
THE MATCHLESS TRAGEDY

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PREFACE

On September 3rd 1894 the pleasure yacht, *Matchless*, set sail from Morecambe to Grange, carrying 33 passengers and its sole boatman. It sank just off Jenny Brown's Point, near Silverdale, with 25 drowning and 9 surviving due only to the close proximity of two other sailing boats that were able to come to their aid. The accident resulted in the Morecambe Bay's largest ever loss of passengers' lives, but until now the story had become largely lost, unmarked by monument or historical analysis, and was sometimes even recorded as an accident that took place in 1895, not 1894.

We live in an age where the phrase "health and safety gone mad" is a popular jibe directed at authorities taking a heavy-handed approach towards protecting the public, usually to the detriment of simple pleasures. Late-Victorian England was a very different place. Children still worked in factories, living conditions were often appalling, and the value placed on a life seems small to the modern viewpoint.

Through this account I want to show not just the extent of the neglect shown towards public safety, but the systematic whitewash that could be put in place by the authorities when things did go wrong. The inquest that followed the accident took place in a hurry, was more concerned with the reputations of Morecambe sailors and local authorities than the victims, and even had as foreman of the jury the man most responsible for the absence of local bye-laws to protect Morecambe visitors, the Chairman of Morecambe's local authority.¹

¹ The local authority of the time was the Morecambe Local Health Board, to be superseded in 1895 following the Local Government Act of 1894, by Morecambe Town Council. John Lee was chairman of each of these bodies.

FANNY BRIERLEY

This account focuses in particular on the experience of one of the survivors, a nine year old girl, Fanny Brierley, who much later in life was to put down her memories of this episode and her childhood in a short journal². It also draws from the scores of newspaper articles, both local and national, that covered the disaster and the inquests which followed. Further material was obtained from the National Archives and Lancashire County Records Office.

² A copy of Fanny Berry's (née Fanny Brierley) account was deposited by family members in the Burnley Public Library's Local Studies Collection in 2008. The 18 pages of memoirs were later entitled "Aunt Fanny's Diary" by the family, but Fanny herself called them "Memories, Pleasant and Painful." This was written in 1946, when Fanny was 61.

THE MATCHLESS TRAGEDY

THE BRIERLEY FAMILY

The Brierleys lived in Briercliffe, on the outskirts of Burnley - then England's leading cotton manufacturing town. In 1894 William Brierley, 41, was on the brink of achieving some level of prosperity. Having worked all his life in the cotton industry, the previous year he and his father had commenced manufacturing cotton cloth, by renting space and machinery in an existing mill and manufacturing on their own account, rather than for a mill owner.

William married Betty in 1874, and by 1894 they had eight children, although one had died some years back. Betty was, in September of that year, in the fifth month of another pregnancy. The family now consisted of father and mother, four daughters and three sons, aged between 1 and 18. The eldest son and daughter worked in the mill and helped support the household. Life must have been cramped in their three-bedroomed house at 1, Queen Street.



Figure 1: 1 Queen Street, Briercliffe

The family was a happy one, with children indulged by parents and grandparents, and even allowed to play in the mill warehouse at weekends, until one day one of the younger children, Ben, damaged a warp in the weaving shed, and these games were stopped.

William, the father, liked outings, and always took one or two of the children with him on his trips - to Southport, Morecambe or Blackpool, or just to an inn up on the Pennine moors via a tram ride and long hike. Betty, his wife, always stayed at home with several of the children while William took others on his trips. When the September holidays came in 1894, William took Fanny, 9, and Ben, 7, for a few days at Morecambe.

These holidays came about through the system of Wakes Weeks, whereby the whole of a mill town would shut down at a given time of the year, allowing the millworkers rest and recuperation (an unpaid holiday), and enabling the mill owners to undertake repairs and improvements to the machinery of the mill.

Each mill town would have its wakes week at a different time of the year - easing the strain on the popular holiday destinations. Burnley millworkers took late summer holidays or day trips to the coastal resorts opened up by the railways in previous decades. Blackpool was especially popular, although Morecambe was rather more refined or at least restrained, with scenic views of the Lake District fells across Morecambe Bay, and a less boisterous range of entertainments on offer. So it was that Burnley was to be a disproportionate victim of the *Matchless* disaster.

MORECAMBE IN THE 1890s

Morecambe developed out of the small fishing village of Poulton-le-Sands and by the 1820s it had already become popular as a destination for trippers from Lancaster. By 1838 a steamboat was based there, for trips to Ulverston and beyond. But it was the arrival of the railway in 1848, with a line to Leeds and Bradford in Yorkshire, which led to its rapid expansion. As part of the same development a stone harbour was constructed in 1851. More guesthouses were built, and orderly ribbons of terraced housing constructed.

