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Tragic story behind Trinity Road underpass

By Roger Chapman



Under the tracks: The walkway passes safely under what is now the Northern line. Photo Mike Coles.



On a Wednesday afternoon in August 1878, nine-year-old William Bowman had been with his father while he worked as a labourer at Park Farm on East End Road when he was sent home at about 4.30pm to get some tea. Home was 16 Manor Cottages, about half a mile away, across the Great North railway track.

The direct route back to his home went via the (now) Trinity Road crossing, which was then above the level of the surrounding fields. The nine-year-old was seen by William Young, a plate-layer, standing close to the rail, watching the approach of an 'up train'.

The moment that train passed him he began to cross, when the 4.30pm 'down train' from Kings Cross to High Barnet knocked him down. "On being picked up life was found to be extinct."

At the subsequent inquest, the engine driver and other witnesses showed that the level crossing was a dangerous one, as also was a nearby one at Manor Road. Nearly 70 trains a day passed that way at a speed of 30 miles an hour.

Evidence was heard that on the down line drivers were unable to see any one on or near the level crossing further off than 126 yards and that it would be impossible to pull up within that distance. Local inhabitants testified that a large number of children had to pass over this crossing on their way to school, and they had petitioned the railway company either to erect a bridge or make a subway.

Mr Blanchard Wontner, representing the company, said it had put up fences and made a new footpath going another way by 80 yards but the inhabitants pulled down the fence and still went over the line. The company had no legal power to

close this path but said it would listen to suggestions.

The jury returned a verdict that William had died of head injuries and considered that immediate steps should be taken by the railway company to provide a safer means to cross the line. The company then committed to construct a subway under the line at the point where William was killed. As a result of his tragic death, hundreds of people every day can now pass below the underground train line in safety.

This article was originally written for www.layersoflondon.org, where you can find fascinating local history, and upload photos and articles of your own.

Dangerous crossing: A 19th-century map of East Finchley showing the path across the fields between Church Lane and Long Lane and the spot where William Bowman was killed.

Underpass update

The underpass beneath the Northern line linking Trinity Road and Manor Park Road is heavily used by local residents and schoolchildren but is badly in need of improved lighting and security to make it safer.

It was four years ago that a £20,000 scheme was announced to install new lighting, new fencing and new security measures, using funding from the Grange Big Local project and Barnet Council.

That work stalled before it began but now Grange Big Local has appointed a new project manager to kick start it again by measuring and conducting drainage surveys over the next few months, ahead of the physical changes being made.

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