

# THE DAY A CAREFREE TRIP TO THE SEASIDE ENDED IN VIOLENT TRAGEDY

IN 1906, ten people died and 26 were injured at Handcross Hill, Handcross, in what still remains the worst road crash in Sussex history and one of the worst single-vehicle crashes in Britain.

PHIL DENNETT looks back at an incident that pitched the small village of Handcross into national headlines and engulfed the community in grief.

REASONS for the tragic death toll at Handcross Hill on 12 July 1906 would strike a chord today for those trying to avoid a similar tragedy on the modern road.

The crumbling old London-Brighton coaching road was condemned by witnesses as being a cause of the horrific accident. It was also heavily criticised as being "fit only for horses".

And witnesses at the inquest held at the Red Lion pub in Handcross complained the camber of the narrow steep road was "excessive and dangerous", throwing the bus into a tree.

But there were echoes of reluctance to commit money to improvements when evidence was given at the 1906 inquest, even as one of the crash victims was dying in a room next door.



The old London to Brighton road in Handcross as it is today and which the Vanguard would have trundled along to a horrific end

One witness suggested that had the camber not been so bad the Vanguard bus could probably have carried on straight down to the level part of the road without crashing, instead of lurching fatally into a roadside tree.

Chairman of the East Sussex Council roads committee, Major John Lister, denied there was excessive camber and said: "Well, I don't see how you could alter the road much."

The crash happened after the flimsy, hired bus full of Kent firefighters and their friends and families from Orpington and St Mary Cray passed through Handcross village on their way to Brighton. Many were on top deck enjoying the

charming country views and despite complaining of engine breakdowns were happily drinking beer, lemonade and, some, whisky.

Their numbers were alleged to have made the bus top heavy but other factors weighed more dramatically against the driver, who had himself enjoyed a couple of beers on the way.

As he turned westwards away from the village and into Brighton Road, which still exists today, the bus ominously began to gather too much speed as it passed the laundry on the right and the owner's house, Hilltop, which still stands today.

Within minutes the laundry workers would be ripping up sheets for the injured and dying but for the moment the driver thought some initial braking would slow the bus.

Instead the bus quickly reached about 25 miles an hour, but its brakes and gearing were made for a top speed of about 14 miles an hour. The city bus could not cope with the steep Handcross Hill.

The inquest heard that some drivers solved this problem somewhat hazardously by letting the bus simply run on without braking on steep straight roads before reaching gentler stretches where they braked.

But the Vanguard was also doomed by an unseen failure in the gearbox manufacture. When the driver braked on the hill the pressure on the mechanics forced the weakened gearbox to shatter, subsequently also wrecking the braking. By bad luck it also sent a shaft into the ground that pushed the bus towards the side of the narrow road.

The driver, who miraculously survived, had to cope with a top-heavy bus on a dangerous camber as it lurched out of control across and down the hill.

Despite his efforts, somewhere near where the north bound lane now runs the bus hit an overhanging oak branch ripping off the top deck of the bus and instantly killing a lot of the passengers.

Witnesses described the horror scenes as people were thrown into the branches, where rescuers found them either dead or seriously injured.

For many years a simple metal cross on a fence marked the spot, but was lost. There are no other memorials, although crowds lined streets for funerals. At the Fountain Inn in Handcross a picture of the wrecked bus is the village's only public reminder.

The crash prompted national concern about safety standards and speed restrictions.

William Beaumont, of Metropolitan Police, denied a suggestion by coroner Mr G Vere Benson that an extra emergency brake removed by the firm might have averted the disaster. He told the inquest: "Thirty or forty brakes would not have prevented this accident."

In the end the driver going too fast, the wrong use of a "city" bus on a bad country road, and the mechanical inability of the bus to stand braking at about 25 miles an hour were also all blamed for the disaster.

The coroner said under the light of oil lamps in a marquee at the Red Lion that the bus company could not be held liable for a "hidden flaw" in the gearbox.

The Rev HR White, delivering the jury's verdict, said the accident was caused by "breakage of machinery brought on by efforts of the driver to check his speed".

Although the jury decided no-one was criminally responsible Rev White said: "We consider the driver Blake committed an error of judgement in allowing the omnibus to attain so high a speed before taking means to check it."

And he added: "We are strongly of the opinion that this type of vehicle is unsuitable for use on country roads."

After 100 years of carnage on Handcross Hill some people believe this 21st century type of country road may be unsuitable for vehicles.



Devastation at the crash scene on Handcross Hill



Villagers are pictured with the badly damaged bus

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