



Photograph of one of the damaged trams (Courtesy of J Soper)

The Oakwood Tram Crash 1952

© By John Harrison

It happened on September 4th 1952. The bad news is that 15 people were injured, 8 of them needing to stay in the Leeds General Infirmary overnight. The good news is that a disaster was averted.

But to begin at the beginning. At 5.38pm tram No. 507 (an ex-London model) driven by Basil Norris, aged 36, of nearly 3 years driving experience, and 'conducted' by Percy Cunningham, arrived at Roundhay Park Gates, disgorged its passengers and was shunted out of the way. Norris applied the air brake and removed the handle, but did not remove the reversing handle from the controller, nor did he apply the hand brake. He got off the tram, helped the conductor reverse the bow collector and then went to the toilet for a minute or two. On his return he saw the tram moving and initially thought the conductor was taking it to its stopping place, then he realised it had gone past the stopping-place and was out of control. Norris ran after the tram, but it was too fast for him! He then persuaded a motorist to give him a lift, arrived at Oakwood just after the crash, got on board and replaced the brake handle in the full 'on' position. Well, better late than never!

What of the conductor meanwhile? Cunningham was standing at the top end of the tram when it started to move, so he jumped on, intending to apply the air brake. He could not do this at the top-end, so rushed to the other end, but of course could not find the brake handle. He tried the hand-brake without success, omitting to apply the ratchet with his foot. By this time the tram had arrived at Lidgett Park Road and, thinking it would overturn when it came to some works further on, on the reserved track next to Princes Avenue, Cunningham 'jumped off' (according to the Ministry of Transport report), 'fell off', according to contemporary newspaper reports.

So No.507 ran on along the Princes Avenue reserved track, nearly stopping on a level bit, failing to overturn as expected, but then gathering speed as it approached Oakwood, where the crash occurred.

My account thus far does not seem too tragic, in fact there is even humour to be found in the driver's Cleese-like pursuit of the empty runaway and ludicrously late application of the brake. But from now on the incident becomes much more serious, and real tragedy was only avoided by heroic actions.

At the same time as tram No.507 was advancing parallel to Princes Avenue, tram No. 92 was leaving the Oakwood stop. After a few yards the reserved track ended and emerged on Roundhay Road, at which point it was conductor A.S. Ingram's duty to check that the road was clear for driver A. Mason to advance. Ingram was just blowing his whistle to indicate to Mason that all was clear when he became aware of the rapid advance of No. 507. After that, things happened very quickly, 507 crashing into the back of 92 and leaving the track just past the junction with Gledhow Lane. Clouds of smoke were seen, both trams were damaged, No 92 especially, and No.507 was only stopped from crashing into the shops by the kerb of the pavement. The author's father, who came on the scene later, said that the 507 was near Blight's chemist's shop (No.468, now (2006) the Halifax). This matches with the map in the Ministry of Transport report.

Attention now turns to No.92, badly damaged and with passengers aboard. Its driver was knocked unconscious, its conductor thrown out by the collision, its floor was forced up, its passengers thrown to the floor and injured to a greater or lesser degree. But worst of all, No. 92 was moving uncontrollably along, on to the reserved track by Gipton Wood. A serious disaster threatened, particularly if the tram should emerge from the reserved track after the Clock Cinema (now an electricity store) into the road at Harehills. This was the rush hour, remember.

The man who rose to the occasion was Mr James Penwarden, a sales manager, aged 37, who was on No.92 with his wife Edna and their 4 year old son Roger. As the tram was moving rapidly to disaster- he could see the ground rushing by underneath the broken floor boards - he picked up

his son, pulled back the door to the cab and stepped over the unconscious driver. He applied the hand brake and the tram gradually slowed. Then he turned the control lever to what he thought was the 'off' position and the tram stopped. He returned to his wife and child, but then the tram started again, so he returned to the cab, re-applied the hand brake and pressed home the ratchet with his foot, whereupon the tram finally stopped. He had no special knowledge about tram controls, saying he had just tried to do what he had seen drivers doing.

Another passenger, Mr John Burke, had been upstairs on No.92 and came downstairs. A newspaper reports him saying there was no panic and the less seriously injured were tending to the more seriously injured. He is said to have tried to stop the tram too, but is not mentioned in the Ministry of Transport report.

No. 92 came to a halt roughly level with the end of Gipton Wood, round the bend from the Gipton Hotel. Mr J F Dover, newsagent at the shop next to the then Gipton Hotel, now the Roundhay, saw it go past, rang police and ambulances, and helped cut the fencing wires to the reserved track so that the injured could be attended to. The 15 injured were taken to the Leeds General Infirmary, but only 8 were detained. These latter included the unconscious driver, who was never able to remember what happened, and George Jeffrey, steward at Leeds Golf Club, Cobble Hall.

After the crash, home-going traffic was diverted via Oakwell Mount and Fitzroy Drive. Emergency bus services ran until the tramline was cleared one and a half hours later.

The Ministry of Transport report, published 18th December 1952, reported that the weather on September 4th was fine and the rails dry. The brakes of No 507 had not been faulty before or after the accident. The report put the main blame for the accident on Norris for not applying the hand brake or properly applying the air brake before alighting. Conductor Cunningham was also to blame for not applying the emergency brake, wasting time looking for the air brake handle and for not properly applying the hand brake. Cunningham had said that he did not know how to use the emergency brake, or indeed where the switch was located,

though it was painted red, marked 'for emergency use', and was in the conductors' vestibule. He was said to be 'of a nervous disposition'. The report also considered that better instruction should be given to conductors.

Both Norris and Cunningham were dismissed. On a happier note, James Penwarden was given an inscribed watch by Leeds City Council, and his heroism was rewarded nationally by the award of the British Empire Medal. A 1983 newspaper article on the accident reported that James Penwarden had died a few years earlier, but that his son Roger had kept the BEM displayed in his Cornish home.

Some say that the Oakwood crash was influential in abandoning trams as a means of transport. This may or may not be true. My own thoughts after reading the accounts are firstly an admiration for James Penwarden's presence of mind and heroism, but I also feel a little sympathy for Norris and Cunningham. Of course they were at fault, but let he or she who has never cut corners at work, or panicked in an emergency, cast the first stone.

Sources

Ministry of Transport. Report on the collision that occurred on 4th September 1952 between two tramcars at Oakwood, Leeds. Published 1953. Yorkshire Post September 5th 1952. Yorkshire Evening Post 5th September 1952, 6th April 1983.

Note: all the above sources are available in the Local Studies Department of Leeds Central Library. The Ministry of Transport report contains many other technical details.