

THE LIGHTCLIFFE RAILWAY MYSTERY and a SECRET LIGHTCLIFFE BURIAL

THE LIGHTCLIFFE MYSTERY UNSOLVED.



THE GIRL'S FUNERAL.
The funeral of Wilhelmina Whitfield, the victim of the Lightcliffe train tragedy, took place secretly at 7 o'clock this morning. Dr. Matthews, of the Old Church, Lightcliffe, and the Rev. H. L. Taylor, vicar, officiated. The only mourner present was Mr. Keegan, of Bradford, in whose service the girl was. The grave was in a secluded portion of the graveyard under trees.

In September 1921 newspapers across the country carried news of this Lightcliffe railway tragedy, the subsequent inquest and then Wilhelmina Whitfield's secret funeral. She was buried in Lightcliffe plot H81. This is her story.

Wilhelmina Poad Whitfield was born on 9th June 1900 the illegitimate daughter of Eleanor Whitfield. Her birth was registered in the Weardale district in County Durham. Eleanor Whitefield was the daughter of John Whitefield and his wife Elizabeth née Poad.

1901 census

John Whitfield Head 71 Besom Maker Employer
 William Whitfield Son 49 ditto Worker
 Eleanor Whitfield Dau 39 Housekeeper
 Thomas Whitfield Son 29 Besom Maker Worker
 Wilhelmina P Whitfield Grnddau 8/12
 Address
 Rope Barn, Hunstanworth, Blanchland, NBL

1911 census

John Whitfield Head 81 Heather Broom Worker
 Wm Whitfield Son 59 ditto
 Eleanor Whitfield Dau 49
 Wilhelmina Whitfield Grndau 10
 Address
 Rope Barn, Hunstanworth, Blanchland, NBL

As you can see Wilhelmina and her mother lived with her maternal grandfather – who died later in 1911 - and family in Blanchland on the Durham/Northumberland border. Wilhelmina attended Blanchland Church of England school from 1905 until 1914. When she left on 17th July 1914 she was of ‘full age’ and the Great War was about to start.

It looks as if her mother Eleanor Whitfield died in 1917. Perhaps this was when Wilhelmina joined the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (W.A.A.C.) known from 1918 as the Queen Mary Auxiliary Army Corps (Q.M.A.A.C.). She was stationed in Halifax, where she became a member of the cookhouse staff at the barracks. There she was befriended by Sergeant-Major Theed and Mrs Theed. Apparently after the war, Mrs. Theed recommended Mina, as she was known, to her sister Mrs. Lily May Keegan of Bradford as a maid. On 19th June 1921 Mina Whitfield was a domestic servant with this Keegan family, who were Bradford Dyestuff and Chemical Merchants.

1921 census

Bernard	Keegan	Head	29	Dye ware & Chemical Merchants	Employer
Lily May	Keegan	Wife	32	Home Duties -	
Bernard	Keegan	Son	3	-	-
John Joseph	Keegan	Son	2	-	-
Joseph	Keegan	Brother	35	Dye ware & Chemical Merchants	Employer
Robert	Keegan	Brother	32	Dye ware & Chemical Merchants	Employer
Mina	Whitfield	Servant	21	Domestic - Servant	Private
Address 9 Curzon Rd., Bradford					

What happen next to Wilhelmina will be told using some of the nearly one hundred newspaper articles, many of which simply repeat each other, The tragedy was reported across the United Kingdom in local newspapers from Devon to Aberdeen as well as in national papers such as the *Daily Express* and the *Daily News*. Where additional information relevant to her story is included that section of an article will be recorded. *The Leeds Mercury* devoted many column inches to this story over a number of days. On 23rd September it documented in fine detail the questions and answers during the inquest. You have been spared this very, very long read!

From *The Scotsman* on 21st September 1921

MYSTERY OF BRADFORD GIRL'S DEATH

BODY FOUND ON RAILWAY METALS

Further inquiry concerning the body of the unknown young woman found on the metals of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway on Saturday night near Lightcliffe Station, situated between Bradford and Halifax, indicates that it is that of Wilhelmina Whitfield, domestic servant, employed by Mr. Bernard Keegan, 9 Curzon Road, Bradford.

The body was discovered shortly after eleven o'clock at night by the driver of the light engine proceeding towards Halifax, and was removed to Lightcliffe Station, where it remained pending exact identification.

The circumstances surrounding the death of the girl suggest that she may have been assaulted by another passenger. The finding of a velour hat on the metals has yet to be explained, but the gold rimmed spectacles which were also on the permanent way may be the property of the deceased girl for she is stated to have had a pair which were deficient of one lens. It is not at present certain how the girl got out of the compartment. The door was closed when the train reached Bradford, and the damage to it was only discovered on Monday morning.

Miss Whitfield, who was a native of Blanchland, Riding Mill, County Durham, was left in charge of her employer's home. When he and his wife went to Blackpool last weekend she was seen to leave the house alone early on Sunday afternoon and visited Sergt-Major and Mrs Thead [sic] at Halifax Barracks, She left there to catch the express train to Bradford, travelling to Halifax Station on the West Vale tram route.

