

In-patient admissions, 1848-59: Railway navigators and labourers

Introduction

The 1840s and 1850s saw significant railway construction in Dorset. In 1847 the hospital's management committee noted that there had been a considerable increase in the number of in-patients "almost entirely caused by the large number of accident cases, of which between one-third and one-fourth have happened on the railroad works"¹.

Data source

The data for this analysis comes from two volumes of in-patient admissions for Dorset County Hospital held at the Dorset History Centre.

- Volume 1 (reference NG/HH/DO(C)/5/2/1) – January 1848 to August 1859
- Volume 2 (reference NG/HH/DO(C)/5/2/2) – August 1859 to December 1859

While the analysis period spans two volumes, there were in fact no entries relating to navigators or other types of railway labourer in that part of 1859 covered by the second volume. The term 'railway labourer' is used in the rest of this paper to denote navigators, excavators, plate layers and other labourers on the railways.

Sex, age and place of origin

During the period 1848 to 1859, 48 railway labourers were admitted as in-patients. All were male. The ages were given in the admission register in all but two cases. Two thirds were aged 20 to 34 years. The youngest railway labourer was aged 13 and the oldest was 48 years.

Age >	Under 15	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	Unknown	Total
In-patients	1	7	15	11	5	2	3	2	2	48

The majority of railway labourers admitted to the hospital were recorded as coming from Dorset with a few from neighbouring counties. However, the data in the admission registers regarding patients' parishes must be treated with caution. Navigator George Whittaker, for instance, was admitted in 1859, and is recorded as coming from Maiden Newton, which is where he was injured and where he was buried. A newspaper report reveals that in fact he was from Brompton, near Northallerton in Yorkshire².

¹ *Sherborne Mercury*, 20 February 1847, page 4

² Entry 3904, admission register, NG/HH/DO(C)/5/2/1; *York Herald*, 20 June 1857, page 8

County v	In-patients
Devon	2
Dorset	36
Somerset	5
Staffordshire	1
Wiltshire	1
Unknown	3

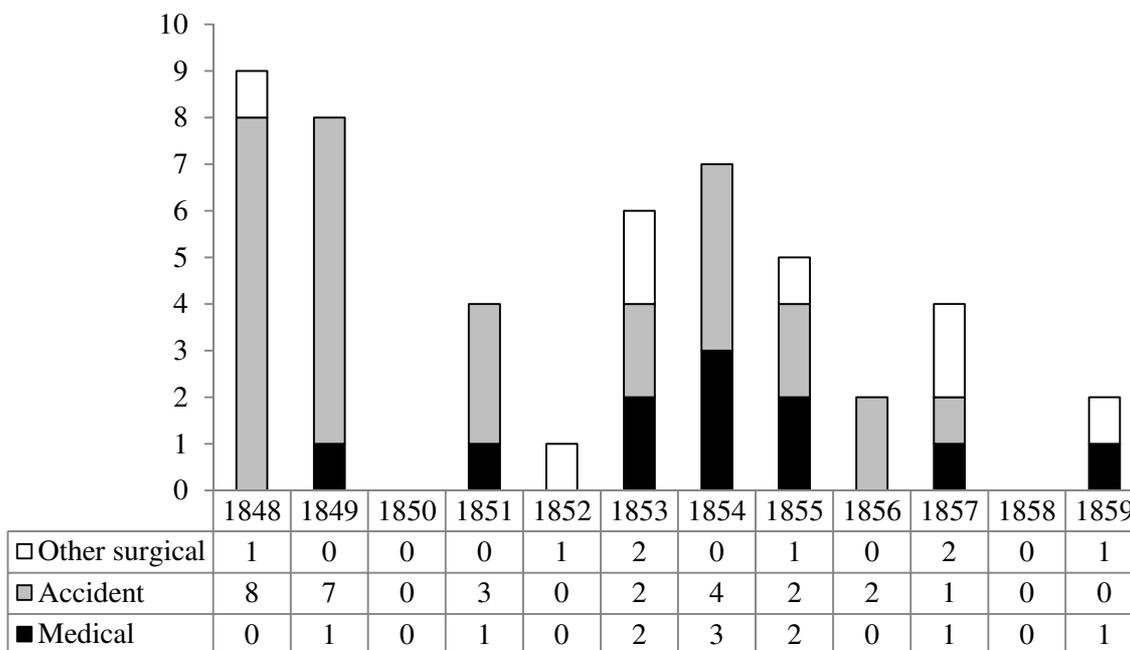
Railway lines in the south-west had especially high levels of local participation among the labourers. For example, 75 per cent of the men working on the Wilts, Somerset and Weymouth railway in 1851 came from the south-west³.

