

Cautionary tales from the canal

Canals can be dangerous places and sadly fatal accidents have happened on the canal over time. Today Canal & River Trust incorporates the message to Stay Away From the Edge (SAFE) into its school outreach programme to educate children about the importance of staying safe whilst enjoying the waterways.

Lives lost

The earliest known was the 46-year old Pocklington farmer William Dowthwaite, who appears to have fallen off his horse into the canal in April 1822 after suffering a fit while watering the animal on his return from Selby. Despite falling into a shallow section he was probably in no condition to save himself.

Most accidents took place around locks, where the deepest water was to be found and the narrow walkways attached to the balance beams and the surrounding land were often slippery. In March 1834, 44-year old Pocklington stonemason William Richardson drowned while crossing a lock gate on returning from Bielby with a companion. Richardson was sober and was often employed to work on the canal, but even those used to the canal could be caught out. He left a wife and eight children, one of whom, also a stonemason named William, married lock keeper Mark Swann's youngest daughter Elizabeth in 1840. Richardson's eldest daughter, Ann, married Swann's nephew, the waterman Mark Thorpe, in 1843, reflecting the close ties among the small community at Canal Head.

The canal was also a source of water for local residents, but collecting it was not without its perils as it would have been easy to overbalance or slip on the steep banks while reaching over. In October 1916, Thomas Davison, 58, of York and two other men were repairing lock gates for the NER and had been living aboard a workboat for about two months, with two returning home at weekends leaving a third man in charge of the boat. During one of his turns on board, Davison appears to have fallen in while collecting water, and was only found when one of his colleagues and the lock keeper, William Hutchinson, drained the area the morning after he was reported missing. Davison was experienced, having worked for the NER for about 34 years.

There were more fortunate outcomes. In August 1934, 6-year old Jack Taylor of George Street, Pocklington, was rescued unharmed after falling in by Thomas Herrington, 14, of the same street. The lads had been playing on one of the lock gates, no doubt a common pastime for young locals along with swimming.

Fortunately people today generally pay more attention to safety and nobody needs to collect water from the canal in buckets anymore! As part of the current restoration work taking place along the canal, the derelict locks are being modified to meet modern day safety standard. For those using the canal today, the restored locks are much safer to operate by design, with guard rails, wider footways and safety ladders.

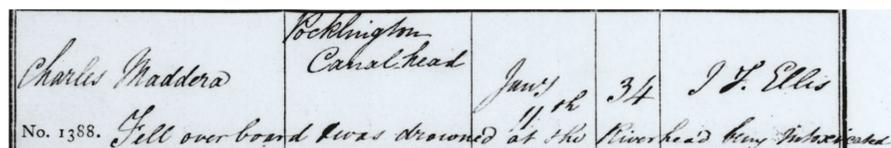
Find out more at canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers



Canal & River Explorers is the main learning programme of the Canal & River Trust, for primary schools and groups such as Cubs and Brownies.



Local men and boys swimming at Silburn Lock c1915. Sheila Nix MBE



Death of Charles Maddrah. Extract from the Pocklington parish registers, 1848