Mr Keegan found his house locked when he returned on Monday morning, and as Miss Whitfield was missing information was given to the authorities, when a description of the deceased girl was published. Neighbours speak highly of Miss Whitfield's character.

Hair of a similar colour to that of Miss Whitfield was found in the compartment, but the authorities do not admit that this and the velour hat make it certain that there was assault.

THE INQUEST

When the inquest was opened yesterday by the Halifax Coroner, the body was identified as that of the maid servant Miss Whitfield.

Evidence of identification was given by the girl's employer, and then a witness made a statement which the Coroner said newspapers must not publish under pain of committal for contempt of Court.

A porter at Halifax Station said he saw Miss Whitfield there on Sunday night waiting for the express to Bradford She left the platform seat, upon which two young men were also seated, and went into the waiting room.

Another railway witness described the man's hat found 200 yards from the body as a brown velour. The doctor who had examined the body said there were no marks pointing to outrage or assault.

A Bradford ticket collector said none of the male passengers who left the train was hatless. It would be difficult, but possible, for a person to get away from the platform without going through the barrier,

At this stage the inquest was adjourned till tomorrow afternoon.

Part of a similar article from the *Lancashire Evening Post* on 22nd September 1921

“You could not find a better girl.” Said Mr William Thead [sic] of Halifax, with whose wife and children Miss Whitfield spent last Sunday afternoon and evening. “Her personal character was beyond reproach. To me the idea that she could have opened the door by accident is inconceivable. Someone was in the carriage with her.”

Mr J. Kelly, under whom Miss Whitfield worked when in the Q.M.A.A.A.C., declared she always kept herself apart and concerned herself with work and her own affairs, “I never had the slightest trouble with her.” He said, “Mina, of the W.A.A.C. “ was a girl of attractive form and face which the glasses that she wore did nothing to mar. She would always be likely to attract attention because of the beauty of her hair – red gold in colour.

Her uncle, William Poad Whitfield, attended the inquest and was mentioned in various reports.

The *Leeds Mercury* 23rd September 1921

The first witness yesterday was Mr. William Poad Whitfield, of Rope Barns, Huntingworth [should be Hunstanworth] Blanchland, via Riding Mill, who said he was the uncle of the girl, whose full name was Wilhelmina Poad Whitfield, the daughter of his sister Eleanor, who was a cook, but was now dead. Witness said he last saw his niece alive in July last, when she visited him, and he last heard from her about six weeks ago when she wrote him. She was quite healthy and happy and had no trouble whatever.

Under the headline below, The *Sunday Sun* joined in on 25th September 1921.

The theory that, in a state of nervous excitement, she might have made a dash for the door and so fallen out, is discounted by the evidence of her uncle, Mr. William Poad Whitfield of Blanchland, that she was not a nervous or excitable girl or inclined to be hysterical.

Sunday Sun 25th September 1921

MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT EXPRESS
—♦—
Missing Key to Drama of Mina Whitfield's
Last Journey.

OPEN VERDICT IN TRAIN MYSTERY

STORY OF GIRL'S MEETING WITH RAILWAY GUARD

SUPPRESSED EVIDENCE READ

The important evidence suppressed on the first day of the inquest on Wilhelmina Whitfield, the Bradford servant girls and ex – W.A.A.C., whose body was found on the railway line at Lightcliffe, Yorkshire, last Sunday night was read by the coroner at the resumed inquiry yesterday.

He returned a verdict that Miss Whitfield died of injuries due to her falling out of the train, but that there was not sufficient evidence to show what caused the fall.

The suppressed evidence, the coroner said, was given by Sergeant-major Theid [sic] who stated that Miss Whitfield told him and his wife on August 29th, that she had 'clicked' with the guard of a train, and that he had asked her to meet him on the last train that night. She was advised not to meet him, and she did not do so.

Last Sunday night shortly before the girl's death, the sergeant-major added he saw Miss Whitfield again, and she told him she had seen the guard, and had promised to meet him on the last train that night.

MAN WITH TRILBY HAT

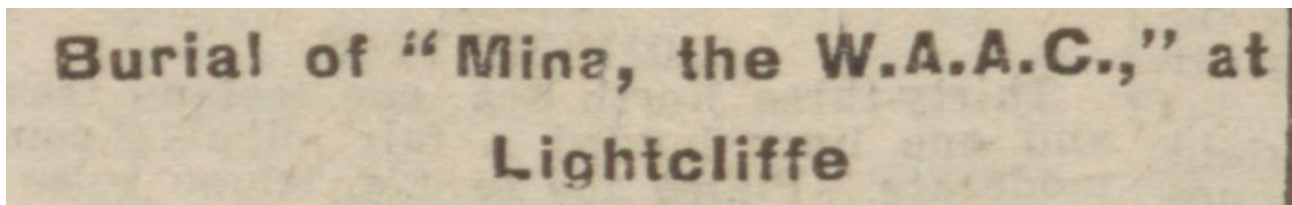
Hubert Wright, a chemist's assistant, declared that on Sunday night he saw a man wearing a trilby hat and raincoat enter a compartment after a girl, but he could not swear that she was Miss Whitfield or that she wore spectacles. He heard nothing unusual during the journey.