Types of case

The type of case has been determined by the name of the medical officer in whose care the patient was placed. Physicians Dr. Jackson and Dr. Cowdell looked after medical cases and surgeons Mr. Curme and Mr. Tapp were in charge of surgical cases. Over three quarters of the cases were surgical.

Type >	Medical	Surgical	Total
Number	11	37	48
Percentage	22.9	77.1	100.0

The vast majority of surgical cases – 29 out of 37 (78.4%) – were accidents or trauma cases. There were no cases in 1850 or 1858.



³ David Brooke, "The railway navy – a reassessment", *Construction History*, volume 5, 1989, page 38.

Medical conditions

No diagnosis was recorded for one of the eleven medical patients. One phthisis patient also had haemoptysis (coughing up blood) which for the purposes of this analysis has been treated as a secondary condition.

Primary medical condition √	Number
Bronchitis	1
Oedema	1
Phthisis (tuberculosis)	2
Pneumonia	2
Rheumatism	2
Sciatica	1
Scurvy	1
Not stated	1

Accidents and injuries

Many of the 29 accident victims had multiple injuries. Sometimes the descriptions of the injuries were not site-specific (e.g. just the word “Contusions”). Injuries to the legs, thighs and feet were particularly common, as illustrated in the following newspaper accounts:

... The deceased, who was about eighteen years of age, was employed with a cart, on what, in phraseology of railway men, is termed “tip;” and, that having stumbled, he fell upon the sleeper, when the grooved wheel of the vehicle passed over and crushed his legs ...⁴

... Deceased was driving a tip-cart, on a portion of the works near the Barracks, when his foot slipped against one of the sleepers, and he fell across the rails, the cart, which was heavily laden, passing over both his legs, one of which was amputated immediately on his being taken to the hospital, and shortly after which he expired ...⁵

... [Deceased] was engaged driving a ballast waggon on the above line, and while doing so the coupling chain broke and he jumped off the train, and fell. Before he could recover himself and gain his feet, an engine which was passing at the time, run over his leg and broke it in two places ...⁶

... It appears that he was connected with a ballast train, and while standing on one of the buffers, as the train was in motion, his foot slipped, and one leg was caught under the wheel ... it was found that the bones of the foot, the ancle [*sic*], and a little above the ancle [*sic*], were completely smashed ...⁷

