

Freight Train Explosion at Bootle, 22nd March 1945

by Herbert Norman Stubbs GM

The following piece was written by Norman Stubbs, the fireman of the train involved in this incident. Being written in the third person, it reflects the modest attitude to this incident adopted by Norman; in his lifetime few people knew of the decorations he had been awarded.

Norman started work on the railway, aged 14 in 1936, at Workington shed as a "knocker-up", cycling round the local streets in the early hours knocking on the doors of footplaters to ensure they turned out for an early shift. He was following family traditions in working for the railway as his father, Herbert, was chief clerk at the shed. Working his way up through the grades of cleaners and fireman it was 25 years before Norman became a driver. In the 1960s he was promoted to Deputy Shed Foreman, but after a short time stood back from that position to return to the footplate work he loved. By this time, though, steam was disappearing and he spent the last years of his working life at the controls of a diesel railcar on the Cumbrian coast line. He retired at the age 61 in 1983.

This event has been visited twice before in Cumbrian Railways, in Volume 2 No. 8, pages 8-9, and in Volume 7 No. 5 pages 79-80 but the personal aspects of this piece well merit a further appearance. Many thanks to Norman's son and brother, both called Alan Stubbs, for submitting the text and illustrations for this article.

MANY YEARS ago, towards the end of the Second World War, on 22nd March 1945, the people of Bootle, Cumbria, had a very near disaster only was averted by the quick action of the crew of a freight train approaching the village at 10-15 pm. The train was composed of 58 wagons, the seven next to the engine each containing 52 depth charges, equal to 10 tons. Owing to working hard with such a heavy train, it was not noticed until approaching Bootle Station that the sixth wagon was on fire. The driver, Harold Goodhall of Workington, managed to bring the train to a stand approx ¼ mile south of Bootle knowing that the wagon on fire was one of those containing explosives that he had been informed about before leaving Workington.

By this time the wooden wagon was burning fiercely and to stop it setting fire to the other wagons and causing a far greater explosion it had to be isolated from the others. So, according to the rules, the fireman, Norman Stubbs of Workington, had to go back and uncouple it from the other ammo wagon and the rest of the train. After it had been drawn clear he had to go back again and uncouple it from the leading five wagons of depth charges. This was not easy this time because the heat was terrific and there was a lot of flames near the drawbar and coupling, but by getting underneath he managed to get the coupling off. They were then able to draw



the leading wagons a safe distance away. The fireman's duty then was to go forward on foot and place warning detonators on the opposite track hoping to stop a passenger train which was due, but he hadn't gone far when the contents of the wagon exploded, all ten tons, killing the driver instantly but by a miracle the fireman was picked up in the blast and carried a distance down the track but was uninjured. When the debris had settled, although badly shaken, he managed to carry on down the track to put the rest of his warning detonators down towards the expected oncoming train, but unknown to him, the train had been stopped at Silecroft owing to the prompt action of the signalman at Bootle, having sent signals forward that this train was on fire.

After placing his detonators approximately ¾ mile from the explosion he returned to the engine where he met the guard who informed him that his mate was dead. It was decided then to take the engine forward although it was badly damaged, for it was almost five miles to Silecroft. Under great difficulty he managed to reach Silecroft and to his relief the passenger train was standing there. When the explosion occurred all communications were lost and the railway was torn up for about 100 yards and a huge crater made; no trace was found of the sixth wagon.

Although houses in Bootle and the RN camp were damaged it was lucky the train was not stopped nearer to Bootle Station. The tremor was felt many miles away.

The driver Harold Goodhall was highly commended for his bravery and quick action, without which there would have been a major disaster.

The fireman, Norman Stubbs, who is now retired after 47 years service, owed his life to his driver that night. He was awarded the George Medal and the Daily Herald "Order of Industrial Heroism", then known as "The Workers' VC" The George Medal was presented to Norman Stubbs at Buckingham Palace on 23rd October 1945 by King George VI.



Above - The crater made by the explosion.
Right

Top - The letter from the Chairman of the LMS
Centre - The letter of congratulation from Millom
District Council
Bottom - A message from the Minister of War.

**Citation from the Supplement to the
London Gazette, 19th July 1945**

Awarded the George Medal:—
Herbert Norman STUBBS, Fireman (Workington), London
Midland and Scottish Railway Company.

Stubbs noticing that his train was on fire immediately told his Driver, who at once applied the brake whilst Stubbs jumped off the engine as it was stopping. He ran back to find flames coming from the sixth wagon from the front of the train and at once unhooked at the rear of the burning wagon and raced forward to the Engine, telling the driver to draw ahead. Stubbs again left the engine before it stopped in order to be opposite the burning wagon when it came to rest. By this time flames were coming out like gas jets, both at the top of the wagon and through the bottom, round the draw gear. The heat was intense and Stubbs realised that the contents of the wagon were dangerous. The flame from the bottom of the wagon was straight above the drawbar coupling and Stubbs had to stoop underneath the flame to uncouple from the five other wagons attached to the engine, thus running considerable risk of being severely burned, quite apart from the great danger from the contents of the wagon. The leading seven wagons of the train each contained about 10 tons of Amatol depth charges. Stubbs then ran back to the engine for a supply of detonators to protect the opposite line, and having correctly placed the first detonator he was lifted from his feet and thrown on to the opposite side of the line by the explosion of contents of the burning wagon, but he recovered and placed four more detonators before returning to the scene of the explosion where he was informed that the Driver had been killed. The alertness of Stubbs in detecting the fire and his courageous action in so quickly isolating the burning wagon undoubtedly prevented a far more serious explosion.

