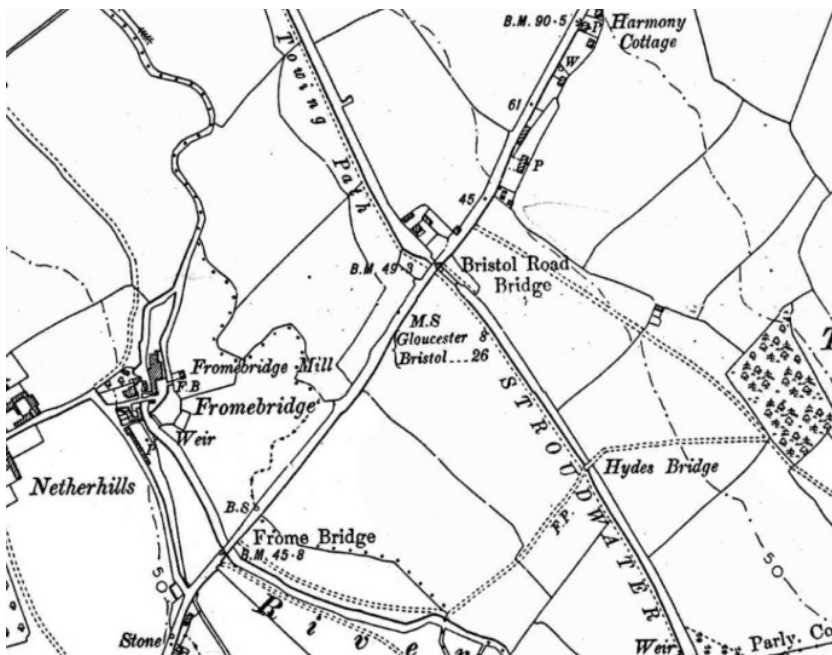


The 'Great Bristol Road Lock Disaster' of January 1923

Stephen Mills September 2014

The Bristol Road Lock on the Stroudwater Canal is one of the less well-known ones along its length and probably doesn't feature very highly in many people's consciousness. Despite this, until the area around it was reconfigured in the past few years, hundreds of motorists crossed over or around its site (at SO 772072) every day of the week without even realising that it ever existed (Figure 1).

As is well known, the Stroudwater Canal initially linked the River Severn with Stroud, providing an invaluable lifeline, particularly for the supply of coal to its mills and factories (1). Built between 1775 and 1779, it was originally lifted via a series of twelve locks from Framilode on the banks of the Severn to Wallbridge in Stroud. It was a broad canal, designed to take both narrow boats and Severn Trows of up to 68 ft in length and a beam of 15 ft - the latter could carry up to 100 tons of cargo. The first lock was at Framilode. This was later joined by Junction Lock, added when the newer Gloucester-Sharpness canal crossed the route of the Stroudwater. Above this came Whitminster lock, followed by the subject of the present article, Bristol Road lock (Figures 2 and 3). After this, came a fairly lengthy pound (the current "missing mile") that led up to Westfield lock, the first in a series that took the canal through Eastington. Westfield lock is currently being restored, along with its attendant bridge.



The Bristol Road lock subsequently disappeared beneath the large roundabout that links the A38 Bristol Road with the approach road to the Stroudwater Junction (J13) of the M5 motorway (Figure 3). The present access road to Fromebridge Mill also now exits the same roundabout. During the past few years, a new canal access has been built through/under the roundabout as part of the plan for the canal's eventual reopening.

Figure 1 The route of the Stroudwater Canal and layout of the area around the lock, 1881. The Bristol Road bridge carried the main Gloucester-Bristol road (now the A38) (courtesy Ordnance Survey)

Apart from today's relentless traffic, there is little to disturb the apparently tranquillity of the site. However, it has seen the odd moment of drama in its history. The following is one of them.



Figure 2 *The Bristol Road was a canal company wharf with good access to several local villages. Coal was the most important cargo. In 1777, the lock keeper was Joseph Grazebrook. This view is looking downstream from the bridge, c1920.*



Figure 3 *Bristol Road Lock, looking downstream to the coal wharf.*



Figure 4 *Aerial view of the A38/M5 interchange under construction, taken by the late Tony Ashby in 1964-5. The Stroudwater Canal can be seen leading up to the new roundabout under construction. At this time, the bridge was demolished and the lock infilled. Fromebridge Mill is in the centre foreground.*

‘The Great Bristol Road Lock Disaster’

The story seems to have been largely forgotten, although the events that took place clearly had a significant local impact. It was first recounted to me during the 1980s by the daughter of a former employee of the Thames and Severn Canal Company (2). This gentleman was Reg Dowdeswell who lived in a canal-side cottage near Brimscombe Port. He was a third generation canal worker, both his father and grandfather having been lock keepers. The story centres on what was referred to locally at the time as the 'Great Bristol Road Lock Disaster'.

