

Accidents Happen

On the odd occasion unexpected incidents came along and we had to deal with them as quickly as possible otherwise they could turn into a dangerous situation. Safety was always in my mind as most important. I was working with Mr. Parsons on a goods train from Reading to Redhill; this was a loose coupled mixed freight quite a heavy train and an N class Mogul 2-6-0 as our workhorse. Our trip had gone well and we were on time, it was the autumn season with falling leaves and light drizzle.

A mile and a half from Redhill; we had come through Reigate level crossing and station, from there on it was a downhill run with a slow left curve into Redhill Station. We both noticed the distant signal was on caution this was quite normal as we would not have a clear run through Redhill, being loose coupled meant we had to rely on the engine brakes and the guard to apply his break. We were moving slowly, the home signal on the bend was at danger and Mr. Parsons started to apply the engine brakes, I soon realized we were going to pass the signal at danger, at this point Mr. Parsons dropped the brake all the way down and we went into a skid we were being pushed along by 50 plus freight wagons. My driver who was a normally a slow methodical grumpy man moved quickly; he managed to get the engine into reverse gear put the sand applicator on then open the regulator in short bursts in the meantime I was busy applying the hand brake I am not sure if this made any difference at all but it was worth a try, we shuddered to a halt some 15 yards past the signal. After a few seconds the signal lifted and we finished our journey in Redhill goods sidings, my driver said nothing. Returning with the engine to the shed we slowly passed the signal box, the signaller stood at the window and gave us the thumbs up; all was well.

Serious wheel slip and the engine priming can be dangerous if not brought under control quickly; sometimes a combination of both would occur. Wheel slip often happened on frosty or wet days when starting away with heavy loads or on a steep incline. To help solve the problem of wheel slip engines had a sanding system that deposited sand in front of the driving wheels either by gravity or steam pressure unfortunately this did not always solve the problem. Priming was a term used when water from the boiler rose and entered the front steam cylinders and spewed the water out of the chimney; the cause was usually a combination of high steam pressure and a full boiler. In both cases the remedy was to close down the regulator and open the cylinder cocks, this did not always work; when high pressure steam was passing through the regulator it was often most difficult to close.

My brother Charles came to grief when hauling a goods train up Dorking bank, the engine started to prime then one of the front cylinders blew out, the driving rods became disconnected smashed into the engine frame and caused the engine to derail, a very scary experience indeed.



This is the N class engine that my brother Charles was stoking when the accident happened, taken at Redhill shed. Photograph: John Bradby

The damage can clearly be seen in this excellent photograph, the cylinder has blown out, the driving rods are missing, and the main frame and reversing gear are badly damaged.