

THE DAY THAT CHANGED LIVES

Last month marked the fifth anniversary of the horrific rail crash at Ladbroke Grove in West London. Jonathan Duckworth was a passenger on the 06:03 Cheltenham to Paddington Great Western express on that fateful morning in October 1999. He says the rail industry owes it to the survivors and the bereaved to maintain a lasting safety vigilance

PHOTOGRAPHY: PRESS ASSOCIATION

The empty coffee cup rested on the slightly creased copy of the *Daily Telegraph*. I returned to work on my presentation. It was coach G again today, I never used H as it was too smoky. A lovely morning, sun rising over misty fields, it seemed warmer now than when I had shivered at Stroud as I stood next to the large man on the platform. He was laughing with his companion.

I paused from my work, looked up and saw an older man in a light grey suit walking towards the front of the train. He caught my eye and we smiled; he looked as optimistic as I felt.

One minute later he was dead.

Five hundred and seventy people were

involved in the Ladbroke Grove rail disaster: 31 were killed and only 121 were uninjured.

Amongst the survivors there was a mixture of disbelief and relief. It was a huge incident and we had come out of it alive. However, those feelings changed to include anger and bewilderment as more details of the causes of the crash were revealed. There was clearly a need for support and for campaigning. Pam Warren, a financial consultant before she was very badly burned in the crash, felt that the best solution would be to form a group of survivors who, through their common experiences and emotions, could support each other and their partners – and additionally focus their anger into a constructive attack on the rail industry's safety record. Quite clearly what we had been through was no accident; it was a preventable crash.

The Paddington Survivors Group (PSG) met on an ad hoc basis. The survivors, particularly those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), have dramatically fluctuating levels of concentration, distress and commitment. Not every member came to every meeting, but a network of coordinators kept all members informed of progress, and canvassed opinions from those unable to attend.

RAIL SUMMIT

After Lord Cullen's report into the crash was published, the group decided to engage all parties involved in a commitment to complete as many of the recommendations as possible. This resulted in a summit meeting held on 11 December 2001, and the signing of the 'Declaration of Intent in respect of the Implementation of recommendations' set out in Lord Cullen's two reports and the Joint Inquiry into Rail Safety. The then Transport Secretary, Stephen Byers, opposition politicians, Railtrack, the SRA, train operating companies and the trade unions all signed up to the declaration.

At the summit the PSG set out to be fair and not to ask for action that was patently unreasonable. Around the table we provided something that no-one else could; the horrible experience of a train crash – something that only those directly involved can really understand. We were all members of the public, brought together because we caught a particular train. The group has no political affiliations and we did not want to become rail industry experts. We simply wanted to see what was right being done and to look at the ensuing issues with a more open-minded and commonsense attitude, something that may be hard for those directly involved in the railway system to do.

The actions agreed in the Summit document were all to be completed by September 2004, just before the fifth anniversary of the crash. With any major event such as our crash, impetus and resolve lessens with time. People heal mentally and get on with new and changed lives. Companies get back to their 'key business drivers'. Governments find other issues in the public eye. We felt very strongly that there was a risk of all the good intentions expressed round the Summit



Of 570 passengers, only 121 walked away from the crash without injuries.



table being diluted and lost over time. We decided earlier this year that we should complete a definitive report into the Summit on its third anniversary and that we should announce this on the fifth anniversary of the crash, along with our new, broader supporting role.

RAIL SAFETY

Rail safety is a difficult issue, despite Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's infamous 'Money is no object' quote. I think it should be viewed in two ways:

- Firstly, it is not acceptable to put a price on a rail death. This builds an 'acceptable' level of deaths into the management culture. Once this happens deaths become an accepted part of the operation of the industry. I believe that no deaths are acceptable and that, if this is the safety premise of the industry, then the attitude to safety will be very different. Quite obviously there will be failures, but these will be seen exactly as that, and not simply as part of a quota.
- Secondly, one of the key reasons the passenger rail industry exists is for its customers, the passengers. Historically the industry has been run by engineers, but

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engineering is only part of the equation. The key question on every railway employee's mind should be: 'What does this mean for the customer?' If that had been the case before Ladbroke Grove, would a driver have been sent out with so little training? Would the signal positioning have been like it was? Would the signal box disciplines have been as weak as they were?

There are also comparisons made with safety on the roads, with banal comments about how too much effort and money is put into rail safety.

This is a ridiculous argument, with its inference that we ought to be lowering safety standards across the board in an attempt to equalise death rates. The fact that one method of transport is safer than another doesn't justify entirely preventable deaths.

PENALTIES

We have never campaigned for corporate manslaughter charges because we were concerned that these tend to focus on individuals. In the case of the Ladbroke Grove crash there was a systemic failure, not an individual one. The fine imposed on Thames Trains hit the whole organisation – the executives, the management and the shareholders. Shareholders tend to invest in a company because of the likelihood of making a financial gain on their investment. The pressure that this applies on the executive and management is less likely to be related to safety and service standards than to financial control. Hit a company financially, as in the £2m Health and Safety fine imposed on Thames Trains, and you hit everyone, resulting in a greater likelihood of a culture change; jail an individual and you only hit one person.

On 5 October 1999 the laughing man and the smiling man entrusted their safety to the rail industry. It failed them. Please don't fail others in the future.

The author is chair of the Paddington Survivors Group