

# Collaboration in the Archive: The MRC and the Railway Work, Life & Death Project

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## Abstract

*In this piece we look at a collaborative project, in which the Modern Records Centre is a co-lead: the Railway Work, Life & Death project. The project is transcribing details of accidents to British and Irish railway staff before 1939. Using a collaborative and co-productive methodology, and thanks to the efforts of volunteers, we are transcribing and making freely available tens of thousands of records of accidents to railway workers. Many of these records come from the collections of what is now the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) trade union, and their support for our work has been excellent. Here we offer up critical reflections from across the project team about how the project has worked in practice.*

**Keywords:** collaboration; history; railway; volunteering; trades union; family history; local history; railway history

## Introduction

On 13 December 1911, Caledonian Railway engine driver George Williamson was at work as usual. However, he realised that his locomotive had a defective water gauge. From the footplate of the locomotive (where the driver and fireman worked), he couldn't tell how much water they had left in the water tank. Knowing how much water they were carrying was crucial – run out of water and they risked a boiler explosion.

To find out, Williamson climbed on top of the tender as the train was moving near Montrose. He planned to open the cover into the water tank and visually check how much remained. As he did so, the locomotive passed under a bridge – which hit Williamson's head and killed him.

*Figure 1: Posed staff safety photograph produced by the Caledonian Railway Company in 1921, warning of dangers of the type that killed George Williamson. (Credit: Railway Work, Life & Death project. Included with permission)*



We know about Williamson and this part of his life because he was a member of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) trade union – and its records have survived, now in the care of the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick (MRC). Otherwise, Williamson would have left relatively limited documentary trace – very typical of the vast majority of railway workers at that time.

We also know from the various places Williamson's accident appears in the ASRS records that he belonged to the Edinburgh West branch of the Union. That the Fatal Accident Inquiry jury added a rider to the finding of 'accidental death,' noting the problem of the defective water gauge. That Williamson's dependents received £300 in compensation (equivalent to

around £36,000 now). That he left five children, who between them received six shillings per week in support from the Union, until they reached age 14.<sup>i</sup>

Williamson's was one of 446 railway worker deaths, and 27,848 railway worker injuries in 1911 alone (**HMSO, 1912**). Whilst the records for only a tiny fraction of those accidents, and those of other years, survives in 2024, it still amounts to a huge total – hundreds of thousands of cases. The Union recorded details of those accidents involving its members in the pages of its annual reports – tens of thousands of cases between the 1870s and 1920s (when its reporting changed format).<sup>ii</sup>

That George Williamson's accident was such an everyday, unexceptional case makes it all the more valuable that we know about it. This was far more representative of working life on the railways than the bigger, more spectacular passenger train crashes which typically dominated attention at the time – but which were (as they are today) incredibly rare.

The ASRS became the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) in 1913 after a merger, and the RMT Union in 1990. Its records were saved and preserved in hardcopy at the MRC. However, the accident details were unindexed and challenging to search – if people were aware of them at all. Yet they offer tremendous insights into the past, for many different groups: family historians, the current rail industry, academic historians, local historians, rail enthusiasts and more.

Knowing that they existed, could these records be brought to a wider public? This was a common challenge across many records relating to pre-1939 British and Irish railway worker accidents – and exactly what the Railway Work, Life & Death (RWLD) project was set up to address (**RWLD, 2024a**).

Initially a collaboration between the University of Portsmouth (UoP) and the National Railway Museum (NRM), the MRC joined in 2018. It has since been supported by The National Archives of the UK (TNA) and the RMT Union. It aims to transcribe and research those pre-1939 accident records that exist, focusing on individual workers and their experiences. Being able to name those individuals is crucial. It reminds us of the *people* involved, something previously lost in the numbers.

Given the scale of the task, this was and is too much for any one person – working collaboratively has therefore been key to the project. This has involved small, dedicated teams of volunteers at the UoP, MRC, NRM, and TNA – without whom the project would be impossible. We gratefully thank and recognise all those who have volunteered their time on the RWLD project – particularly, in this context, the MRC team: Cheryl Hunnisett,

Chris Jolliffe, Stephen Lamb, Colin Sharp, and Peter Waghorn, carefully supported by MRC staff Helen Ford and James King.

Given the subject matter, accidents to individuals, it is worth noting the strong ethical core to the project. Some of this is formal; it has been through the UoP ethical opinion process and internal approval processes (including consideration of ethics) at the other collaborating institutions. Some of this, though, is informal: particularly team members' commitment to respectfully remembering and promoting the public understanding of the individuals involved in accidents.