By the late 1880s the name “Morecambe” was in common usage and was formally adopted in 1889, combining the villages of Poulton-le-Sands, Bare and Torrisholme. Morecambe was, by the 1890s, one of the leading resorts for day-trippers and holiday-makers from the mill towns of Lancashire and West Yorkshire.

The population numbered less than 6,500, but was swelled by the annual influx of 30-40,000 holiday makers that lodged there, typically, for a few nights, and the 30,000 coming for a day’s excursion in any year.

A resort needed attractions, and Morecambe had them. It was in competition with its neighbours Southport and Blackpool on the west coast, and towns such as Scarborough, Filey and Bridlington on the east. Morecambe, some thought, had greater natural attractions, and a certain gentility, compared with the brasher Blackpool to the south. To the vista of the Lakeland fells dominating the view across the Bay, Morecambe added its own enticements.

The People’s Palace was built across from the promenade in 1878 - a large indoor entertainment pavilion which included an

aquarium adjoining the existing public baths. This had the largest span roof in the north of England. There were music halls, the Promenade Pier with entertainments, a horse-drawn tramway, covered bazaars and open air stalls, donkey rides and Punch and Judy shows, horse-drawn wagonette rides to Silverdale and pleasant walks to Heysham.



Figure 2: Morecambe Promenade

In 1877 a magnificent pleasure park, the Summer Gardens, was opened, covering some 30 acres with delightful gardens, ornamental walks, flower beds, terraces and conservatories. Activities were freely available including: lawn tennis, croquet, bowling greens, and areas for football, cricket and other sports. You could spend days here in total relaxation or build up a sweat in one of the many activities. Its Pavilion held a massive 10,000 people, quite an architectural feat for the late 1800's.

It also had a large fleet of pleasure boats and excursion steamers for people to enjoy the beauty of Morecambe Bay.

THE BRIERLEYS ON HOLIDAY

Morecambe's August had been something of a washout in 1894, but the weather had cheered up for the Brierley's holiday. It hadn't started well for nine year old Fanny. On Friday 31st August they had set out from Burnley's Bank Top Station. A boy was looking out of the train window, turned back, and was sick down Fanny's frock. The boy's mother tried to smooth things out by saying, "Oh well, it'll wash, I have a frock like that and it washes like new." This was Fanny's frock for her whole holiday, but she later said she soon forgot about it.

William, Fanny and Ben Brierley were to stay at Mrs Foulds' lodging house, at 6 Victoria Street, near the railway station. The following morning the threesome took one of the many wagonettes plying for trade on Morecambe promenade - for a trip to the Fairy Steps, a popular beauty spot near Silverdale, some 15 miles north into the pretty wooded limestone pavements that are still such an attraction to visitors today. On the Sunday they spent their afternoon at Morecambe's Summer Gardens.

Monday 3rd September was a fine day. After breakfast at Mrs Foulds', the Brierleys went for a stroll along the promenade. William posted a card home, saying that they would be home tomorrow. He bought some oysters, for the fun of watching the children try them as much as anything else. Fanny and Ben weren't impressed. Fanny was even less impressed when her father announced they were going to take a sailing boat trip to Grange.

She pleaded that she be left behind, but was told that if she dug in, they would all have to take the train home that day. Fanny relented, and the three made their way towards the narrow landing stage where a few boats and their skippers were

seeking passengers, and where a small crowd was forming. A Bradford couple with a small child³ argued over whether they should board, having previously promised the young husband's mother that they would not go for a sail. The Bradford man's view prevailed, and they boarded the largest boat, *Matchless*.



Figure 3: Sailing Boats for Hire

The *Matchless* was a typical Morecambe Bay boat - a "Lancashire Nobby", with a shallow draught to navigate the shoal waters in the bay. It was a fishing smack, measured 33 feet, was half-decked, and had a mainsail, topsail, foresail and jib. Like all the local boats it was rigged so that one man alone could sail her. For the summer season the *Matchless*, like 300 other Morecambe fishing boats, was converted to become a

³ Joseph Fawcett Carter, a sports journalist for the Bradford Observer, his wife Florence, and their 2 year old daughter, Doris had promised Joseph's mother that they wouldn't take a sail when in Morecambe. They all drowned. Florence's body was the last of all the bodies to be recovered. In January 1895, the next year, her body was noticed tangled up in the metalwork of the landing stage at Grange.

pleasure boat⁴. The boatman would simply add some planks for seating. The general practice was for boatmen to take a lad to help only if the seas were a little rough. This meant that, in general, when a boatman collected his fares during a crossing he had to leave his tiller and ropes.

