

January 23 1841

INUNDATION AT BRENTFORD – IMMENSE DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY AND LOSS OF LIFE

Sunday morning a most fearful inundation occurred in the town of Brentford, occasioned by the bursting of the banks and locks on the Grand Junction Canal, which has been attended by the destruction of great property, the carrying away of many houses by the stream, as well as loss of life.

The Grand Junction Canal, it should be stated, joins the river Thames southward of the town of New Brentford, running at the rear of the town on the south for some hundred yards when, turning short to the right, it divides New Brentford from Isleworth parish at Brentford End, and proceeds along towards Southall. On the north side of the high road, which crosses the canal by means of a strongly built stone bridge, it is joined by the river Brent, which passes thence through Hanwell, Perivale &c towards Harrow, and the general belief is that it was the immense body of land water, occasioned by the rapid thaw, which poured down from the country, swelling the stream of the Brent, which caused the catastrophe.

The water, it appears, was first observed to be slowly rising about half past twelve o'clock on Saturday night; but no fears of an inundation were entertained by the persons residing near. Towards two o'clock, however, police-constable Smith, who was on duty near the bridge, observing the water still increasing and rushing with great power to the Thames, awakened some of the boatmen belonging to what are called "monkey boats", large numbers of which were moored off the different wharfs abutting on the canal, and cautioned them to be on the alert for their own security. At that time, and even up to half past three o'clock yesterday morning, immediate danger was not apprehended; but a few minutes before four o'clock a loud noise was heard towards the north of the town, which approached nearer and nearer, and it was soon ascertained that the narrow stream of the Brent had become swelled into a mighty river and, overflowing its banks, was pouring itself into the already increased waters of the canal. Numbers of boats, barges and lighters were instantly torn from their moorings, and driven with great force and speed through the bridge towards the Thames. At the same instant also the accumulated waters, having overflowed all the premises north of the high road, burst with frightful force through the two avenues by the houses of Mr Brasher, near the bridge, and Mr Farrell, directly opposite the church, filling the lower rooms of the houses. The police lost no time in waking the inhabitants. The scene at that moment it is impossible to describe. Men, women and children, many of them in their night clothes, were running in all directions for places of shelter, while the roaring of the waters, added to the screams of the wretched inhabitants of the monkey boats borne along on the stream, and of the persons inhabiting the numerous cottages running south of the town down to the waterside, were most appalling. In a very short time all the houses at that portion of the town were flooded and, the water rising rapidly, the occupiers of the houses near the market place commenced damming up their doors, and there is no doubt that the whole not only of New Brentford, but also of Old Brentford would soon have become under water had it not forced itself an outlet at the bottom of Church Alley, by razing the wall of the extensive nursery grounds of Messrs Ronalds, and another wall at the southern extremity of the grounds, by which it joined the stream of the canal near its outlet to the Thames.

About five o'clock the water was at the highest, and the only communication between the houses near the bridge was by means of a boat. Towards six o'clock it was ascertained that the water was gradually decreasing, and when daylight came the extent of the damage was pretty clearly ascertained.

Above the bridge, as far as has been ascertained, the damage has not been so extensive as below. Below the bridge, a short distance on the right, were found five large barges driven by the force of the water against the wharf of Mr Fowler, an extensive wharfinger at Brentford End, and swamped. They belonged to Mr Chas Saunders, lighterman, of Stroud on the Green, Kewbridge, and were laden with 1300 qrs of corn and 350 qrs of linseed. It was near to the mouth of the outlet to the Thames where the greatest damage has been done. At other parts of the canal several barges and lighters have foundered, and many have sunk, the names of the owners of which are not yet known. It has, however, been ascertained beyond doubt that the barge *Susan*, the property of Mr Scheele, lighterman, of North Hyde, near Southall, has gone to pieces, and the body of one of the persons on board of her, named Wm Spruce, about 17 years of age, was picked up about eleven o'clock yesterday, jammed between the rails at the bottom of Catherine Wheel yard, covered by some tarpaulin. It was immediately conveyed by the police to the Catherine Wheel public house, in the high road, where it awaits a coroner's inquest.

In the tan-yard of Mr Norris the whole of a large quantity of tan with which the warehouses were stored have been carried away by the stream, and portions of it are still remaining on the high road. It has been ascertained that no less than 21 men, women and children saved their lives by climbing over the wall of the Duke of Northumberland's grounds, and taking refuge in a cow house, where they have been since found. Throughout the whole of yesterday a large number of men were employed with wagons and carts in carrying away sacks of grain and other articles which have been rescued from the sunken barges, or driven ashore,

one of which, belonging to Mr Saunders, went to pieces in the afternoon. Messrs Joseph Dawson and Co, whose timber wharf is on the north side of the bridge, have lost numerous timber floats, as have also Messrs Abercrombie, but they will be probably recovered. The house of Mr Whitburn, tobacconist, at the opposite corner of the bridge, has sustained great damage, the gable end having been carried away at the bottom, and there is no doubt had the water, which was within a foot of the crown of the bridge, risen higher than the bridge itself, with the adjoining houses, must have been carried away. Above the bridge, where the junction of the waters of the Brent with those of the canal took place, the towing-path has been washed away and, consequently, no intelligence could be obtained as to the extent of damage further up the country.

ADDITIONAL PARTICULARS

New Brentford, Monday evening Throughout the day the town of Brentford has been thronged by persons from the neighbouring towns and villages, and even from the Metropolis, anxious to visit the scene of the late inundation.