So far, the project has produced a publicly available database of approximately 48,000 accidents. Of these, around 25,000 cases have come from the ASRS/NUR records held at the MRC. They were transcribed by a combination of the MRC and NRM teams, with some added through *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine's* 'Transcription Tuesday' in 2019 (**RWLD, 2019**). They cover 11 years between 1889 and 1920. Hard to estimate with certainty, but the remaining years' coverage (including records extending back into the 1870s) might add a further 30,000 cases.

The database is freely available from the project's website, along with a range of other resources. The website also contains the project blog, regularly updated with research into the individuals and the accidents in the records behind the database. The blog also features contributions submitted by members of the public, often bringing a much more personal connection – frequently these come from descendants of the men and women found in the accident records. Finally, the project's social media presence on Twitter<sup>iii</sup> has generated hugely valuable connections in different spheres, increasing the reach of the project and its work.<sup>iv</sup>

At its heart, the project and this piece speak to some big questions about access to archival records, volunteering and collaboration across institutions and individuals. This piece is therefore a reflection on our project, on collaboration and on work with and at the MRC. All contributors were given free-reign, as we wanted to hear their experiences; we have jointly drafted the piece as peers and co-productively. In the sections that follow each person or group provides their unique insight about their personal or institutional involvement in the project. We end with a joint conclusion, evaluating and questioning the project, and considering its next steps.

## **Critical reflections: the MRC volunteers' perspective – Cheryl Hunnisett and Stephen Lamb**

Over the length of the project there were five of us, all volunteers living reasonably near the Modern Records Centre, of retirement age with some available time and interested in the challenge of working on a new project. This article reflects the experiences of two volunteers, Stephen Lamb and Cheryl Hunnisett, who have worked on the data since the inception of the project in 2018.

Neither of us had an interest in railways to start with. Stephen became involved because of his interest in social history especially gaining an insight into how working people lived. Cheryl had already undertaken some family history research at the MRC and thought that the archive was potentially a fantastic resource for genealogists but hard to access for majority of researchers, who probably wouldn't know their ancestor had belonged to the Union. Both of them liked the idea of working with original documents and making the data accessible to as many people as possible.

There was quite a steep learning curve for both volunteers and project managers; deciding what data would be recorded, agreeing standardised formats, finding out that over the years different formats and headings were used for the same type of information, agreeing the difference between indexing and transcribing, enabling remote working (which allowed us to carry on working through the pandemic lockdowns), basic raw data interpretation skills and managing spreadsheets. These are all skills that we can use in other projects. The volunteers tackled thousands of pages of data, some handwritten, some prose and some endless columns covering who was paid, how much and when. It was pretty tedious at times.

Figure 2: Typical National Union of Railwaymen Orphan Fund claims table. The team have been transcribing these records, which are feeding into the Railway Work, Life & Death project database. (Credit: MRC, MSS.127/NU/1/1/4. Included with permission)