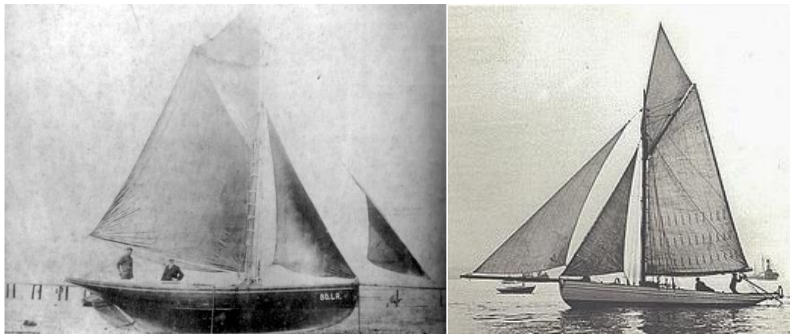


Figure 4: The Lancashire Nobby

The Brierleys also boarded the *Matchless*, helped aboard by its burly skipper, a Morecambe fisherman, Samuel Houghton, 54 years of age, with a lifetime's sailing experience in all seasons and weathers. The *Matchless* seemed the most popular choice among those on the landing stage, and soon filled up. Once 33 had boarded, Houghton said he could take no more, and people boarded other waiting boats.

On board the *Matchless* were a jolly mixture of families, and groups of friends of all ages, all in high spirits and looking forward to the sail. Nearly half the contingent was made up of cotton workers from Burnley and their children. One of these, a

⁴ 300 Morecambe boats held licences to take passengers, although it is unlikely that more than a small fraction of this number could have plied for trade at any one time.

13 year old girl⁵, succeeded where Fanny had failed, by refusing to sail and staying on the Morecambe promenade.

One Burnley woman, Mrs Clegg, sat next to the sulking Fanny in the stern of the boat, and gave her a pear. Fanny took a bite, but it was too hard for her tastes. She sat between her father's legs, frightened, while her more adventurous brother, Ben, stood in the bow of the boat. Fanny wasn't the only frightened passenger. A nearby older woman was hardly comforted by her husband when he remarked, "Never mind, if it goes down we shall die together."⁶

SETTING OUT

At a quarter past ten the *Matchless* set sail and departed the Princess landing stage in the company of seven similar boats - each making for Grange-over-Sands across the bay.

High tide that day was at half past one o'clock, with a 31 foot tide (9.4m) predicted. Morecambe Bay at low tide seems to be just a vast plain of sand, stretching out to the horizon seawards, and across the bay towards Grange, Flookburgh and Barrow-in-Furness. In fact, on closer inspection, the sands are far from being flat and featureless - they carry innumerable gullies, bounded by steep-sided sand banks, and areas of treacherous channels and quicksands.

The pleasure boats would take passengers aboard as the tide was coming in, and when enough water had filled the channel

⁵ Margaret Ann Robinson, aged 13, refused to board with her parents and 15 year old sister. Her father survived the accident; her mother and sister died.

⁶ The Ramsbottom couple: Samuel Brooks, 54, and Betty Brooks, 58. He remarked to a nervous wife, on boarding the *Matchless*, "Never mind, if it goes down we shall die together." In this observation, he was wrong - he drowned; she was rescued.

running along the coastline from Morecambe, would sail their boats northwards along this channel, all the while watching as the sea came in to gradually fill the Bay. Only then could they make the crossing direct to Grange. The usual point of crossing was from a beauty spot known as Jenny Brown's Point, just south of Silverdale.



Figure 5: Route taken and site of accident at Jenny Brown's Point

As the boats made their way up the coastline from Morecambe, there was just a light breeze, and the sailing was straightforward - although one of the boatmen temporarily beached his boat on a sandbank and took ten minutes to refloat the boat, “showing great courage” according to one of his passengers, (although other words might be used to describe a boatman beaching his boatful of people!)

“GETTING UP A SING”

Just prior to the accident, the sounds of singing could be heard from the Matchless. The passengers on one of the other nearby boats jealously admired this merriment, complaining that their own boat could not “get up a sing”. In particular, it was the Burnley contingent of the Matchless party who were in jolly spirits, leading the singing of sea-related hymns, including “The Golden Shore”, “A little ship was on the sea”, and “Lead kindly light”.

