

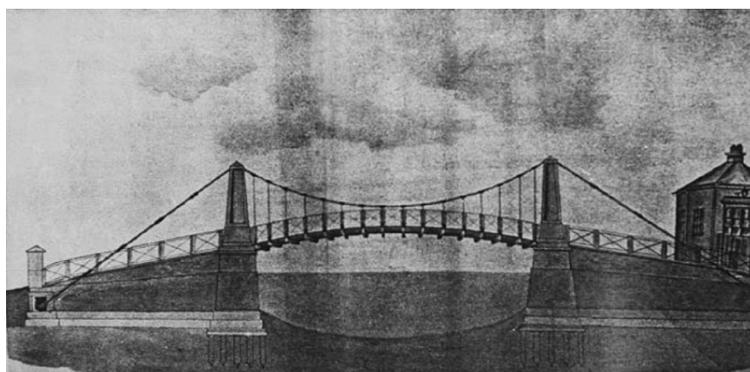
Broadland Memories

The Great Yarmouth Suspension Bridge Disaster - May 2nd 1845

The following account of the Great Yarmouth Suspension Bridge Disaster which happened on May 2nd 1845 was taken from the book "Yarmouth Notes 1830-1872" by Frederick Danby Palmer, published in 1889, and was itself a transcription of the original report from the Norwich Mercury of 10th May 1845.

On the afternoon of the day on which this narration bears date, Nelson, the Clown at Mr. Cooke's Circus, had undertaken to swim in a tub, drawn by four geese, from the drawbridge on the Quay to the Suspension Bridge across the North river - a foolish exhibition - but it was one which, from its novelty in Yarmouth, was calculated to attract the multitude. As early as five o'clock, when the train arrived from Norwich, although raining smartly, thousands of spectators had already assembled to witness the feat on both sides of the river. The Bridge was then comparatively clear. The Clown commenced his feat with the flood tide at the drawbridge, and had entered the North river. There were many persons on the Bridge, and as he drew near, the multitude upon it endeavoured to obtain a full view as he should pass underneath. Already had he reached Bessey's Wharf, not far from the Bridge, when one or two of the rods were observed to give way; an instant alarm was given to quit the bridge. Alas! the caution came too late. The chains broke, and quick as the passing thought, one entire side fell, and the whole mass of the human beings, whose numbers were estimated from three to four hundred, were swept into the river below. The traffic road of the Bridge, which but an instant before was horizontal, had become nearly perpendicular.