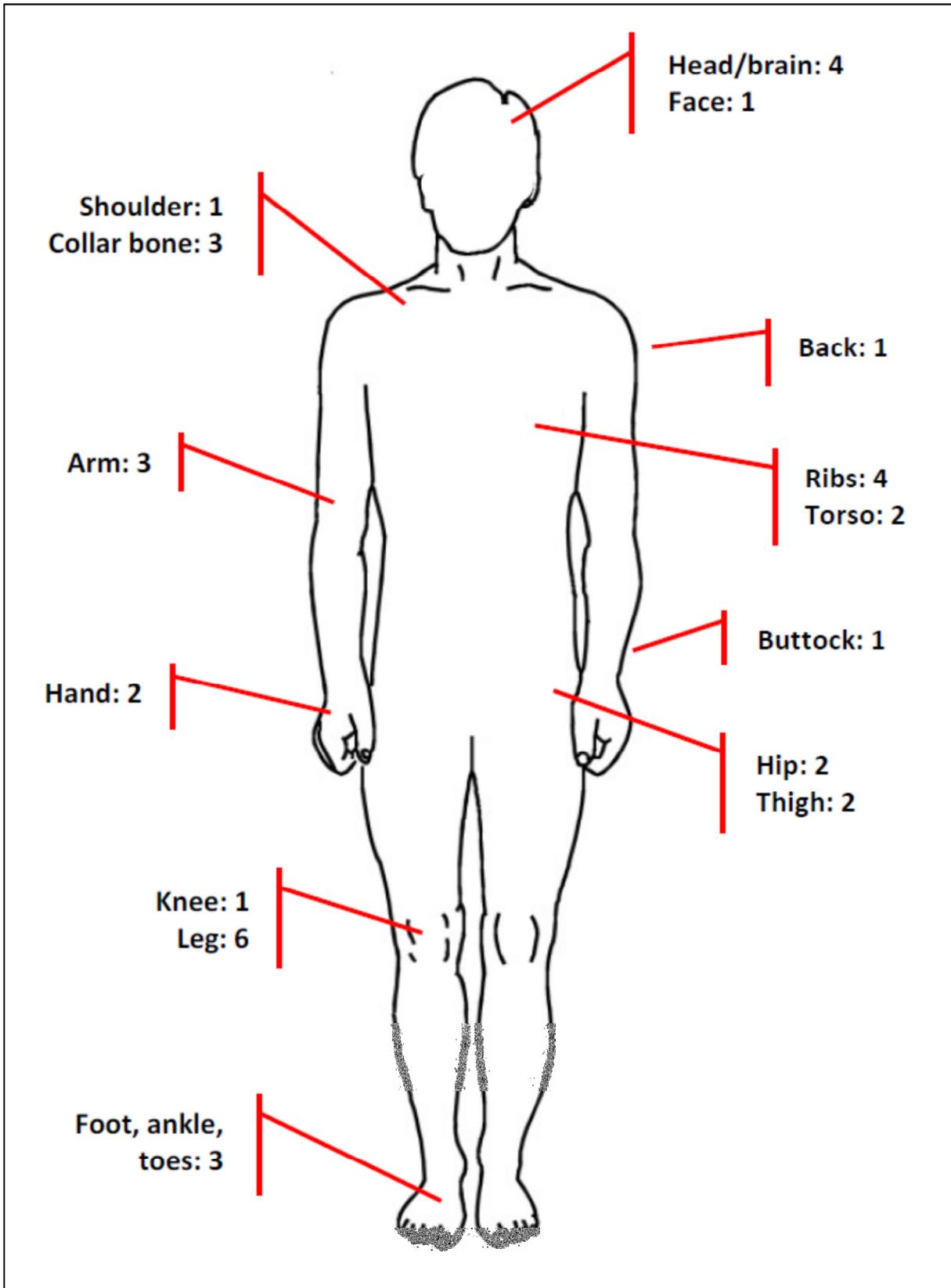
⁴ *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 20 June 1846, page 3

⁵ *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 19 February 1848, page 3

⁶ *York Herald*, 20 June 1857, page 8

⁷ *Sherborne Mercury*, 24 October 1865, page 5

Below: The site of physical injuries, and their frequency, for 29 railway labourers admitted as a result of accidents during 1848-59



Other surgical cases

There were eight other surgical cases: one patient had both a surgical condition (an anal fistula) and a medical condition (phthisis). The other cases included inflammation of, and loose cartilage in, the knee; disease of the vertebrae; an abscess and secondary eruptions (possibly syphilitic); retention of urine and chronic periostitis.

None of these conditions resulted in deaths in the hospital; most were categorised as 'relieved' upon discharge. One surgical patient left of his own accord and another was discharged because he refused treatment.

Recommendations

Accident cases and medical emergencies were, mostly, taken without a recommendation from a hospital governor (i.e. one of the subscribers or donors). In one case, the diagnosis was "Injury to hip" but the patient gained admission via a governor's recommendation. It was not categorised as an accident in the admission register but that categorisation has been applied for the purpose of this paper, hence the total number of accidents is actually 29, although the number admitted on an "accident ticket" was 28.

Recommender > Case type √	Admitted as accident	Admitted as emergency	Recommended by				Total
			Individual governor			Poor Law Union	
			Clergy	Male gentry	Female gentry		
Medical	0	1	4	4	1	1	11
Surgical	28	2	2	4	1	0	37
Total	28	3	6	8	2	1	48

Two patients needed second recommendations to prolong their hospital treatment. Both were non-accident surgical cases.

Deaths and other outcomes

The majority of deaths – 6 out of 7 – relate to accident victims. The one medical patient who died in the hospital had pneumonia. Among the treatment outcomes, the 'other' category consists of three patients who left at their own request and one discharged for refusing treatment.

Outcome > Case type √	Cured	Died	Relieved	Other	Total
Medical	7	1	3	0	11
Accident	20	6	1	2	29
Other surgical	0	0	6	2	8
Total	27	7	10	4	48