The words of these songs carry many ironies. The first of these starts:

We are out on the ocean sailing,
Homeward bound we swiftly glide;
We are out on the ocean sailing,
To a home beyond the tide.

All the storms will soon be over,
Then we’ll anchor in the harbour,
We are out on the ocean sailing,
To a home beyond the tide.

The second of these, “A little ship”, starts:

A little ship was on the sea,
It was a pretty sight;
It sailed along so pleasantly,
And all was calm and bright.

When lo! a storm began to rise,
The wind grew loud and strong;
It blew the clouds across the skies,
It blew the waves along.

And all, but One, were sore afraid
Of sinking in the deep:
His head was on a pillow laid,
And He was fast asleep.

In this late-Victorian carol Jesus woke up, and stilled the waves. Not today.

Fanny didn't join in the singing, and was asked by her father "Are ta sick?"; Fanny nodded, although she was actually just frightened. The journey had been a slow one, as they waited for the tide to come in, and Grange didn't seem to be getting any closer. "Are ta sick?" were to be William Brierley's last words.

THE ACCIDENT

The *Matchless* had been sailing for an hour and twenty-three minutes when the accident happened, according to the recovered watches of two of the passengers⁷. At thirty-eight minutes after eleven o'clock the *Matchless* was just off the end of the land reclamation wall⁸ off Jenny Brown's Point, near Silverdale.

⁷ William Milner, 53, survived the accident; Jonas Webster, 50, drowned. Both their watches had stopped at thirty-eight minutes after eleven o'clock.

⁸ In 1874 a Bill was passed by Parliament to permit a land reclamation scheme, which entailed the building of a rock embankment from Jenny Brown's Point, near Silverdale, to Hest Bank, near Morecambe. In the event the scheme ran out of money in 1885, leaving just a wall running across the sands from Jenny Brown's Point for half a mile. The wall had since become covered in the sands, but became visible again in 1894 after storms and bad weather. The *Matchless* sank about 100 yards from the end of this wall.



Figure 6: The land reclamation scheme today. The Matchless sunk at a point about 100 yards off the far point.

A sudden gust of wind blew the hat off one of the men standing at the front of the boat, then the wind caught the boat broadside. The jib came across the boat, and the boat was blown flat onto the water, with no pause in the sail's descent. As the boat turned over, many grabbed hold of the gunwale that was now uppermost, but the boat turned over and sank, and all the passengers were fighting for their lives.

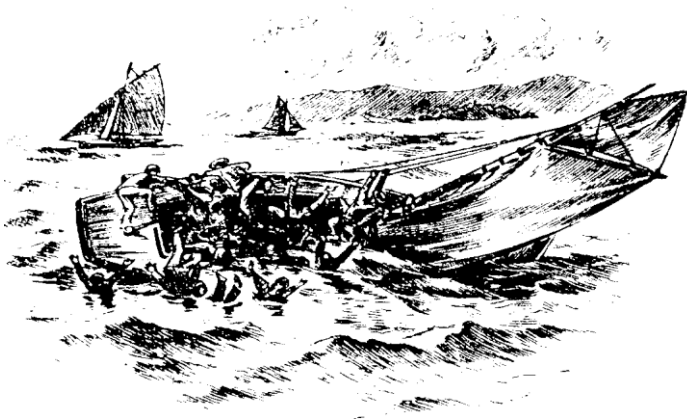


Figure 7: An unnamed eyewitness's sketch of the disaster⁹

⁹ From the Lancaster Standard and County Advertiser, September 7th 1894 - archived at Lancaster Library.

There was no time for panic, the boat had turned over in just two or three seconds. Thirty-four people were now in the water, struggling for their lives. Few could swim, and some had got caught up in the ropes and sails of the *Matchless* as she went under. The boat was in eight or nine feet of water, and people sank and re-emerged as they pushed themselves off the bottom.

Fanny later remembered going down and down, and thinking “I’m done for.” But she came back to the surface, only to sink once again. Underwater she grabbed hold of two passing bodies, and came to the surface a second time.

Why had the accident occurred? It was a perfectly fine day, and gusts of wind were far from unknown to such experienced sailors as Samuel Houghton. But the boat was almost certainly overloaded, and with just one member of crew the ropes had to be fastened to cleats. This would make the necessary quick response, that of releasing the sails when the gust hit, impossible.

Three of the *Matchless*’ four sails were raised¹⁰, giving the gust of wind a considerable surface area to catch. Once the *Matchless* became destabilised the passengers became, in effect, mobile ballast. In addition, the ballast in the hull may also have broken through a wooden division that is meant to impede its travel, and assisted the boat’s capsize rather than prevented it.