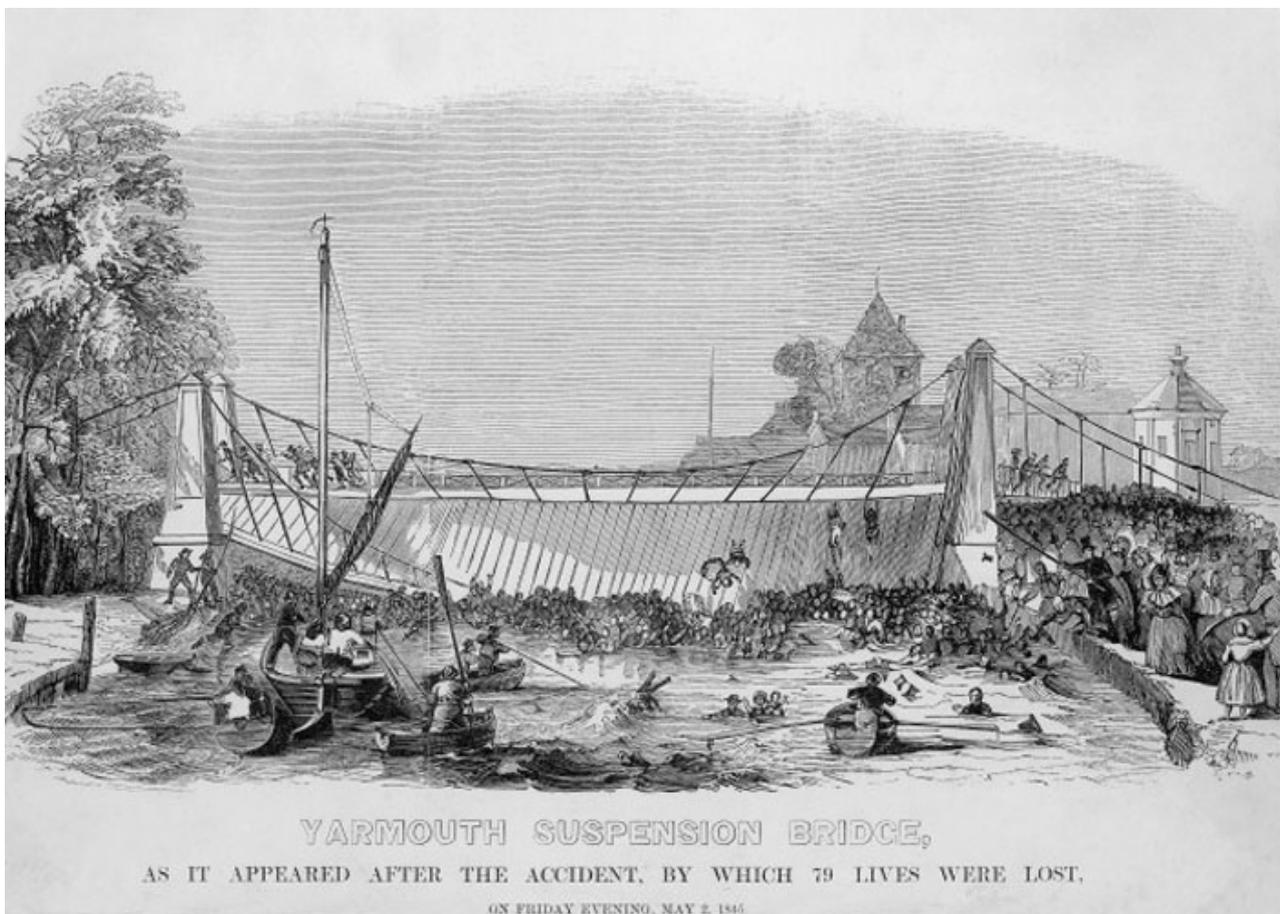
The children, poor little things, of whom there were very many, and had naturally gathered to the balustrade, were of course the first to sink, while the force with which the whole fell, caused those who were in the background to be hurled with terrific force into the water beneath, crushing and annihilating those under them. Oh! who shall paint the one mighty simultaneous agonizing death-scream which burst upon the affrighted multitude around - re-echoing from earth to heaven - may the appeal not be made in vain. One instant and all was bushed, save the struggling of a few whose lives it pleased their Maker in his mercy to spare. The waters, we are told, as if gifted with a sudden impulse of horror, at this fell swoop of death, recoiled in the impetus of the fall and "boiled up" at the back of the Bridge, which hung perpendicularly below the surface of the river. As suddenly the struggle for life was past to all but a few.



The first suspension bridge at Great Yarmouth was built in 1829. This illustration shows the bridge prior to the 1845 disaster.

Then came a scene scarcely less heartrending. With an energy, activity, and stern determination of purpose, which are among the wise and merciful provisions of the Almighty, twenty-seven children, all girls, were immediately rescued alive on the West side of the river, and as instantly put to bed at the "Vauxhall Gardens," who as soon as revived were replaced by others equally beneficially spared, or by some never to be recalled. Some scrambled out and rushed home to their own houses, not a few fainting after arriving safe at home. On the East side numbers of bodies were taken into the adjoining houses, where all the assistance which medical skill, humane attention, in short all the aid which humanity would teach everyone to offer, was brought to bear. Alas how often in vain. In one house alone, at nine o'clock at night, out of sixty-eight bodies carried in only three were revived. Many a touching scene was witnessed as the anxious mother, and the hardly less excited father or friend, recognised some missing one safely emerging from the crowd. Thousands thronged the North Quay messengers were despatched in all directions to procure medical aid, and the communication with the West side of the water being cut off, hundreds were left in painful suspense respecting those who were safe on the opposite shore. Nothing could exceed the promptitude, activity, and attention of the surgeons and medical men of the town, all of whom were in immediate attendance doing all they could to afford relief to the sufferers, where the slightest chance of resuscitation appeared. Mr Lacon and a number of the persons employed in his brewery were exceedingly active in supplying hot water for baths, which is not far distant. All the blankets from the Union House that could possibly be spared were in requisition.

