

Report 19/2018: Collision at London Waterloo, 15 August 2017

On publication of RAIB's report concerning the collision at London Waterloo, Simon French, Chief Inspector of Rail Accidents said:

"The disastrous collision at Clapham Junction on 12 December 1988, in which 35 people died and 484 were injured, was a turning point in the history of Britain's railways. The immediate cause of the accident was poor working practice by a signalling technician, and the subsequent public inquiry into the accident highlighted serious deficiencies in the management of safety, particularly around the design, modification, testing and commissioning of signalling systems. Putting in place the recommendations of the inquiry fundamentally changed several aspects of how the railway is run, and for signal engineers one of the most important was the approach to routine tasks, such as testing alterations to signalling installations. It was therefore concerning for RAIB to discover, during our investigation of the collision at Waterloo last year, that some of these important changes were not reflected in the way that signalling modifications were being undertaken.

"Some of the people involved in the signalling work connected with upgrading Waterloo station and its approach tracks did not keep proper records of temporary works, or ensure that additional temporary wiring was shown on the design documents. Leaving that temporary wiring in place when it should have been removed led to a passenger train being diverted onto a blocked line and colliding with wagons. Compliance with the existing standards, developed since Clapham, would have provided the controls needed to stop temporary wiring being installed and used in the uncontrolled manner which resulted in this accident.

"These symptoms of a deep-seated problem should give us all pause for thought. How can organisations ensure that lessons from events that happened outside the personal experience of present-day railway people are taught and retained? Compliance with a standard comes more naturally to people when they understand the purpose of the requirement, and the consequences that may arise from disregarding it.

"We are recommending that Network Rail takes action to develop and reinforce a positive safety culture within the signal engineering profession as a whole, by putting in place processes to educate present and future staff about how and why the standards have been developed, and why these things matter. It's also important to give people the skills to recognise and deal with non-compliant behaviour, whether that behaviour is by themselves or their colleagues. I believe that this accident at Waterloo starkly demonstrates why the lessons of Clapham should never be forgotten."