¹⁰ The mainsail, topsail and jib were raised, with the foresail down, according to boatman Edward Gardner.

THE RESCUE

Of the eight boats that sailed to Grange from Morecambe, three were close enough to the Matchless to realise an accident had occurred, and to come to the rescue. Two of these were behind the Matchless sailing up the channel; one was ahead and had started to cross the bay towards Grange.

Edward Gardner, 38, was the boatman on the *Band of Hope*¹¹, carrying seventeen adults and a child. His boat was less than 100 yards behind the Matchless, and, running with the current, was in amongst the struggling bodies very quickly. Some of the ladies in his boat jumped up and screamed. Edward had to shout, “All the ladies must sit down and the men must get ready for work; I’ll go right into the lot.” Some of the men took off their coats, ready for action.¹² As the boat got among the struggling survivors Gardner directed that any rescued person should be held at the gunwale, rather than be immediately pulled aboard, so allowing Gardner to manoeuvre to rescue as many as possible, and to prevent capsizing his boat as people were hauled in.

Gardner wanted to direct the lifting of people himself. Two men were pulled into the boat, alive, and then another, dead. All the time, heads were popping up above the water as drowning people propelled themselves above the surface one last time, sometimes having the breath to shout “Help!” A walking stick was used to reach out to desperate people.

¹¹ The *Band of Hope* was named after a temperance movement organisation of the same name, which was established in Leeds in 1847. It grew to a movement with 3 million UK members by the 1930s.

¹² Details given by a passenger, Harry Greenwood, to the Bradford Argus, printed for the Wednesday 5th September edition.

A young woman, Lizzie Walker¹³, surfaced. Dramatically she had a child in each hand; these were Fanny and Ben Brierley. Lizzie was unconscious as she and the children were rescued and hauled on board. Fanny would later proudly claim to be the only one to be rescued by the *Band of Hope* that never lost consciousness. She couldn't stand however, and they tied her to the mast to keep her upright. One more passenger was then saved, an elderly woman, and as they hauled her unconscious body in, Gardner, the boatman, called to the men, "Mind what you're doing there, you're going to have this over." Poor Fanny cried, "Oh dear, is this going o'er too?"

Fanny now noticed the boy laid at her feet, and said, "That's my brother." A man said, "Yes, and isn't this your mother?" Fanny looked at the unconscious Lizzie Walker and explained that she wasn't their mother, and that they were with their father. Fanny was later to wonder how she and Ben had come to be rescued in this way, having been at opposite ends of the boat at the time of the accident. Having rescued as many as were visible, attention was now given to the unconscious forms pulled out of the water. Artificial respiration was applied to Ben, and Fanny watched as the water poured out of his mouth.

At the same time, two other boats were attempting rescues. Richard Gardner (no known relationship with Edward Gardner¹⁴), 74, had eleven passengers in a boat capable of holding many more. But all the passengers were women or children - he lacked the men needed to pull bodies over the gunwale. Nevertheless he saved three lives, and recovered one dead body.

¹³ Lizzie Walker, 25, of Burnley. Lizzie was one of a group of 7 Burnley cotton millworkers staying in Morecambe at a boarding house. She had been accompanied by her sweetheart and fiancé, James Boothman.

¹⁴ The name Gardner was a common local surname.

His first rescue was that of the boatman of the *Matchless*, Samuel Houghton, who was using a plank that had been a seat as a buoyancy aid. Next they recovered a young man who was able to swim. James Boothman, fiancé to the unconscious Lizzie Walker on the *Band of Hope*, had been a member of the Burnley swimming club; he was the only able swimmer among the thirty four people that had been deposited in the sea. Boothman had no idea that his fiancée had been rescued, and simply stared into the sea for the whole of the return to Morecambe.

The third rescue was of the unconscious form of Esther Clegg. She was part of the Burnley group, and had travelled with her husband and four year old son - both had drowned. It was Esther who had been sat next to Fanny Brierley in the *Matchless*, and had offered her a pear to try to cheer her up. Aged 47, Esther had breast cancer, and was in a very poor way when she came round. But she was to make a full recovery, was never troubled with the cancer again, and was later to become a good friend of the Brierley family.

The third boat onto the scene had been half a mile ahead of the *Matchless*, and had had to turn and sail back. This boat was only able to recover two bodies.