The scene now presented is still most agonising. Children, mothers, and fathers, seeking one or other of their families, tracing and discovering in the pale face of some of the dead, one of their dearest ties. In every street are to be seen one or more bodies extended on biers, returning to that home from which but short minutes before they had passed in health and life. The consternation - the agony of the town is not to be described - it is as if some dread punishment was felt to have fallen upon its inhabitants - every face is horror-stricken - every eye is dim. Never since the devastating plague in 1664, which swept off 2000 of its inhabitants, has Yarmouth, notwithstanding its numberless shipwrecks, 105 been visited with so dire a calamity, occurring too at the very moment a public meeting was about to be held to make arrangements for the distribution of the funds which have been received for the widows and families of the Beachmen who were lost in January last. How many are there added to this list? We dare not anticipate - Time will show. Numbers, it is believed, are entangled with the rods and other portions of the broken Bridge. At this hour it is impossible to say how many or who are called to their dread accounts. The escape of some was miraculous. One woman, of the name of Gillings, the wife of a carpenter, was on the Bridge with her child; when she was hurled into the water, with extraordinary presence of mind she seized her child's clothes with her teeth - thus preventing the rush of water, and paddled herself to a place of safety.



Original illustration of the Great Yarmouth Suspension Bridge disaster 1845

On the East side of the Bridge the greater number were taken to the "Norwich Arms Inn," where there were at one time fifty-three corpses. Others were taken to the "Admiral Collingwood" and to the "Swan," and many to their own houses. Not a few of those who first got out of the water went away unnoticed, and their number is unknown. Up to a late hour last night, it was ascertained that seventy-five dead bodies had been taken out of the water; and up to midnight, from the enquiries made, it was ascertained that forty-five others were missing. By far the greater number of those lost were females and children. James Marshall, 16, escaped with a wound in the scalp. Two boys named Honorley, aged twelve and seventeen, were taken home, the younger died last evening, the elder is likely to recover.

The inquest on the bodies of the drowned was held next day at the "Church Hall," before W. S. Ferrier, Esq., coroner, when the following gentlemen were sworn on the Jury:- Samuel Palmer, Esq., (foreman), and Messrs. John Norman, John Orfeur, John Fenn, G. B. Palmer, William Smith, William Spillings, Charles Barber, Charles Woolverton, Joseph Davy, James Emms, William Haylett, Mark Blowers, J. E. Laws, John Stagg, E. Garrod, Thomas Davy, and James Pratt, and after hearing evidence as to the identification of the bodies of the drowned was adjourned *sine die*. The following list of the victims is given :-