ORPHAN FUND CLAIMS GRANTED BY GENERAL SECRETARY.												
Reg. No.	Name.	Branch.	Grade.	Railway.	Date joined union.	Date of death, also when benefit granted.	Age at death.	Period of membership.	Cause of death.	Number of children.	Amount granted weekly.	s. d.
290386	D. Davies.....	Bassaleg .....	Driver .....	B. & M.....	Nov. 20, '10	Oct. 17, '16	42	5 1/2	Lat. sclerosis .....	1	3 0	
18057	J. S. Codling..	Penrith .....	Signalman .....	C. K. & P. ...	Nov. 7, '92	Oct. 22, '16	59	23 3/4	Anæmia .....	1	3 0	
338653	H. Hurst .....	Laisterdyke .....	F. porter.....	G. N. ....	Nov. 12, '11	Oct. 26, '16	42	4 1/2	Acute pneumonia .....	3	5 0	
542235	H. Cooper.....	Hinckley.....	Signalman .....	L. & N. W. ...	Jan. 24, '14	Oct. 26, '16	45	2 1/2	Tubercular adentitis... 1	3 0		
512417	J. Anderson...	Barrow-in-F. ...	Joiner .....	Furness.....	Oct. 19, '18	Oct. 27, '16	37	3 1/2	Pulmonary tuberculosis 6	6 6		
607967	W. Gibson .....	Neepsend .....	Loader.....	G. C. ....	Mar. 21, '15	Oct. 27, '16	49	1 3/4	Syncope .....	1	3 0	
351792	T. Backshell..	Carmarthen 1 .....	Signalman .....	G. W. ....	May 12, '12	Oct. 31, '16	33	4	Tuberculosis .....	2	4 0	
172271	H. Thompson ..	Newton Heath 1 .....	Fireman .....	L. & Y. ....	Nov. 22, '03	Nov. 3, '16	33	12 3/4	Drowned .....	2	4 0	
364132	G. Hallas .....	Huddersfield 1 .....	Platelayer .....	L. & N. W. ...	July 21, '12	Nov. 4, '16	43	4	Accident .....	1	3 0	
12390	G. Sims .....	Ballast guard.....	Midland .....	Dec. 21, '90	Nov. 6, '16	66	25 3/4	Asthma, etc. ....	1	3 0		
277800	B. F. James...	Covent Garden .....	Gateman.....	London Elec. ...	Jan. 14, '10	Nov. 7, '16	28	6 3/4	Heart failure .....	1	3 0	
316291	C. Shaw .....	Colwick Junction .....	Shed labourer .....	G. N. ....	Aug. 26, '11	Oct. 24, '16	32	5	Heart failure .....	4	5 6	
531238	D. McLaren...	Perth .....	Checker .....	Caledonian l. ...	Oct. 26, '13	Oct. 26, '16	—	3	Aortic disease .....	3	5 0	
396727	G. F. Talbot...	Stafford .....	Platelayer .....	L. & N. W. ...	Mar. 16, '13	Nov. 3, '16	31	3 1/2	Accident.....	4	5 6	
197453	E. McAuliffe..	Newcastle 3.....	Porter .....	N. E. ....	Feb. 9, '06	Nov. 4, '16	38	10 1/2	Cardiac dis. and dropsy 2	4 0		
258431	J. T. Harris...	Skipton .....	Timekeeper.....	Midland .....	Jan. 26, '08	Nov. 4, '16	46	8 1/2	Asthma .....	4	5 6	
377989	W. Richards...	Bridgwater.....	Signalman .....	G. W. ....	Sept. 7, '12	Nov. 9, '16	49	4	Bronchitis .....	1	3 0	
134554	A. Templeman ..	Doncaster 1.....	Gateman.....	G. N. ....	May 2, '00	Nov. 12, '16	43	16 3/4	Tuberculosis .....	4	5 6	
118541	R. Grundy.....	Belper & Duffield .....	Platelayer .....	Midland .....	June 18, '99	Nov. 13, '16	48	17	Bronchitis .....	1	3 0	
43758	G. Henderson ..	Tyne Dock 1 .....	Guard .....	N. E. ....	Nov. 27, '06	Nov. 15, '16	61	19 1/2	Heart disease .....	1	3 0	
351583	F. Stratford...	Sandy .....	Signalman.....	G. N. ....	April 19, '12	Oct. 23, '16	36	4 1/2	Accident .....	1	3 0	
265892	J. H. Phillips...	Yeovil .....	Driver .....	G. W. ....	Mar. 8, '08	Nov. 4, '16	36	8 3/4	Exhaustion .....	4	5 6	
594806	A. W. Jepson...	Ashton-u-Lyne .....	Relief porter.....	Midland .....	Aug. 9, '14	Feb. 24, '16	35	1	Accident.....	1	1 0	
280231	D. Morris .....	Barry 1.....	Assistant foreman .....	Barry.....	April 10, '10	Nov. 20, '16	37	6 3/4	Pneumonia .....	2	4 0	
408505	H. J. Langley..	King's Cross 1.....	Number taker.....	G. N. ....	Mar. 14, '13	Nov. 25, '16	40	3 3/4	Pneumonia .....	6	6 6	
318953	C. A. Yebber...	Bermondsey .....	Checker .....	L. B. & S. C. ...	Aug. 27, '11	Nov. 25, '16	35	5	Pulmonary tuberculosis 2	4 0		
5562	T. W. Brown...	Crewe 2 .....	E. driver.....	L. & N. W. ...	Oct. 23, '87	Nov. 21, '16	61	29	Morbus cordis .....	1	3 0	
381166	E. Hamer.....	South Elmsall .....	Goods guard .....	Midland .....	—	April 23, '05	45	—	Consumption .....	1	3 0	
218043	A. T. Sabine...	Cirencester.....	Signalman .....	G. W. ....	Jan. 5, '13	Nov. 19, '16	40	3 3/4	Accident.....	2	4 0	
174122	F. Lippiatt...	Hither Green.....	Signalman .....	S. E. & C. ....	Feb. 22, '07	Nov. 20, '16	39	9 3/4	Pulmonary .....	3	5 0	
351695	F. W. Green...	Gorton 1.....	Goods guard .....	Midland .....	Dec. 20, '03	Nov. 29, '16	49	12 3/4	Influenza .....	1	3 0	
341350	W. H. Bassett..	Lynn .....	Wagon lifter.....	G. E. ....	June 9, '12	Dec. 1, '16	43	3 3/4	Loco. ataxy .....	1	3 0	
		Plymouth 1 .....	Mileage porter .....	G. W. ....	Jan. 21, '12	Dec. 2, '16	34	3 3/4	Paralysis .....	2	4 0	