THE RETURN TO MORECAMBE

On the rescue boats some of the passengers were quite panicky, and despite the now calm weather urged, and even offered money to the boatmen to carry on to Grange, which was the nearest place to dock. But the boatmen discussed the matter, and decided to make the return to Morecambe. Why return to Morecambe when Grange was by now the closer destination? Presumably the decision was made to repatriate to Morecambe the soaking wet and mostly unconscious saved

passengers as quickly as possible, and to alert the large fishing community of Morecambe, who might assist in further rescues.

At the landing stage the news quickly spread, and the police were sent for. Fanny and Ben were carried onto the promenade. Fanny could not stand, and the children were sat on a bench and given a sip of brandy. Ben at last opened his eyes and began to look around. Fanny told him, “Ben, we’ve been shipwrecked.” The woman who had earlier sold oysters to her father carried Fanny to the nearby Bath Hotel, saying, “You’ll never forget the oyster woman, will you?”

Likewise, her brother Ben and their rescuer, Lizzie Walker, were carried to the hotel. The three of them were to share a room, and were put to bed, there still being a misunderstanding that Lizzie was their mother. Ben was unconscious once more, and didn’t awake for another 3 hours. Quite soon they had visitors - probably the police or a doctor - asking questions: names, father’s name, where they were staying, what was their address.

LATER THAT DAY

Meanwhile, the scene at the landing stage was chaotic. The word had quickly spread, and a large crowd had formed, made up mostly of rubbernecks, but also those with genuine anxieties as to whether their friends or relatives had been on the Matchless, and, if so, whether they were lost or saved. One of the rescued men¹⁵ had rushed back to change clothes, and

¹⁵ Ben Robinson, 47, one of a group of nine from three adjacent houses in the village of Reedley Hallows on the outskirts of Burnley. Ben and his daughter were the only survivors of this nine.

was rushing around desperate for news of the fate of his wife and 15 year old daughter (his other 13 year old daughter being the one who had argued against a sail, and been allowed to stay ashore).

The second and third rescue boats unloaded only after the first boat's rescued persons had been taken away - and this was before names were taken. One consequence of this was that James Boothman landed without any news of his fiancée, Lizzie Walker, having been saved. It was several hours before he was to find out.

The police had neither a passenger list nor even a count of passengers aboard the *Matchless* to work with. They set up a mortuary in the changing rooms of the local football club, behind the King's Arms Hotel on the promenade, and the four bodies so far recovered were laid out along the benches and covered with white sheets.

A procession of people made their way into the dressing room to try to identify bodies, and as the days went by, many more bodies were added, whilst earlier bodies were sent home having been formally identified in front of the County Coroner.

Landladies were particularly helpful to the police; they knew which guests hadn't returned, and they helped make positive identifications of bodies. The police also caught up with the survivors, taking details of travelling companions who were still missing.

The Post Office was kept very busy, with crowds of individuals sending telegrams home to reassure their families of their own well-being, or with police asking relatives, if there were any, to come to Morecambe at once to help with the identification of the bodies.

More boats had gone out to search for bodies, or even the chance that some may have got ashore. Samuel Houghton, the owner and boatman in the Matchless, had recovered sufficiently to go out in another boat. Presumably action was far preferable to inaction, although he was heard to say that he wished he himself had drowned in the accident.

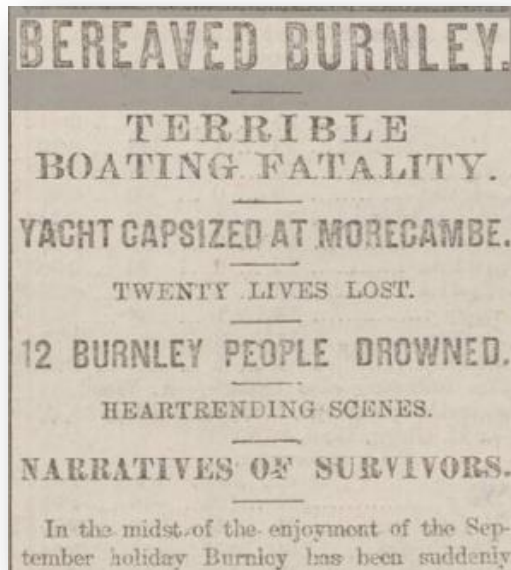


Figure 8: Burnley Express, 5th September 1894

The first reports of the disaster were on the news-stands of local newspapers late that afternoon, and very soon the telegraph and telephone offices of towns across northern England were besieged by the families of those holidaying in Morecambe, anxious for incoming news, or sending enquiring messages to Morecambe. Railway stations also became a focal

point for crowds, where each train from Morecambe was met with more requests for information than the train's passengers could possibly handle.