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| 1. Adams, Robert, Rainbow Corner (age 7) | 26. Field, Hannah, Row 14 (age 12) |
| 2. Augur, Caroline, Garden Row (age 10) | 27. Fulcher, James, Row 34 (age 14) |
| 3. Bussey, Harriett, Ferry Boat Row (age 26) | 28. Fulcher Elizabeth, St. John's Head Row (age 16) |
| 4. Beloe. George John Henry, Fuller's Hill (age 9) | 29. Funnell, John, Wortwell (not yet found) (age 19) |
| 5. Buttifant, Sarah Ann, Row 2 (age 18) | 30. Fox, John Horace, Butcher's Row (age 19) |
| 6. Borking, Emily Hanworth, George Street (age 5) | 31. Field, Susannah, Say's Corner Row (age 7) |
| 7. Burton, Benjamin Patteson, Row 54 (age 7) | 32. Gilbert, Sarah, Row 14 (age 12) |
| 8. Barber, Christopher, Pudding Gates (age 11) | 33. Gotts, Alice, Conge (age 52) |
| 9. BradBerry. Isaac, King Street, Norwich (age 20) | 34. Gotts, Alice, jun. (age 9) |
| 10. Beckett, Ann, Priory (age 8) | 35. Grimmer, William, Moat (age 8) |
| 11. Barker, Leonard, Surrey Street, Norwich (not yet found) (age 22) | 36. Hendle, William, Ferry Boat Row (age 10) |
| 12. Buck, James Seaman, Row 17 (not yet found) (age 4) | 37. Hunn, Sarah, Row 3 (age 13) |
| 13. Balls, Reeder Thurston, Bath Place (age 16) | 38. Hunnibal, Elizabeth Jane, Row 110 (age 12) |
| 14. Church, James, Rainbow Corner (age 7) | 39. Hatch, Elizabeth, East Hill (age 11) |
| 15. Crowe, Eliza, Row 6 (age 14) | 40. Johnson, Elizabeth, Row 23 (age 8) |
| 16. Church, Caroline, Horn Row (age 16) | 41. Johnson, Sarah Ann, Row 23 (age 16) |
| 17. Conyers, Elizabeth, Row 13 (age 13) | 42. Johnson, Thomas (or Robert), Row 1 (age 8) |
| 18. Cole, Jane, Row 65 (age 16) | 43. Jenkerson, Mary Ann, Row 1 (age 10) |
| 19. Durrant, William, Row 24 (age 12) | 44. Juniper, Maud, at Workhouse (age 9) |
| 20. Ditcham, Mary Ann, Row 18 (age 64) | 45. King, Mary Ann, Apollo Walk (age 11) |
| 21. Duffield, Eliza, Rainbow Corner (age 10) | 46. Lucas, Frederick, Row 21 (age 62) |
| 22. Dye, Charles, Moat (age 2) | 47. Lake, Mary Ann, George and Dragon Row (age 2) |
| 23. Dye, Benjamin, Rainbow Corner (age 9) | 48. Lyons, William, Row 1 (age 6) |
| 24. Edwards, Maria, Garden Row (age 12) | 49. Little, Harriet Mary, Market (age 13) |
| 25. Ebbage, David, Row 17 (age 9) | 50. Livingstone, Joseph, King Street (age 6) |

51. Livingstone, Matilda, King Street (age 7)
 52. May, Clara, Row 6 (age 20)
 53. Mears, Susan, Ferry Boat Row (age 8)
 54. Manship, Elizabeth, Rainbow Corner (age 28)
 55. Morgan, Elizabeth, Row 1 (age 62)
 56. Maze, Robert, Charlotte Street (age 26)
 57. Powley, Elizabeth, Row 2 (age 21)
 58. Powley, Richard, Row 3 (age 4)
 59. Parker, Charlotte, Row 13 (age 8)
 60. Powley, Amelia, White Lion Opening (age 10)
 61. Richardson, Phoebe, Row 99 (age 17)
 62. Roberts, Lydia, Pudding Grates (age 12)
 63. Roberts, Mary Ann, Pudding Gates (age 19)
 64. Read, Elizabeth, Rainbow Corner (age 5)
 65. Scotten, Ann Maria, Row 3 (age 20)

66. Stolworthy, Maria, King's Arms Yard (age 14)
 67. Tann, Harriett, George and Dragon Row (age 15)
 68. Tennant, John, Railway Walk (age 11)
 69. Tennant, William, ditto (age 10)
 70. Thorpe, Heppy, Row 2 (age 12)
 71. Trory, William Townshend, George Street (age 12)
 72. Thompson, Mary Ann, British Lion Alley (age 15)
 73. Utting, Louise, Row 33 (not yet found) (age 7)
 74. Utting, Sarah, Gaol Paved Row (age 18)
 75. Utting, Caroline, Row 33 (age 9)
 76. Vincent, Maria, Apollo Walk (age 19)
 77. Vincent, Richard, missing
 78. Watts, William Walter, Coble's Buildings, Pudding Lane (not yet found)
 79. Young, Emily, Fuller's Hill (age 6)
 80. Yallop, Martha, George Street (age 20)

