

THE GREAT HORSLEY DERAILMENT OF 1952

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An encounter with an eye witness also reveals East Horsley's unsung 1950s role as the cabbage plant capital of Surrey

Immediately after giving a U3A talk in September 2025 on the story of Horsley Station I was approached by East Horsleyan Geoff Willott. He was there, he said, just moments after the great derailment of 1952.



Courtesy Mike King. Photograph by M J Gann

Then aged 11, Geoff had fetched up at Horsley Station just after 6pm on Friday 9th May, 1952. He was in the passenger seat of a 1935 Standard 9 saloon driven there by his Dad Horace. Father and son were there on business.

Horace Willott had an arable farming operation based at Manor Farm in Bishopsmead, East Horsley. The site now houses the St Martin's Court sheltered housing complex and the green in front. The Willott family home was just up the road in Chalk Lane.

Horace's business was no ordinary agricultural enterprise: so much so that it featured in a special report in the August 1957 issue of "Practical Power Farming." Under the headline "20 ACRES ON THIS FARM PRODUCES PLANTS BY THE MILLION" the article began...

"Every spring and summer for the past 10 years an advertisement has appeared in the popular farming newspapers for cabbage, kale and Brussels sprouts plants grown by Mr H Willott of East Horsley, Leatherhead, Surrey. For Mr Willott this plant trade forms a fair part of his income. Although he farms more than 290 acres.....a large part of his farming energies are absorbed by the 20 or more acres [in the Horsleys] he sets aside each year for his specialised plant growing business."

This targeted farmers and smallholding managers looking to cultivate cabbages and other vegetables without the paraphernalia of growing them from seed.



Geoff's Dad Horace Willott

The Horsleys were perfect for this. The chalky soil's alkalinity helped prevent a fungus borne disease called clubroot that can massively reduce crop yields.

So Horace's plant sale business thrived with literally millions of plants ordered each year by farmers as far flung as the Shetland Isles and Channel Islands. In the action shot below, an order for 20,000 Horsley grown cabbage plants destined for a customer in Buckinghamshire is being loaded. Geoff has no trouble remembering that those helping the driver stack his lorry are left to right Jessie Hunney, Florence Bickerton and Bert Tyrrell. Bert's father, also a Bert, is another member of Horace's staff.



But how were orders from further flung customers fulfilled?

Practical Power Farming takes up the story.

"Bundles are made up of 50 plants and tied with string. Then each order is stacked and labelled ready for dispatch. Lots of under 100 are sent by letter post ...larger lots are sent off by train."

Which takes us back to moments after 6pm at Horsley Station on 9 May 1952.

A couple of hours earlier 11 year old Geoff had alighted from the 408 bus on the A246 opposite Wellington Meadow. He had just finished his school week, paying 4d bus fare each way. In September he will start at the Royal Grammar School in Guildford, but for now he is still at York Road School for Boys based in the Baptist Church Hall in Chertsey Street (now known as Grace Church).

Geoff legged it home to "The Warren" in Chalk Lane, changed into his farming clothes, then hurried to Manor Farm. There, as happened 2 or 3 times a week this time of year, for a shilling an hour he helped his Dad. That afternoon the job was to cram plant bundles into the long-suffering Standard. Each bundle contained 50 plants plus 3 or 4 extra thrown in to allow for damage in transit.

Then Geoff jumped into the front passenger seat before the drive to Horsley Station.

There, on that Friday in June 1952, Geoff has a clear memory of unloading the bags from the car, then putting them as per usual in the station master's office. There they await the arrival of the designated train where they will be put in the guard's van and sent on their way.

But today that train was going to be delayed. Entering the ticket office, Geoff heard shouts and commotion coming from the platforms. He hurried onto the Guildford bound platform and looked left.

What he saw first took his breath away. Then he doubled up in stitches of schoolboy laughter at the sight of the comically askew front carriage.



The Willott family in 1950

Geoff is between his brothers

Did he wander up the platform to take a closer look? I asked as the dramatic photograph clearly shows a small group of children standing close to the stricken train. Geoff said no, they are all dressed smartly while he was definitely in his farm clothes.

So how could this have happened?

The July 1952 issue of Railway Magazine explains:

"It is usual for the 5.15 p.m. train from Waterloo to Effingham Junction to travel to Horsley, the next station down the line, and reverse on the crossover there [then located just beyond the bridge over the Ockham Road], avoiding congestion at Effingham.

The leading bogie of the train took the crossover in the normal manner to pass from the down to the up line, but the other bogie of the first coach and the leading bogie of the second coach jumped the points and remained on the down line.

The fourth bogie then became derailed when the rest of the train began to take the crossover. So the leading coach had one bogie on one track and one on the other, the body being slewed across. When the repair gang had rerailed the fourth bogie, the points were disconnected so as to work independently and the first coach drawn back the way it had come.

The mishap considerably disorganised the evening rush-hour traffic and the line was not cleared until the following morning."

It is not clear from this report whether there were any injuries, but hopefully this was not the

case as only the driver and guard would have been on board and the train would have been travelling at very low speed. The one certainty is that this is not a way of crossing to the London bound platform being advocated by today's campaigners for step free access!



Geoff in 2025

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