However, as the indexed data grew, so did our understanding of how valuable the role of this early trade union was in building up sources of income and support in an era where no state or employer benefits were available for elderly or injured workers, widows and orphaned children. We also learnt a lot about the different jobs men did and how dangerous the majority of them were; being a porter on a 'mineral' line being especially hazardous. We also gained an understanding of why and how health and safety legislation evolved and how necessary it was.

It was especially interesting to be able to find enough information about an individual or group of workers to be able to make mini case studies or to write blogs about them. It brought the statistics to life and gave us another new skill. In Stephen's blog, he researched the background to a case of suicide and unearthed the progress of, what to him, was a clear mental health issue that went unrecognised at the time (Lamb, 2019). Cheryl explored the fate of the family of a 37-year-old porter who fell off a wagon and was killed, leaving six young children ranging in age from a few months to eight years (Hunnisett, 2019). Both involved investigating a lot of sources outside the ASRS records to build the broader picture. We also found that the modern-day descendants didn't know that history and were very interested in what we able to find.

We discovered a wealth of personal and social history tied up in these pages and we're proud that we've helped provide a huge resource for a wide range of researchers' interests and learnt a lot about real life in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now we are almost finished indexing the data, we'd like to help promote its existence and usefulness, particularly to genealogists. This may be by doing more research about some of the workers and families supported by the Union, publishing more blogs and going out and talking to various interest groups about it. We also think that there are other related sources out there, untouched as yet, that would benefit from the same attention in preserving the stories within for everyone to find. We've talked about building a bigger volunteer team, perhaps via the U3A, railway history enthusiasts, local history societies - all to be explored!

### **Critical reflections: the RMT's perspective – Alex Gordon**

The fiftieth birthday of the Modern Records Centre (MRC), where so many RMT records are archived for the use and benefit of students, researchers, and trade unionists, is a celebration and a marker for labour, trade union and social movements. Trade union and other working-class organisations suffer from our records being discarded or lost.

Fifty years since the founding of MRC is also fifty years since the Labour's 1973 Programme, which set out to bring about 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families' and 'make power fully accountable to the community, to workers and to the consumer'. The MRC is one of the few labour institutions remaining from that era before Thatcher and Blair.

As President of the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT), I was asked by the MRC in 2010 for permission to digitise membership records held here of RMT's predecessor unions, notably the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, founded in 1871 and which became the National Union of Railwaymen from 1913.

Those early trade unionists recorded their membership in painstaking detail in large Victorian ledgers. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the value of such data was clear to genealogists and access to the internet opened up its commercial application. In a globalised, highly mobile society, millions of people worldwide want to discover their family lineage, to find out how their great-great grandparents lived, worked, and died.

The Victorian railway companies of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales were among the first mass corporations, employing collectively an incredibly diverse workforce numbering millions of men and women.

Early railway unions were social networks, providing news and commentary to the new industrial workforce through newspapers such as *The Railway Review*, and a structure through which political and social aspirations of the new industrial working class could be expressed. Crucially, they also contested the absolute power of employers to hire and fire workers and the terrible conditions of employment, which led to thousands of fatalities, injuries, and cases of occupational illness each year.

Examples of new, ground-breaking research such as that by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at UCL, which traces the impact of slave-ownership on making Britain, demonstrate the impact on public debate of quantitative research, mapping historic data for a better understanding of the true historical record.

