

**John Henry Bignell**

**Isle of Wight County Press  
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**SHOCKING FATAL ACCIDENT AT NEWPORT.**

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**STEAM WAGON STEERSMAN CRUSHED TO DEATH**  
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Yesterday the Deputy Coroner (F. A. Joyce, Esq.) held an inquest at Newport on the body of John Henry Bignell, aged 25, of 7 Town-lane, Newport, who was crushed to death on Tuesday afternoon whilst acting as steersman on a steam wagon belonging to Messrs. J. Thomas, Ltd., millers. Deceased, who leaves a widow and one child, was for some years driver of a pair-horse van for the same firm, and was in charge of the van into the pole of which a soldier cyclist accidentally dashed with a fatal result on the Arreton road some months ago. – Mr. G. H. Arthur, C.C., was foreman of the jury. Mr. A. W. Drew represented Messrs. Thomas and Mr. Cox was present for the Workers' Union, of which deceased was a member.

Harry Hayter, engine driver for Messrs. Thomas, said that deceased had been employed by the firm for seven or eight years. On November 5<sup>th</sup> witness was driving the Foden steam wagon, and deceased was steersman. When they started for Shanklin in the morning Sidney Jackson was driving, but he was unwell and left at Sandford. Witness, who had been steering, took on as driver, and deceased took the steering wheel. Witness had been driving for about seven weeks, and had been steersman for six months or more. Deceased had acted as steersman with another driver. On returning to Newport they took a load of flour from Arnell's mill to Croucher's stores, Sea-street. Deceased was sitting with one leg inside and the other outside on the left side when the accident occurred. The driver controlled the brake, which could be controlled by the steersman if he stood up. After discharging their load they moved off to go to the High-street and to return to Pan Mill. Witness started the engine, and having looked to see that it was taking the road all right was attending to the fire when he found the engine going faster than it should have been. He quickly stood up and saw that it was running to the corner of the wall of Shepards' stores on their left hand. He immediately shut off steam and jammed his foot on the brake, which, however, did not act, owing, he thought, to deceased's foot being under it. The brake was in good order before and after the accident. Before witness could get his hand on the reversing lever the engine had run over the pavement and struck the corner of the wall of Shepards' store, opposite to the entrance of Sharp's timber yard, and deceased's head and body were crushed between the engine and the wall as he sat in his seat. Before they started witness shouted "All right, Jack?" and deceased replied "Yes." There was a sharp incline down to the kerb. Not realising what had happened witness said "What's up Jack?" and getting no reply saw that deceased's face was turned towards the back, the right side of the face being against the wall, and he then found that he was crushed. He tried to back the engine, but

the wheels would not grip the pavement. He sent for help and to see if one of the Croucher's engines had steam up to haul the wagon back. He should say it was a quarter of an hour before deceased was extricated, but he had been killed instantly. Having regard to the position in which deceased was jammed it would appear as if he was looking to the back of the wagon, and that in consequence he either did not steer at all or steered wrongly just at the moment the wheel ran over the kerb.

By the jury: Had deceased been looking forward in the usual way his head could not have been caught against the wall. – By Mr. Cox: He did not see or hear anyone at the back of the wagon calling or speaking to the deceased. – By the Coroner: When the front wheel struck the kerb it might have jerked the steering wheel from deceased's hand for the moment. – By the Foreman: He had had tuition in driving and felt competent to drive.

The Coroner said that in ordinary times he should have made some severe comment on the fact that neither of those men seemed thoroughly experienced, but they had to remember that the war had absorbed most of the experienced drivers and influenza had laid hold of the few left at home, and firms dealing with the food supply were necessarily much embarrassed to find men for the work.

Witness said that he had driven under the supervision of a good driver for seven weeks. – By the Coroner: He felt quite safe with deceased's steering.

By Mr. Drew: Deceased did the steering sufficiently except for a little difficulty in rounding an awkward corner at Shanklin when they had to back. He turned other corners very well.

The Coroner said it seemed a question of inexperience more than anything else, but they could not make much comment as in the exceptional circumstances one felt grateful that there were men left who took such jobs on.

The Foreman said the first witness was on the engine for six months, and if he did not learn in that time he never would.

Mr. T. P. Leach, secretary to Messrs. Thomas, said deceased was stableman, horse feeder, and driver of a pair-horse van, but owing to influenza and shortage of men they were compelled to put him on the engine. He had been steering 12 or 13 times for certain. It was not difficult work, as witness had steered the same engine several times. – The Foreman: When you asked him to go on the engine did he go voluntarily? Yes. - Q. He did not object? "Oh, no. When he came back from Shanklin we had arranged for another man to take deceased's place for him to go back to the van, but on the choice being offered him, he said "Oh, no: I will finish the day out." They had had that engine seven or eight years, and the other four or five years, and had had no serious accident with them.

Inspector H. Sibbeck described the position in which the body was found, and Dr. McKay gave particulars of the terrible injuries to the head and upper part of the left hand side of the body.

The Coroner said they were not called upon to decide the question of liability. There seemed no blame attaching to the driver for that deplorable accident, the cause of which

they were left to conjecture – whether deceased turned round to speak to someone, or by mistake turned the wheel the wrong way. Having regard to the labour shortage, aggravated by the influenza, he did not think it necessary to consider the addition of any rider to the verdict.

The jury found that deceased was accidentally killed by the steam wagon colliding with the wall.

Mr. Drew expressed the great regret of the employers at the accident, and their deep sympathy with the widow. The Foreman expressed the sympathy of the Jury, saying deceased was a very nice young fellow, and likely to make a good townsman. – The Coroner said no doubt the widow would much appreciate those expressions.

Transcription by Shani Watts for the Friends of Newport and Carisbrooke Cemeteries.  
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