On January 4th 1923, the local weather was overcast and for most people, it was just another working day. Generally, all was quiet. However, a 'disaster' (albeit only of local importance) was about to take place. Late in the evening, two narrow boats were cautiously making their way through the gloom from Saul Junction on the Gloucester-Sharpsness Canal. They belonged to E T Ward & Son, coal and coke merchants and canal carriers of Stroud. The company had depots at Stroud's GWR station, the MR station at Frocester, as well as the canal wharf at Stonehouse (3). These were kept supplied with coal partly via the Stroudwater Canal. There were a number of similar boats that regularly carried coal along the canal, supplies usually coming either across the Severn from Bullo Pill, or from further afield, often from the Staffordshire coalfields or Sharpness Docks. Such journeys must have been made thousands of times, mostly without incident. However, that was about to change.

The lead (engine-driven) boat of the two was the *Alfreda*, towing the *Dorothy* behind. The combined crews comprised Mr Dowdeswell and two other men, one of whom ran forward to check that the Bristol Road lock (Figure 5) was clear. However, it transpired that the upper gates were open. The man shouted back to the narrow boats but for some unknown reason, *Alfreda* continued forward, crashed into one of the lock gates and stuck firm. In the darkness, *Dorothy* quickly came alongside and hit the other gate, presumably broke it free from its hinges and brought it down.



Figure 5 *The rarely-photographed Bristol Road Bridge, looking upstream. The lower lock gates are visible through the arch of the bridge that once carried the main Gloucester-Bristol road (now the A38). The bridge and lock were built by James Bough (1770-1830), also responsible for building various other local locks and bridges (4). The photograph was taken c1920 by the late Mr S Pitcher (courtesy Gloucestershire Archives).*

In the darkness, chaos ensued. With the gate down, water from the pound leading up to Westfield poured out of the lock. The force of this rapidly swept the two narrow boats backwards, and it appears that the *Alfreda* sank. The Westfield pound was a lengthy one, and consequently, a large volume of water gushed through the damaged gates, draining the pound and flooding the adjacent meadows.

In the morning light of the following day, it was apparent that this was not going to be an easy situation to remedy. The lock was badly damaged and any attempt at repairs would be hampered

further by the fact that the adjacent meadows were now under water. Furthermore, it proved impossible to drain the downstream pound between here and Whitminster lock.

The Aftermath

Naturally, the saga was recorded in some detail in the minutes of the monthly committee meetings held at the Stroudwater Canal Company headquarters at Wallbridge, Stroud. A week after the disaster, on the 10th of January, the committee was informed officially about what had happened (5), although no doubt, most had already been told via other channels. At this stage, there was probably a degree of panic at the severing of this important commercial link to Stroud. Discussion doubtless centred on the quickest and cheapest way to get the canal re-opened.

One of the most urgent concerns was to drain the pound between the Bristol Road lock and Whitminster. However, this was going to be far from easy. In the following days, the Chairman visited the site. He walked down the canal to the Whitminster (Lockham) aqueduct to examine a suggestion for damming the canal. At this point, the canal crossed the River Frome - the latter passed below the canal in a deep inverted syphon. At the subsequent committee meeting (on the 25th January) he reported that he:

...thought it would perhaps be as well to accept the offer of the Sharpness New Docks Co. who he understood would do the necessary for about £50:- He assumed that this amount included the whole of the cost of erecting and removal of the dam and all expenses incidental thereto that they, the Sharpness New Dock Co. would accept all responsibility for same.

A suitable letter was subsequently prepared and sent to the Engineer of the Dock Company accepting their offer to erect a dam at the aqueduct. At the same meeting, the Clerk reported that the new gates for the Bristol Road lock would be on site by the 12th of February, and that if "all went well" should be operational by the middle of the following week (in hindsight, a forlorn hope!).

At the following meeting on 21st February, the Clerk reported that the owner of the land adjacent to the canal at the aqueduct site (a Mr Vick of Tuffley near Gloucester) had agreed to the cutting of a ditch to enable the water to be drained from the canal. The new Bristol Road lock gates were delivered on time and by midday of the 14th, had been lowered into the lock in readiness for fitting, but this could not proceed until the water had been drained from the pound. However, this was delayed as the dam at the aqueduct had to be moved further upstream. In the meantime, the damaged gates were inspected by Mr E J Bradley, Superintendent for the Severn Commission. On the 20th February, he reported:

In accordance with your request I have inspected the broken lower lock gates and from my examination I find evidence that the gate on the North side (or offside) had been struck with considerable force on the iron langett or T iron about 18" from the mitre of the gates. This would have the effect of bursting the gates open for a certain distance and considering the fall in the lock at the time of the accident at about 8 feet, the resulting back pressure was too much for the gates to stand and they were carried away.

Having checked the damage, he concluded that because of existing wear and tear, they would have required replacing within the next five years or so. He also produced cost estimates for the new replacements - assuming that they were built from the best English Oak, with good quality pitch pine planking and new ironwork, the total cost would be around £217. He regretted that "being unfamiliar with the local conditions for stanking and pumping and with the bad weather and consequent floods

to contend with "he was unable to provide an estimate of the cost of emptying the lock and fixing the gates".