*Railway Work, Life & Death* (RWLD) is a valuable, innovative project developed with RMT's enthusiastic support by Dr Mike Esbester (University of Portsmouth) along with the National Railway Museum, The National Archives and MRC to link archives, volunteers and researchers to improve our knowledge and understanding of British and Irish railway worker accidents from the late 1880s to 1939.

In excess of 40,000 fatal and non-fatal accidents to railway workers have been compiled by RWLD volunteers from Board of Trade Railway accident investigation reports and ASRS/NUR records of death, disablement and orphan funds. The overall picture they reveal is astonishing and horrifying.

3,929 accidents (777 fatal and 3152 non-fatal) to workers investigated by the Railway Inspectorate between January 1911 and June 1915, constituted only 3 per cent of the total number of accidents reported – over 130,000 workplace accidents during this four and a half-year period, or 2,425 accidents to rail workers on average each month.

As telling as the statistical analysis of this industrial carnage, which provides a rich source for further studies, are the detailed investigations of individual cases that the RWLD volunteers and researchers continue to uncover and commemorate with local communities and descendants of the workers (Esbester, 2024). Deaths of working-class people under capitalism are often not regarded as important enough to record or remember. The RWLD project rescues these railway workers from the condescension of history.

For RMT members and railway workers today, this is not only of academic or historical interest. Public and worker safety are issues of fierce public, political debate.



In December 2023, RMT warned that funding cuts threaten the safety of passengers and rail workers and the integrity of Britain's rail network. A litany of rail crashes, including the deadly derailment at Carmont in August 2020 caused by poor infrastructure maintenance are a testament to what can happen through lack of investment.

Following on the heels of the founding of the MRC was the Health & Safety at Work Act (1974), another milestone in labour history. The RWLD project acts as a reminder of how far we have come in the struggle for workplace safety and how far we have to fall.

### **Critical reflections: the MRC's perspective – James King**

As the premier repository for British trade union archives, the MRC holds considerable quantities of material that is of value to family historians and others interested in the lives of individual members. This is in various forms, but predominantly consists of either membership registers or various listings in annual reports (e.g., new members, superannuated members, deceased members, etc.). Although the information provided by these sources is often fairly sparse (as its main purpose was to record data relevant to the union's finances rather than a detailed record of members' lives), it is still a useful source of biographical data.

Its use by researchers, however, is complicated by the fact that it is very rarely indexed and can thus only be discovered by time-consuming combing through multiple volumes, which may ultimately draw a blank in any case. The MRC does not have the resources to provide a research service beyond a basic search, and the digitisation programme is not likely to reach most of these volumes any time soon, so this can only be accomplished by an in-person visit to the MRC, which may obviously be difficult for those who do not live in the Coventry area (especially since not all family historians researching British roots even actually live in the UK).

Any assistance to make the information held in these volumes accessible remotely is therefore extremely welcome. This is especially the case with information relating to railway workers. The railway companies were once collectively the largest employer in the country and the MRC receives more genealogical enquiries about former railway employees than those of any other industry.

The ASRS/NUR represented all of the many grades of manual workers on the railways, although many drivers and firemen instead belonged to the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and many workers in railway workshops belonged to the appropriate craft unions. In the days before the modern welfare state, the trades unions played a major role in the provision of benefits for those who were unable to work or the dependents of those who had died. Up until 1921, the

quarterly reports of the ASRS/NUR, which are all held by the MRC, included lists of claims for death and disability payments, accident compensation payments and orphan fund claims, as well as details of Board of Trade inquiries into railway accidents and inquests on those killed on the railways which were attended by union representatives. As is typical with such reports, these are not indexed and a researcher looking for a case must therefore know the relevant year and quarter or face very a long search. This has the obvious result that the records are underused and their potential for family history use is under-recognised.

Therefore, when Mike Esbester first contacted the MRC with a view to getting involved in the RWLD project in July 2018, we were only too happy to collaborate. Not only would it assist a valuable historical research project, but it would also provide opportunities to gather the genealogical data in the ASRS/NUR reports, disseminate it and make it searchable, and also to increase awareness of the extensive genealogical material in our trade union collections.

Over the last five years, the data in almost all the reports has been transcribed for the RWLD project through the hard work of a number of volunteers, some working directly with the MRC and others working with the National Railway Museum in York. The MRC volunteers have visited the MRC search-room to see and/or copy the material directly, whilst the NRM volunteers have worked from copies provided by MRC staff. The data from these reports that has already been made available online by the RWLD project and will be made available in the future will play a vital role in the MRC's attempts to make as much of our collection as possible freely available to researchers, ideally in a form that can be accessed remotely.