The following is the list of persons who were rescued, as far as ascertained:

Sarah Ann Thorpe, aged 13, who continues very ill.
 Mary Ann Arnold, with child in her arms.
 Mrs. Thomas Money, reported to be in great danger.
 Rehecca Page.
 Mary Church, was taken out near the lime kiln.
 Hannah Eliza Lake, an infant.
 Widow Edwards, reported to be in a dangerous state.
 Martha Field, aged 7 years.
 Mr. Frederick Nathaniel Palmer, surgeon.
 Mr. William Jackson.
 Eliza, daughter of Mr. James Borking, dyer, aged 12, whose sister was drowned. She got hold of a man's leg and he pulled her out.
 Martha Field, a young woman, who came into Court, but had her head tied up and seemed much bruised
 Elizabeth Cuddon, a young woman from Ipswich.
 Mary Utting, mother of Caroline Utting.
 Ann Bowles, aged 11 years.
 Mrs. David Little and one child, another being drowned.
 Mrs. Livingstone and one child, two having been drowned.
 Mrs. Louisa Beloe and one child, another child drowned.
 Mrs. Susan Money and one child
 Elizabeth Rowland, aged 16, said that she and her four brothers were on the Bridge but a minute or two before, but having been cautioned by her mother not to take the children on the Bridge for fear they should come to any harm, and being fearful lest from the crowd they might be pushed into the water, she left, and thus providently escaped.
 Susan Knights stated that she was on the West end of the Bridge with three children, all of whom were happily saved. Maria Smith went down twice, when she caught hold of a boat and was taken into a wherry.
 Elizabeth Bowles was on the end of the Bridge, but happily escaped.
 Grace Duffell, mother of Elizabeth Duffell.
 Elizabeth Browne - She said there was plenty of time for all to have escaped after they heard the chain break, had they been aware of the danger.
 A little girl, sister of Maria Stolworthy.
 Betsy Wright left the Bridge a minute or two before it fell.
 Alfred Norman on hearing- a cracking noise ran off on the West side of the Bridge, when he saw the Bridge fall.
 Eleanor Eliza Allman says, a man called out that the Bridge would fall, and she ran off; she said "In about five minutes after the Bridge fell"
 Robert Whitlock left the Bridge to look for his brother, and the Bridge fell before he returned.
 A little boy named Jay, son of Mr. Jay, baker, White Lion Gates, said that when he was under the water, the people looked as if they were hugging each other. He could see them quite perfectly.
 One man fell across a piece of iron with his head just above water; he reached to two girls who were struggling for life, and a third caught hold of his collar. All four were saved.
 A young man named Simmons, (whose leg was also fractured in extricating them from the bended iron of the Bridge with a crowbar)
 Robert Marshall, aged 16, escaped with a scalp wound.
 Sarah Linder, aged 12, Row 132, was also rescued with a wounded scalp.
 Martha Ann Stolworthy, aged 7 years.
 Mr. John Lake's servant and one child saved.
 A brother of B. P. Burton's.
 A young woman named Cook, living in Row 65.
 Harriett Hunnibal, Row 110.
 Caroline Roberts was standing quite at the foot of the Bridge, and escaped without going into the water.
 John Watts, aged 16, and three brothers were saved.
 Tresor Steward, aged 12, Priory.
 Hannah Watering, aged 8, Priory.

It was noted that the handbill issued by Nelson, the Clown, was prefaced by this extraordinary motto, " Is it to be a benefit, "or not ?" that is the question." And in another part of it, it is stated, "Mr. Wm. Cooke will appear in a dying scene"