been made safe at Hailey Garage was moved under its own power to the Plough Inn at Hertford, partially covered in a tarpaulin to hide the damage from public gaze. Both these movements were at the request of the Coroner Mr P. R. Longmore in time for him to open the inquest at Hertford Town Hall that evening, to look into the three deaths that had so far occurred, [Mr Rogers, Mr Sabin and Mr Hayes].

Once the preliminaries were completed at the inquest the jurors and others made their way to the mortuary located in the grounds of All Saints Church, then to the Hospital, followed by viewing the bus at the Plough Inn before returning to the Town Hall. The need for time to collect more evidence led the coroner to adjourn the inquest until 10.30 am on Monday 11th August.

When the inquest did reconvene the number of fatalities had risen to five with four critically serious cases still in the Hospital. The evidence from the driver Mr Edmund Ralph Cottard included the fact that the cyclist who he had swerved to avoid had cycled on. [*He was not identified or seen again*]. He also admitted that a Mr Bishop and the Conductor Mr Yates were riding with him at the front of the bus at the time of the accident. [*This was very much against the bus company's rules and both the driver and the conductor were clearly in the wrong*]. Another witness said all three had been at the front of the bus since Newport on the return journey. Police Sergeant Herring of Ware gave evidence that both conductor and driver had appeared sober when he saw them when they stopped briefly in Ware. However, he mentioned that the bus did seem to be overloaded with many persons singing and dancing on the top deck as it set off from Ware High Street. This of course drew attention to the fact that the bus had toppled over, which meant that the evidence from Mr Francis Bradley an Inspector of Omnibuses took on a greater significance. He was to explain that the bus was one of the latest types which was frequently used in London. He was clear that in his opinion the accident was not caused by the swerving of the bus but by excessive speed. He suggested that the bus must have been travelling at over 10 mph for it to topple over in the way it did.

We need to regard Mr Bradley's evidence in the context of the time where motor bus design was in its infancy and regulations concerning the construction of buses and their operation on the road were very sketchy indeed. The double decker buses of the day were narrow and relatively tall with a high centre of gravity. Like the horse drawn stage coaches before them were somewhat top heavy and it did not take that much for them to topple over. In the 1920s bus companies applied for permission to enclose the top decks of many of their buses. There was much concern from the police and other authorities about this. Permission for enclosing the top decks tended in the end to be restricted to the 1920s designs which were considered more stable than the buses running on the roads a decade earlier. In later years London Transport devised a machine to "tilt test" their double decker buses and made a point of reassuring their passengers, through advertising, including short films shown in cinemas, of the safety of their latest buses.

The jury at the inquest returned a verdict of accidental death for all the five victims of the accident. They added that they felt the driver and the conductor were not reliable witnesses and made a particular point of chastising the conductor for not being in his proper place on the bus. A wider point arising from the inquest was that it was desirable for buses used in the rural areas (around London) to be properly regulated with respect to construction, speed, lighting and the competence of the crew.

In retrospect, over 100 years later, it seems probable that the bus toppled over because the driver turned the wheel too aggressively when swerving back from the right-hand side of the road on the downhill section of Pepper Hill. In addition, with a large number of the passengers partying on the top deck the stability of the bus would have been reduced. The approach to the top of Amwell Hill would have seen the bus labour up the slope and then the driver would have accelerated down the other side. Although the bus may have exceeded 10 mph this would not have been a major problem had the steering wheel been turned gently. One wonders if the driver's attention wandered and he suddenly found himself trying to prevent the bus running into the bank and hedge on the right-hand side of the road. This might well have led him to take drastic avoiding action which led to the bus toppling over. It does seem that the jurors, who stated they felt that the bus crew were unreliable witnesses, may well have wondered if the wobbly cyclist the driver said he was swerving around actually ever existed.