### **Critical reflections: the academic perspective – Mike Esbester**

I'd flag three aspects of the academic world to focus on in my reflection: the intellectual, the methodological and the philosophical.

So far as the intellectual goes, over the last 25 years or so, there has been increasing interest amongst academic historians both in the everyday and in accidents.<sup>v</sup> Academic publishing can be a relatively slow business, however, and the project's reach into the different sub-fields of historical research has so far been more limited than I'd hoped. The project and its use of the MRC's holdings has the potential to contribute to social, labour, disability and, of course, railway history amongst other academic areas. What's needed is for scholars who work in these fields to see what they might get from the union records held by the MRC and featuring in the RWLD project. As the academic lead on the project, I do what I can to reach into different fields and to publish – however, I'm only one person. More

academics working on and publishing using our work would be a great benefit, to the project and to academic historical scholarship.

In terms of methodology, our focus on collaboration and where possible co-production is a strength, serving to open the discipline and academic world more (**Esbester, 2020**). I proposed the RWLD project as I believed there were different communities of researchers who would be interested in the records – if they knew those records existed and could be easily accessed. I'd initially thought of family and academic historians – though I've been delighted that the project has reached and worked with so many communities beyond these. Working with groups beyond Higher Education and understanding and respecting each other's expertise has been crucial to meaningful collaboration.

But herein lies a challenge: to do this seriously and in a way that builds and sustains trust – sometimes with groups who are suspicious of academic motives – takes time. A lot of time. Research and writing are small parts of the project equation. Promoting the project, for example, is an intensive aspect of the work. I have a responsibility to the volunteers who are so generously giving their time, effort and expertise (and from whom I've learned an awful lot). They should receive prompt responses from me – though that doesn't always happen, as I try, but don't always succeed, to balance competing pressures.

And this is the philosophical response. This time pressure is reflective of broad challenges in UK Higher Education at the moment (and no doubt worldwide, too). We are pulled in multiple directions, slicing our time and energy ever smaller. If we don't have sufficient time and space to develop and maintain collaborative projects – and these are long-term commitments – then we are all poorer for it. Equally if universities are called upon to produce quick wins, what space is there for projects like RWLD which may take many years to come to fruition and whose benefits are sometimes hard to quantify in ways that fit universities' metrics?

Institutionally there are benefits which Portsmouth accrues. The RWLD project brings public visibility, engagement – and even some of the notoriously-slippery 'impact.' With the RWLD project I have worked with national and local museums and archives, have reach into the heritage sector and have worked within the current rail industry, not least with the RMT Union. This is important, as without these benefits I cannot imagine that my spending time on the project would be viewed favourably at an institutional level.

This isn't why I continue with the project, however. I do what I do because I believe it's *important*. I get a very personal sense of satisfaction from the project's work. And my practice as an academic historian has benefited,

too. When I started my focus was very much on the accidents, with some regard for the individuals. Now my focus is much more on the accidents *and* the people involved. I have built strong connections across perceived barriers – for example, between family and academic history. I have become much more focused on collaboration and co-production as methodologies.

So where will the project, and I, go in future? Wherever it is, it'll be together – trying to break down hierarchies of power which persist (certainly in perception) and being more co-productive. At some point we'll finish transcribing the MRC records – I'd like to see more research into the individuals appearing in the records. In particular, I'd really like to support volunteers to do more of this research – because what they have done so far has been brilliant. I'd like to see that research reaching out into new communities, or communities that haven't traditionally engaged with railway history. Finally, I'd like to see the relationships with the RMT and the MRC strengthened, and to make sure that we work with them to meet their future needs.

## **Conclusions**

What's clear is that each of the groups or people involved at the MRC in the Railway Work, Life & Death project have come with different aims, objectives and skills. There's been enough in the project, though, to form a coherent whole which provides everyone with enough of what they need to make it worthwhile. As such, it exemplifies the power of collaboration, in the archive and beyond. This is particularly significant in this context, as the MRC hasn't run a volunteering project like this before. Might the RWLD project offer a model that can be replicated?

