

Tales from the Riverbank

Policeman (1960s) – Item – BOAC Cigarette Tin

(Policeman stands quiet for a moment, still staring out.)

Police: Its peaceful today. Ain't always like this. I tell you, I've seen some sights along here. All kinds. Deaths, drownings, disasters, plane crashes. What you got there? BOAC eh? That'll be from the plane crash then. Don't you know about that.

About ten year back, 1954 it was I saw this plane circling up in the sky, not a small plane, big one. Turns out it was a Bristol Britannia on a test flight. There was only fourteen people on board, crew, observers and official passengers. Any way one of the passengers had noticed as how the wing had caught fire. Course I didn't know this standing here on the ground just saw this great big plane circling round above my head. Pilot he was looking for somewhere to crash land. Well it was low tide see and the sandbanks would make a good place to settle down.

Seemed to be up there forever, must have been at least 20 odd minutes I reckon. Suddenly it comes straight in on its belly down onto the mud flats. Bits of the plane flew off and I expected to hear a great almighty bang but nothing happened just bits flying up everywhere. I ran down to see if I could help. Down into the mud to help the passengers and crew off. Well, you never know with planes and the like always think they're going to blow up.

(Extra to go in from newspaper report)

Lucky that time no one died. There are deaths on the river. Some people likes to think that if you drowned here, you must have done it on purpose. That ain't the case. I like a bit of history, don't we all, and I thought I'd look at some of them poor souls who had lost their life here. Most of them seem to be around the 1870s some 90 year ago. Or maybe that's just when the records were better kept. I don't know.

There was William George Montague, an articled clerk, who was out shooting ducks and he'd shot a bird and waded out to collect it for his dinner, when the river claimed him as we say. Dragged down and drowned.

Sarah Matthews is a sad tale but one of them unsolved ones. She was a poor soul who suffered from the epilepsy, had a row with her mother and stormed out of the house and next day was found drowned. Some say suicide, some say the river took her.

A vicar the reverend R P Luscombe he went under. So did two Westbury boys who drowned together near Awre. In Awre though if you have drowned your body is by custom laid out on an ancient chest in the belfry of the church.

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Joseph Price, a servant to a Mr. Hawkins he was drowned near Ledbury and finally there's Henry Bowyer of Henbury what drowned when he was swimming.

Mind not everyone who swims drowns, that Captain Webb what swum the channel, he practised his swimming in the Severn.

There have been bodies found in the river by the police divers. I don't do that myself, not diving in them wetsuits with the scuba thing on your back. Not for me. I'll stay on the ground thank you very much. But one of the divers told me as how, he went under and found this body and it had been there for some time and the water and the fish had taken advantage of it being there. He went to grab it by the arm and pulled and the arm came off in his hand. So he tried the other arm, same thing happened. Eventually, he had to scoop it up and bring it to the surface on account of the state it was in. Mind it was armless!!

One of the strangest deaths though, nothing at all to do with the water, I read about this man called Stephen Aldridge and he died in the 1700s because and I quote "he was suffocated by a sole fish that he unadvisedly put betwixt his teeth." Beware the river and beware the sole fish!

The river itself is a force, on a day like today its peaceful but it can rage as a torrent, that's why the Romans gave it that goddess Sabrina. A force to be reckoned with. People think its alright to try and mess with the river but you mustn't. They build homes near its edge and then wondered why they have been flooded. See the river will always find its own course and will always use its own force to tell you that it's there.

I remember the floods in 1957 Gloucester streets were flooded, people had to be taken out of their homes in army trucks and boats it was that bad.

Worst disaster I witnessed though was the Severn Bridge disaster, in 1960. I was called to the scene after it had happened there was fire along two miles of the river. It was about 10 o'clock at night when it happened two tankers, one carrying 300 tons of black oil, and one carrying 350 tons of petroleum spirit were both heading the same direction up the river to Worcester. There was also a couple of tugs and three small lighters as they are known loaded with logs.

A fog came down as the tankers came near to Sharpness and they were told to listen for the fog horn from Sharpness Pier. The Arkendale, the tanker carrying the black oil was swinging off from Sharpness, stemming the tide as they say, sitting and waiting to enter the port when one of the tugs came across in front of it. The skipper George Thompson he had to go into full reverse, full astern as the boat people call it. Well there wasn't a collision but the tanker started to drift back towards the dock entrance. George Thompson he suddenly saw another vessel come out of the fog. He shouted at it "Do you know where you are?" "No" came back the reply. This was the Wastedale the tanker filled with petrol. The captain, James Dew was trying to find a safe place to be and wait for the fog to lift. He heard the fog horn and started to head for Sharpness Pier.

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Unfortunately, he didn't know, he was already past piers.

These two mighty tankers were heading straight towards each other. Both skippers fought with their wheels to try and bring them apart. But what George Thompson didn't know was that some of his crew had tied his ship off to a barge which made it impossible for him to steer to safety.

Before they knew it they were at the railway bridge, James Dew gave his ship everything it had got and he got the stern, the front of his ship past but the rear end swung across and hit a column of the bridge with such a force that he was thrown from his wheel house and into the water. At the same time an almighty girder from the bridge fell down. It hit his ship. He climbed out of the water and onto his ship which was now on its side. As he clambered up he realised the ship was on fire. So he leapt off her and jumped for the Arkendale, the other ship. That had also been hit by the bridge girder and had been sliced through in front of the wheelhouse. George Thompson the captain, issued life rings to his crew and told them to jump into the river. James Dew meantime was trying to decide what was best for him to do, he found two other crew men and the three all decided to try and jump to safety. But as they did the engineer Jack Cooper he caught his back on the propellor of the other ship which was still turning.

When he came up in the water he could see fire all round him as it was spreading up the river. He decided he'd rather down than burn alive, so he took off his life ring and sank beneath the river's surface. He said that as he went down he had a vision of his family which saved his life. He came back to the surface in a clear stretch of water and found his life raft. He was later rescued, an exhausted but very grateful man.

Five others died that night. Captain Dew he survived and was rescued three hours later up river. Captain Thompson, thought he was going to die. As he jumped from his tanker into that oily black water he heard an explosion and when he looked back his ship was just a mass of flames. He swam about a mile from one bank to the other, pulled himself up on the Lydney side and hollered for all he was worth, until a nearby farmer rescued him.

But for all that, the hero of the night was another tanker barge man, Tommy Carter. He saw the tanker burst into flames with a great glow in the sky, found a small boat and loaded it onto a lorry. Then he took it to Purton and launched it into the river. Him and a local carpenter Mr Henderson, rowed that boat zig zag to avoid the flames and found Jack Cooper, that man who had hit the propellor. Were it not for them he would have definitely died that night. Tommy Carter was actually mentioned in Parliament for his bravery.

Them two barges you can still see them, a reminder of the Severn Bridge disaster.

See the river is a force, a force to be reckoned with and you don't mess with her.