Lewis Marsden, passenger guard, in charge of the train, said that going through Bowling Tunnel, owing to the sign being against them, they slowed down to five miles an hour. It would have been possible for a man to alight then. From his look-out post at the side of the train he did not see a carriage door open.

Marsden and another guard called denied knowing Miss Whitfield.

A Lightcliffe woman, who saw the train pass, said one of the carriage doors was open, but there was no one in the compartment. She heard footsteps on the line.

Commenting on the evidence of a platelayer who found a grey velour hat, bearing the initials "R.G.," and the dead girl's spectacles on the line, the coroner said the finding of the hat was suspicious, but it might be a mere coincidence.



Twenty-one-year-old Wilhelmina Whitfield was buried in plot H81 in St. Matthew's churchyard on 23rd September 1921 as the parish record shows.

2506	81 H	Sept 18 th	Sept 23 rd	Wilhelmina Whitfield	21 years
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Again, various newspapers reported the interment including the *Western Times*, Devon using the headline above.

From the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* on 24th September 1921.

FUNERAL OF "MINA" WHITFIELD

EARLY MORNING SERVICE IN OLD CHURCHYARD

Under circumstances of secrecy and at an early hour, seven o'clock yesterday morning, the remains of Wilhelmina Whitfield, the Blanchland girl who was killed on the line at Lightcliffe, near Halifax, on Sunday night, were interred in the graveyard of St. Matthew's Old Church, Lightcliffe.

The reason for concealing from the general public the actual time of the funeral is obvious, when it is realised that the case of Miss Whitfield's tragic end has excited enormous interest throughout the district.

The body was removed from Lightcliffe Station on Wednesday night and remained in the church till yesterday morning. A peculiar

feature is that St. Matthew's is no longer used as a regular place of worship, and, in point of fact, service is only there once a year.

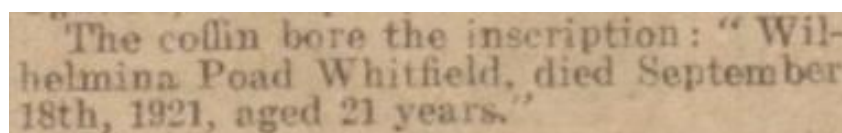
Owing to the unusual hour selected for the ceremony there was no gathering of villagers at the church or graveside, which latter is in a secluded spot, sheltered by tall trees.

The funeral ceremony was conducted by the Rev. H. L. Taylor, vicar of St. Matthew's New Church, and the only mourners, it is understood, were Mr. Bernard Keegan, of Curzon Road, Bradford (Miss Whitfield's former employer) and Mr. Keegan's brother.

There were wreaths from the Keegan family, Mr. and Mrs. Thead, Mr. and Mrs. G.E. Ainley and sons, South Shields, Ogden's, Blackpool, and Blanche.

Visitors to the old churchyard later in the day found the gates locked.

The *Leeds Mercury* for the 24th September 1921 added





Lightcliffe plot H81,
“a secluded spot, sheltered by tall trees.”

Then about a fortnight later, on 7th October 1921, the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* published this article.

THE TRAIN MYSTERY

Anonymous Letter to Police Believed to be a Hoax

Investigations have been renewed in regard to the Lightcliffe railway mystery, owing to an anonymous letter having been sent to the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway police. Inquiries made in Bradford, Halifax, Manchester, and Birmingham in consequence of the letter have all been fruitless, and the letter for the moment can only be regarded as a hoax.

The letter implied that the husband of the writer was the man who went into the railway carriage occupied by Wilhelmina Whitfield, the Bradford domestic servant, who met her death in coming home from Halifax by the last train on Sunday, September 19th.

The letter bore the Birmingham postmark, and invited the police to meet the writer near the Bull Ring, Birmingham, on Sunday last, in

order that she might give them fuller details. At the point indicated the police waited patiently for several hours, but no one corresponding with the description contained in the letter presented herself.

Over the signature "Chief Witness" the writer of the letter claimed that she was in possession of the "real clue to the train mystery," and certain circumstantial details were added. She declared that she and her husband had quarrelled and had lived apart for some time. They happened to meet on the night of the tragedy at Penistone, and both caught the last train to Bradford – the train which Wilhelmina Whitfield joined at Halifax. The writer's husband, who had become violent during the journey, said "he would go to a young lady in the next compartment.". He then struck her, and she fainted. She added that she had not seen her husband since, and that he was in the habit of carrying spare headgear when travelling.

After that the newspaper chatter went quiet and Wilhelmina Whitfield was left to rest in peace in Lightcliffe plot H81.

Sixteen years later she was joined by Matthew Ernest Ward but that is another tragic story that has already been told in

Three burials and two sad stories

D. M. Barker

March 2025