

Carlisle through the back door or *The Great Train Crash of 1984*



On May 1, 1984, a Liverpool-Glasgow Freightliner train, using the Carlisle Goods Avoiding Line, broke in two when crossing a bridge over the River Caldew. The rear section – dangerously out of control – headed towards the station where passengers were getting on to an early train to London. Signaller Bill Taylor quickly diverted the runaway section of the train onto a bridge where it crashed. He was disciplined for not following procedures which were to let the train run into and out of the station to come to a rest [in theory]. He should have got a medal instead. There's a plaque to the memory of Bill Taylor in Carlisle station waiting room.

The resulting chaos closed the Avoiding Line permanently: the loss of a very useful rail bypass for Carlisle, adding to congestion in the station. It took months to clear up the mess. Local residents were evacuated. The UK's largest crane lifted the containers out of the river. The train and parts of the track were thrown into the air when the containers derailed at about 60mph on a 20mph speed limit section of the curved goods line and hit the bridge walls pushing the bridge off its bearings and into the river. A 60 foot piece of rail was hurled into the end of a container which was full (not for long) of unbonded Guinness. Another container held Octel, an anti-knocking additive for gasoline, which is highly explosive.

The parts of the Avoiding Line trackbed were converted recently, after the devastating Carlisle floods of 2005, into a cyclepath and walkway alongside the River Caldew. This runs from Denton Holme, behind Carlisle station, to close to Carlisle castle. It's a curious back door into the city centre: wild flowers and shrubs; industrial grunge; a grade 2 listed gas holder frame; a converted once-nationalised pub called the *Cumberland Wrestlers*; the temperamental and fast flowing river; views of Carlisle landmarks from unusual places; mediaeval and Victorian history jumbled up with a new Lidl store and postmodern apartments, all carefully designed with front doors above flood level; thick flood-protection walls; wild birds and butterflies; and specially commissioned artworks. This is classic 'edgelands' Carlisle.

The public art includes railings by Alan Dawson Associates celebrating Carlisle's railway heritage, especially freight rail. There are signal box levers, engine motive parts, tracks, signals, and crossing gates in the designs of the stanchion uprights and some infill. The decorative railings have a practical use: they allow Environment Agency staff maintenance access to the Caldew River.

In January 2005, over 1,800 Carlisle properties were flooded and two people died as a result. Over 70 people were injured. Large areas of the city were evacuated. All Stagecoach's buses were damaged. Production at McVities ceased: there was a national shortage of Bourbon biscuits. Roads were lined later with skips full of damaged fridges, cookers, beds, and furniture. Many people had to live in hotels. The total damage cost about £250 million. The Environment Agency's Flood Alleviation Scheme (2008-10) cost £25 million to build. This included building floodwalls, earth embankments, reopening the natural floodplain and creating four areas of improved wildlife habitat. We will explore some of them on our short walk, along the riverside wildlife corridor, into Carlisle through the back door.

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