Any names of victims or rescued persons were posted in shop windows, and each edition of newspapers constantly revised their lists of names, even to the extent of carrying contradictory lists within a single edition when more than one reporter filed copy. The early rumours proved correct, that Burnley was disproportionately hurt by this tragedy¹⁶.

Victims had also come from Ramsbottom, Bolton, Manchester, Skipton, Bradford and Dewsbury. Some of the printed facts were wrong, for instance that Lizzie Walker had lost her life.

From her bed in the Bath Hotel Lizzie arranged for a telegram to be sent home that evening: "Can't get home tonight; been upset in boat. Safe. - Lizzie."¹⁷

Search parties were now out on both sides of the bay, scouring the sandbanks and creeks. Before midnight a boat came with the tide and docked at Morecambe with nine more bodies to join those in the football changing rooms.

¹⁶ 18 of the 33 *Matchless* passengers were from Burnley and its surrounds. 12 of these lost their life.

¹⁷ Lizzie Walker sent another telegram the next morning: "Not fit to travel. You had better come." But by the time it arrived, Lizzie's parents were already on the train to Morecambe.

THE INQUEST

(A full account of the Inquest, including verbatim evidence, is appended.)

The Morecambe authorities wanted this affair to be wrapped up as quickly as possible, and without any blame directed at their boatmen, their practices, or themselves. To this end the coroner was put to work straight away, and the jury composition was fixed to provide a benign outcome (or, at the very least, the jury was highly conflicted in their interests.)

By the end of the next day the local police had, remarkably, completed correct lists of the 34 occupants of the *Matchless*, the 9 survivors, and the 25 drowned - recovered or still missing.

By daybreak the body count was 13, and all but one of these had been identified. The County Coroner¹⁸ was summoned and a jury assembled, and an Inquest commenced the morning following the disaster, held in the large dining room of the King's Arms Hotel, next to the temporary mortuary.¹⁹

The legal roles of the hearings were to establish the cause of death of the bodies, and to apportion blame, if there was any. There was to be no separate inquiry - this inquest into the cause of death had to suffice for all purposes.

The proceedings were wrapped up by the end of just two mornings' sittings, having taken evidence from relatives of

¹⁸ The County Coroner, Lawrence Holden, was 68, but did not retire until 1905. By then he was 79 and had completed 50 years' service in that position - this was thought by journalists to be a national record.

¹⁹ It was the custom to mount an inquest at the earliest possible moment, to allow for the identification of bodies, and then their repatriation to their homes for burial.

recovered victims, Samuel Houghton and the other boatmen involved, and from some of the survivors.

Other boatmen's evidence supported Samuel Houghton - he was regarded as "one of the most experienced of our men, and very competent." His boat was "the very best of boats, and the biggest." The wind had struck the *Matchless* from above, "like a whirlwind."

The inquest came in for considerable criticism²⁰. It was mounted with such haste that a number of relatives were quite unable to attend. A Bradford father of the young man who had died with his wife and young child wrote complaining to his local MP, suggesting that the speed of the inquest was in the interests of preserving Morecambe's season rather than bottoming things out, saying that similar catastrophes could still occur, and asking for a Board of Trade Inquiry. The MP forwarded the letter to the President of the Board of Trade²¹. Board of Trade officials concocted a reply to the effect that a full inquiry had been held, and that, anyway, it wasn't their department's responsibility; it was that of a different government ministry, the Board of Local Government.

A second criticism of the inquest was that the Foreman of the jury, John Lee, was none other than the Chairman of the Morecambe Local Board (the forerunner of the Council, which would be established in 1895). This was a highly conflicted position. One possible outcome of the inquest might have been

²⁰ Appendix 4 features example extracts of press comments.

²¹ This correspondence was obtained from the National Archives. Joseph Carter, the father of Joseph Fawcett Carter (drowned with his wife and daughter) of Bradford wrote to his MP, Mr William Pollard Byles, MP for Shipley. Byles wrote to James Bryce, MP, President of the Board of Trade. A reply to Byles was drafted and sent. No further links in this chain of correspondence have been found.

for the jury to hold the Local Board responsible for the accident given its lax bye-laws and lack of public protection. But this became a practically impossible outcome given the choice of the Local Board Chairman as jury foreman²². Whether the Chairman had suggested himself as jury foreman or had been proposed by someone else, the Coroner should have entirely prevented his presence on the jury.