Eventually the water was drained from the pound and with the help of a diver brought in from Sharpness Docks, the new gates were finally fitted and the Whitminster dam removed. On the 21st March, the committee were informed that after being closed for more than two months, the canal had re-opened. However, the story was far from over. Now the recriminations and bickering began in earnest. At the meeting of the 18th of April, the committee heard that the Chairman and Mr Bloxham had met Mr Ward (the boats' owner) at Wallbridge on the 28th March and had had "a long discussion" with him. Clearly, things had not gone well. The Chairman read a letter from Wards in which they made a counter-claim against the canal company in respect of the sinking of the *Alfreda*, alleging that this was caused by the lock gates being in an unsound condition. Incensed by this, the Chairman was asked to repudiate this claim in his reply, and to inform Mr Ward that no further interview could possibly take place unless it was withdrawn. It was also pointed out that the accident had occurred as a result of the negligence of his firm's employees and that in view of the position that Messrs Ward had taken, the committee had decided to make a claim against them for £403-10-0. The atmosphere between the two parties worsened and at the meeting on the 23rd May, the committee heard Ward's response. It was noted that:

As the correspondence made it evident that a friendly arrangement was unlikely, it was resolved that the company's solicitors to take such action as they should think desirable.

So, the lawyers were now involved and the tit-for-tat correspondence continued. At the June 20th meeting, the Chairman read out a letter from Wards in which they stated that they would pay £100 "and no more" in settlement of the company's claim. After some discussion, it was decided that the committee would be prepared to settle the matter if Wards paid £200 to the company's solicitors. But the affair rumbled on. Even after the canal had re-opened and Ward's boats were again plying their trade, bringing coal to the company's yards, the committee continued to smart over the mishap. On May 24th, during an inspection of the Eastington Pound (from Bristol Road Lock to Westfield Lock), they once again encountered the pair of boats infamously responsible for destroying their lock (6). The inspectors noted ruefully:

At this reach, Ward & Co's motor boat Alfreda of notorious memory, passed us, one man on board, one on towpath. Boat travelling well over 5 miles per hour, and making lot of wash. Stem down over 18 inches. She was towing the barge Dorothy. Question if speed of these motor barges can be limited.

By the time of the meeting of July 23rd, Wards had finally paid £100 in settlement of the company's claim for damage to the gates. Perhaps weary of the whole affair, the committee agreed to accept this sum which went some way towards the costs incurred in making repairs to the lock. At the same meeting, the clerk was instructed to send the Sharpness New Docks Co. a cheque for £185-12-1 to cover the charges for services rendered by that company during the stoppage (for the erection and removal of the dam, services of their diver, etc). Presumably shaken by the amount, the Chairman undertook to write to Mr Manning Lewis asking if his company could see its way to granting a reduction. It worked, and at the September meeting, he was able to announce that the Dock Company had been gracious enough to send him a cheque for £20.

Finale

So, what really caused the mishap that must have affected many people connected directly with the canal as well as those whose livelihood depended on it? Was it simply a case of negligence by Ward's boatmen, or did the well-documented problems with the ageing gates also play a part? Possibly it was a combination of the two. Having witnessed the *Alfreda* and *Dorothy* at what they considered to be excessive speed, the canal committee were doubtless convinced that this was the answer. Some motor-driven boats such as the *Alfreda* were relatively fast (8). The late Les Pugh well remembered the *Alfreda* - she was powered by an oil engine (9). However, the poor condition of the lock gates may well have played a part. Their condition had been mentioned repeatedly during inspections of the canal (5). In 1908, during an inspection of the canal between Framilode and Eastington, the inspectors noted that the adjacent Bristol Road bridge was in good order, however:

With regard to the lock, there is a leak between the heads of the lower gates, which, it is understood could be lessened. Your Committee understand that the repair of these gates in order to stop the leak altogether would be a difficult and expensive matter, and that, as there is plenty of water, the leak is immaterial.

Nothing was done, despite the fact that at least two of the gates had been in place since the 1870s. In 1915, the Committee again noted that the lock was leaking badly at the bottom and should perhaps be attended to. However, a year later, again, nothing had been done and the inspectors reported that:

The lock gates are still leaking badly at the bottom. The mitre of the inside top gate (this gate was put there in 1872) requires scarfing or renewing.

And so, it appears that the gates continued to decay and leak. Possibly their weakened state was a major factor in their apparently easy destruction a few years later by the two narrow boats, acting as a floating battering ram. However, it appears that perhaps, at times, the *Alfreda* was pushed hard and went faster than was advisable - this may have been a contributing factor in her unexplained collision with the lock.

So, a combination of speed and rotting lock gates might go some way to explaining how the "Great Bristol Road Lock Disaster" of 1923 happened.

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http://www.cotswoldcanalsheritage.org.uk/page_id_140_path_0p103p4p43p49p40p41p.aspx Les thought that the Alfreda may have ended her days carrying tar from Stroud gasworks to the 'Tar Works' on the River Severn at Sandhurst.

Acknowledgements

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