To what's already been said, it's worth adding another dimension: the 'one-off volunteer.' We've seen a lot of this in the project – people offering support by providing further details of cases not yet in the database, or by writing guest blog posts for the project. This is hugely appreciated, and something we firmly encourage (**RWLD, 2024b**). Often it comes from the family history community; to establish a connection like this, between ancestor and descendant, is amazing and pushes the records held by the MRC far outside the climate-controlled space of the archive. We've seen this recently, for example, in contact from the grandson of Francis Huish of Senghenydd; and from various descendants of Crisanto Rego, both of whom feature in our project's work.

So, what of the future for the RWLD project and the MRC records? As we've suggested, some aspects are 'business as usual.' There are still the final records to be transcribed and then checked and released. We want

to remain open to contributions in whatever format and ways people are able to make them – and to be as inclusive as possible.

We firmly believe that, for those willing to be involved, everyone benefits – but, equally, how sustainable is the current model? There are very real challenges to archival volunteering, particularly around demography and opportunity. The RWLD project, at the MRC and beyond, is reliant upon individuals to donate their time and effort. At the very least, recognising that is important. Arguably everyone involved wouldn't do it if they didn't get something from it – but does this also mean others are unable to contribute? Or just that they need other ways to do so – the 'one-off volunteer', feeding in with their small part that's relevant to them as opposed to the 'general volunteer' who offers a more sustained commitment and deals with anything. Our project and its work at the MRC is a small manifestation of a much wider question: can institutions and projects support volunteers properly?

Those are issues that are sector-wide. To return to the RWLD project and the MRC, two key areas for our future have emerged. Firstly, making sure that we are reaching as widely as possible and ensuring as many people as possible are making use of the project work and therefore the records at the MRC. Secondly, a change in focus from transcription to more active research into the people and cases in the Union dataset. If this can be a wider effort, co-produced with different people and groups, that would be a real success. How we're able to achieve these objectives is a challenging question – but one we'll try to meet.

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Alex Gordon is President of the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT). Records of RMT's forerunner unions ASRS, NUR and NUS are archived at the MRC. Alex is Chair of the Marx Memorial Library & Workers' School in Clerkenwell, London and writes for the Library's journal, *Theory & Struggle*. He is a member of the International Brigades Memorial Trust, which recently published a short history of the role of railworkers and seafarers in the fight against fascism in the 1930s.



Cheryl Hunnisett has studied family history and genealogy for the last ten years, and very much enjoys teasing out the stories behind the factual information. In addition to researching her own family line she runs two global one name studies. Her background in regulatory financial services project management & training for one of the big four consulting firms has been good grounding in the organisational skills and standards of proof required for genealogy. She's personally grateful for the explosion of online resources over the last few years and has found it very rewarding to be involved in unlocking the huge amount of information and personal histories from within the pages of the ASRS records and making them available for researchers.

James King is Senior Archivist at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, and co-lead of the Railway Work, Life & Death project.

Stephen Lamb retired from a career in social care and criminal justice in 2018. He got involved in Railway Work, Life & Death shortly afterwards. He had been looking for an opportunity to pursue his interest in history. He is also a tour guide at Arbury Hall, which is a historic house in Nuneaton; an exams invigilator at a school in Nuneaton where he also helps with security; and he works with the Elections team as a Presiding Officer and as a canvasser checking the electoral roll. He enjoys walking, gardening and photography and sharing life with his partner and two cats.



## List of Images

Figure 1: Posed staff safety photograph produced by the Caledonian Railway Company in 1921, warning of dangers of the type that killed George Williamson. (Credit: Railway Work, Life & Death project. Included with permission)

Figure 2: Typical National Union of Railwaymen Orphan Fund claims table. The team have been transcribing these records, which are feeding into the Railway Work, Life & Death project database. (Credit: MRC, MSS.127/NU/1/1/4. Included with permission)

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**Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Modern Records Centre (MRC) MSS.127/AS/1/1/45.

<sup>ii</sup> Records are found in MSS.127/AS/1/1 and MSS.127/NU/1/1.

<sup>iii</sup> Or X, as the site was rebranded by its current owner in 2023.

<sup>iv</sup> RWLD Project Twitter/X account accessible at: <https://twitter.com/RWLDproject>.

<sup>v</sup> For example, see Roger Cooter and Bill Luckin, eds, *Accidents in History: Injuries, Fatalities and Social Relations* (Atlanta: Rodolphi, 1997); Arwen Mohun, *Risk: Negotiating Safety in American Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Tom Crook and Mike Esbester, eds, *Governing Risks in Modern Britain: Danger, Safety and Accidents c.1800-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).