The infant school rooms in the Butts were on Sunday evening prepared, by order of the Rev Dr Stoddart and Messrs Banting and Hopkins, the churchwardens, for the reception of the distressed boatmen, and public intimation to that effect having been given, on the doors being thrown open no less a number than ninety men, women and children presented themselves and were admitted. At six o'clock they were refreshed with a plentiful supply of coffee and bread and butter, after which those whose boats were not so much damaged as to render them destitute were dismissed, and the remainder, amounting to sixty, were at nine o'clock supplied with a good supper, and at about half past ten o'clock, clean straw having been laid down, they retired to rest, the males in one room and the females in another. This morning, at eight o'clock, they all had breakfast, and at dinner the number was increased to sixty eight. What makes the case of these unfortunate individuals more distressing is the fact that, as they were clearing out, about five weeks since, to return with their boats to their houses, the late severe frost set in, and they being compelled to remain until the ice broke up, many of them were reduced to such distress as to be obliged to beg of the inhabitants, and now that the ice had partly broken up and they were preparing to start on Sunday morning, their vessels have been wrecked, and most of them have escaped but with their lives.

Nine boats are supposed to have been sunk and broken up by the stream, as no trace of them has as yet been discovered. In addition to this, several are known to be seriously injured, as well as their freights rendered unfit for further use.

During the day great numbers of persons have been busily engaged in clearing out some of the barges lying off the shore, in which they have to some extent succeeded; also in fishing up large numbers of sacks of wheat &c, which had been washed out of the craft, but from its sodden and swollen state, by which many of the sacks have been burst, it is feared it will not be of much value. Mr Saunders has today succeeded in getting up one of his five barges, which has been found not to be so much injured as was anticipated. Mr Fowler, against whose wharf Mr Saunders's barges were swamped, has lost three barges of coals. He had for some time previously been ill, and died rather unexpectedly on Sunday evening.

A man belonging to Mr Fowler, named Henry Corsell, is now lying without the slightest chance of surviving. He was found about 11 o'clock on Sunday forenoon in one of the barges, which was riding in safety off the wharf, lying on his bed in the cabin in a state of insensibility, and very much cut about the head, and is labouring under a concussion of the brain.

In addition to the wharfs and premises of Messrs Bourne, Curtis, Sims and others, whose premises were stored with wheat and other grain, &c, most of which have been flooded and damaged, there are nearly fifty small cottages, situated in the yards and alleys leading from the high road to the water, and are inhabited by the poorer class, who have suffered considerably by the inundation, as have also a large number of inhabitants of the High street. The damage done at Mr Norris's yard is estimated at nearly £1000.

In the course of the afternoon each of the poorer cottagers who have suffered from the flood have been presented by the parochial authorities with a hundred and a half weight of coals, for the purpose of drying their dwellings, the water having nearly subsided.

With regard to the origin of the calamity, it is evident, from an inspection of the locks and banks of the canal, that they have not given way, as was at first supposed; and police-constable Smith, who was on duty at the time at the side of the canal, gave the following statement of the occurrence :-

It was about twenty minutes past twelve o'clock on Saturday night that he first noticed the boatmen, whose boats were moored on the side of the canal, preparatory to their departure, making remarks about the rising of the water, when he rendered them assistance in more securely fastening their craft. Before one o'clock, however, the ice broke up with a loud noise, when the boatmen became more alarmed, and some of them got out on the towing-path, where they were immediately knee deep in water, and one woman, about two o'clock, being knocked by the ice into the canal, he jumped in and got her out. About two o'clock some

timber boats, belonging to Messrs Dowson and Co, which were moored at the entrance of the river Brent, got loose, and he got over into Messrs Dowson's yard and acquainted Mr Pepper, the manager, with the circumstances, who told him to tell the watermen of it which, not being able to leave his boat, he was unable to do. He then went on the bridge on the high road, and watched the water, which kept gradually getting higher, until a few minutes before four o'clock, when the great body of it which hurried down the Brent forced itself into the canal, pouring over the locks without bursting them. The boats were now forced onwards to the bridge, where the first that sank was a coal barge; the next was one belonging to Mr Saunders, freighted with corn; then a coal barge belonging to Mr Eaton; and next one of Bissell's passage boats, freighted with hoop iron from which, as it was scuttling, he pulled up to the top of the bridge a child, by means of his strap, and also a woman, but before her husband could be got at, the boat sank and he swam on shore with great difficulty. Immediately afterwards another of Bissell's boats ran against the corner of Mr Whitburn's house, and carried it away. As the boat passed under the bridge, Mr Plim, butcher, threw a bullock rope to a woman who was on top of the cabin, who instantly seized hold of it, and was partly drawn up when, seeing her husband passing under the bridge without being rescued, she let go of it with one hand, but fortunately he (Smith) being at the moment sitting astride of the parapet of the bridge, seized hold of her arm, and she was saved. At that time he observed fourteen or fifteen woman and children on the lock bridge, but admittance was refused them, on which he got them onto Brentford Bridge, while he knocked up the landlord of the Six Bells, who sheltered them, and he then assisted the inhabitants.

The escape of twenty one men, women and children, from off the passage boat, as they passed the wall of the Duke of Northumberland's grounds, was almost miraculous. The first that got over was a boy, named John Jones, who instantly fastened a rope to a tree, by which means the others got over. As they did so, they felt the wall tottering underneath them, and while the last boy was on it it was overthrown by the water, he falling within the grounds. Immediately on being discovered by his Grace's gardener, they received both shelter and succour, for which they express their heartfelt gratitude.

During the day considerable excitement has been occasioned in the town by the fact that Mr Charles Morris, a market gardener at Old Brentford, had been missing since the evening of Saturday; and in the course of the afternoon all doubt on the subject was removed by the discovery of the body near his own residence, in a stream communicating with the Brent, and which until yesterday was much swollen. The body was removed to his residence, where it awaits an inquest.

No time has been fixed for the inquest on Spruce, as it is probable there may still be other bodies in the water.

