

03.06

Accident involving James Jennings - An employee of the E & W J R

Died 1.7.1899 Hit by a train in the vicinity of Fenny Compton Station.

Comment by John Jennings (SMJ Line archivist) following a request from P Jennings.

NOTE. This is version 2 of this document. Additional material was submitted by P Jennings that I was not aware of when making my original assessment. Any copy of version 1 should be destroyed in the interests of accuracy. Note date 13.3.2009.

Based on material supplied by Patricia Jennings including two contemporary newspaper reports, in addition I visited the site which is still a working railway during March 2009 and reminded myself of the juxtaposition of the E & W with the GWR. Good views of the line are still visible from bridges and public footpaths in the area. I also reviewed the track layout and gradient profiles. Although the E & W route was abandoned in 1965 the track bed of the line still exists to the south of Fenny Compton station site and is used as a road by Network Rail maintenance road vehicles for about half a mile to the point where it swings out to gain height to cross the GWR. It retains its profile for much of the way to where the bridge abutments that carried the E & W over the GWR still exist. This section is used by local farmers who have no doubt bought the track bed from BR in recent times. The formation can be clearly traced on Google Earth images.

P Jennings is anxious to establish the identity of the dwelling that James lived in whilst he was employed as a platelayer at Fenny Compton during the late 1800's. There are no known records and Patricia has queried whether the substantial brick and slate roofed house that appears in a number of contemporary photos of Fenny Compton station might be the residence used by James.

I have used my general railway knowledge and my familiarity with the East & West Junction route to conclude that the house in question is highly unlikely to have ever been used by a platelayer's family. It is the Station Master's house and was a GWR building, not an E & W structure. It is shown on most of the maps of the area over the period in question as "Station Master's House" and is clearly on the GWR part of the site.

There are some very useful clues in the two newspaper reports and after commenting on the nature of a platelayer's job I will return to them.

At the time in question the railway companies employed platelayer gangs to be responsible for the maintenance of a specific "section" of their route mileage. A very useful reference to the way in which the later SMJ and LMS divided this railway regarding the platelayers' sections is contained in Mr Pettifer's essay "Tempus Fugit". There is no reason to suppose that the working arrangements were much different in the earlier E & W days. James Jennings as foreman would have been in charge of a small gang that would have had responsibility for a section of the line on a day to day basis. It was customary for the Company to erect small huts (often called hovels) at regular intervals along the track to store tools and provide shelter for the gang. On the SMJ line these were at one mile intervals and some were very rudimentary. The gang would have one larger hut or complex of huts at a convenient point in their section. This would always be near a station at which there was a signal box. This served as a central store for materials which could be offloaded from adjacent tracks. At best these huts would be constructed substantially from second hand sleepers and crossing timbers and could be regarded as "semi permanent" buildings. It was not unknown across the Railway system at the time for lower graded staff to

(sometimes officially) live in such buildings; they always had a stove and a plentiful supply of coal from passing locomotives. Produce could be grown by cultivating the embankments as allotments. The reference "Jennings lived in a *frame house*" in the Banbury Guardian report is a clue to the wooden construction. It was also very convenient for an impoverished company such as the E & W to allow a platelayer to effectively be "on call" 24 hours a day. In the winter months the signalman would need to call out a "fogman" very often at short notice and the first choice for such a task was a local platelayer. Much time and therefore hold-ups could be saved if all the signalman had to do was walk up the yard to call out his man! Maps of the site from various dates show a hut with a permanent way trolley platform and materials store area on the E & W line as it curves away towards Kineton on the western side of the line. This confirms Mr Pettifer's comment that Fenny Compton was a "section break" where two gangs were based with responsibilities in each direction. After further discussions with P Jennings about James and his family it now seems unlikely that he did in fact live in the platelayer's compound as he had a wife and children with him. The reference to the "frame house" is therefore directed at some other dwelling. I can find no records of the E & W owning cottages for the use of staff at Fenny Compton. There are no surviving houses that seem to fit the description or indeed the location that we believe James's house was situated. He had been domiciled in the area with his family for some time and census returns give his address as "near Railway Station" The most likely location for any house was in the area now occupied by an industrial estate immediately to the south and west of the station site.

I would now comment on the actual circumstances of his death.

The layout of tracks at Fenny Compton during the whole of its history is well documented. The GWR route was its important main line between Birmingham and London, the E & W crossed it at right angles on a bridge about a mile south of the stations immediately turning to run parallel, losing height until the two companies tracks ran on the level at a point about a quarter mile to the south of the bridge that carries the Coventry – Banbury road over the three tracks. The E & W swung off to the west immediately after its station with the GWR lines continuing on a roughly north – south axis. All of the histories of the E & W line confirm that the relationship between the two companies was not a good one, they had to tolerate each other and some co-operation was needed at Fenny Compton due to the proximity of the joint level crossing. Until as late as 1959 there was no commercially viable interchange facility for traffic and in James Jennings's lifetime the only physical track connection between the two companies was a short kick back siding in the yard.

On the night of the 1st July 1899 James had been to the Inn to obtain a jug of porter for his wife. The location of the inn was near the Oxford canal and it was known locally as the "Tunnel Beerhouse". (The reference to a tunnel is because until the mid 1800's the Oxford canal ran through a tunnel at this location. The tunnel was removed placing the canal in the cutting that survives to this day). His route home involved walking to the railway bridge that took the Coventry – Banbury road over the three tracks and down on to the E & W track. In those days there would no doubt have been a well worn path down the side of the bridge. It was around 10.00pm and although at that time of year it should have still been in partial daylight it was raining that night, so no doubt almost dark.

James Jennings would have had a fob watch issued by the E & W as a senior ganger needed to keep track of the time when working out on the line. The E & W timetable would have been engrained in his head and at that time he would have concluded that the last train of the day from Blisworth to Stratford had passed that spot as it was due off Fenny Compton at 9.59pm.

The Banbury Guardian report states that he was walking in the "six – foot way of the East & West". The term "six foot way" is a pure piece of railway jargon and it must have been given to the reporter of the newspaper by a railway man. It is the term by which the strip of land between the tracks on multiple track lines is known. The E & W was a single track railway except at stations but at this point its single track ran parallel to and was separated from the two GWR tracks as though they were in effect a triple track formation on the same level.

James was walking north towards Fenny Compton station probably in the six foot separating the E & W line from the GWR down line, he became aware that a down GWR train was approaching either because he heard it in the distance or saw the GWR signals go green, or both. He thought that there was no danger in moving across to walk in the four foot way of the E & W line to avoid the GWR train so he stepped across without bothering to look behind him. He did not know that the Blisworth passenger was running late and was coasting down the grade towards Fenny Compton slowing for its station stop. Under these conditions the E & W train would be making the minimal amount of noise with steam shut off. Its driver was possibly pre occupied with adjusting his braking on the wet rails and in near darkness did not see anyone on the track ahead. Any sound that the E & W train did make was almost certainly obliterated by the noise of the GWR train running through at speed. James was killed by being run down by the E & W train. The Coroner's report appears to be a thorough and accurate reflection of the event.

It is interesting to note that many of the jury were E & W or GWR employees who worked in the locality.

J R Jennings
March 2009

Note. As far as I am aware James Jennings was not a distant relation to me. I was approached by his descendant Patricia Jennings after she became aware of me from internet enquiries in case we were related.