It was also pointed out that the inquest had not called upon any expert witnesses. The *Matchless* could have been recovered and examined for faults. One theory was that as the boat heeled over, the 2½ tons of ballast in the hull broke through the middle board, which is meant to prevent ballast from freely shifting to one side or the other of the hull. This would have helped the boat to turn so quickly and alarmingly. Whilst the wreck of the *Matchless* soon drifted with the tides, and was soon mostly sunk in the sands, there had been time to attach ropes and recover the wreck in the first two days. A diver had gone into the wreck to search for trapped bodies; such a man could have attached ropes to enable the boat to be recovered.

The regulation of passenger boats was covered by local bye-laws, and as the inquest was to find, these were lax: that whilst the *Matchless* was licensed, no inspection was ever made of the boat, there was no requirement to carry life-saving equipment (buoys, lifelines, lifebelts), there was no requirement for a boat to carry crew to assist the boatman, and the only restriction on the number of passengers that could be taken was the boatman's own discretion!

The Coroner's summing up directed the jury towards a verdict of "accidentally drowned", and after ten minutes' retirement

²² John Lee presided as Chairman of the Morecambe Local Board, and from 1895, as Chairman of Morecambe Council.

the jury foreman, i.e. the leader of Morecambe's local authority, announced the unanimous verdict of "accidentally drowned", adding that no blame was attached to anyone. They wished, in particular, to exonerate the boatman from any carelessness or blame.

This concluded the first inquiry of six that would take place as more bodies were found. In just a few hours of formalities and witness statements, the whole affair had been wrapped up. Nobody was to blame. Not the boatman, nor the local authority. The Board of Trade would receive a letter from the Coroner. The police and the fishermen were congratulated for their fine work, and medals were to be recommended for two of them. It was thought commendable that Morecambe would pay for the bodies to be transported to their families.

A total whitewash!

THE BRIERLEY FAMILY

William Brierley's body had been recovered on the evening of the accident. A telegram was sent to inform the family, and William's brother, John, came to Morecambe. He appeared at the inquest to formally identify the body, stating that William was 41 years of age, and a cotton manufacturer. He last saw him alive at Briercliffe. The deceased left a widow and seven children.²³

John Brierley was also to take Fanny and Ben home. They had received a stream of visitors at the Bath Hotel, where they

²³ Betty Brierley was in the fifth month of her pregnancy. A son was born in January 1895, and named after his father, William.

were kept in bed. The landlady from their own lodging house visited on the morning after the disaster; Mrs Foulds was the first familiar face they saw. Fanny asked her where her father was, and was told “Oh, don’t you worry, he’ll have been picked up by another boat.”

Fanny asked her Uncle John the same question when he came, and was given an equally evasive answer. The bad news was being left to Fanny and Ben’s mother to break to them. Uncle John took Fanny and Ben to the station. They were not to know that a coffin carrying their father was also loaded onto the train. Fanny sat next to a man reading a newspaper, and read the headline, “Morecambe Catastrophe.” This was the first time she realised that the disaster was a news story.

The ghoulis attention of thousands of rubberneckers became a feature of the return of the survivors and bodies to their hometowns, and of the funerals. At Burnley Bank Top Station spectators in their thousands had gathered, and police had to control the crowds, with the railway platforms being closed to any but bona fide travellers.



Figure 9: Burnley Bank Top Station in the 1880s

Uncle John left Fanny and Ben in the waiting room, and told them to stop there. He needed to supervise the unloading of his brother's coffin. Ben soon became bored and wandered onto the platform. Fanny soon followed and found Ben the centre of a small crowd. Both children were bought chocolate from a slot machine. Uncle John returned, and took them out to climb into a strange vehicle known as a Shillibeer. This was a funeral vehicle still in use in the area, albeit antiquated by then.

A reporter from the Bradford Observer described it: "It is an old-time vehicle - used in London as long as 200 years ago and until the last thirty years or so - built on the omnibus principle, except that its doors are at the sides, like those of a saloon railway carriage, and the mourners sit back to back on long central seats, with their faces turned to a row of windows, through which the crowd in the street can gape at their grief to its heart's content. The vehicle in its entirety is painted black, and it is more freely ornamented with designs and figures than are the most extravagantly contrived hearses. At the back of it is a door covering a space, under the passengers' seats, in which the coffin is placed, unless the mourners have gone in for the expense of a hearse. There is only one redeeming feature about this wonderful structure. The undertaker informed me that it enables poor people to obtain conveyance for both themselves and the coffin in one vehicle at a cost of about 25 shillings, whereas if a hearse and coaches were used the hearse alone would cost 30 shillings."



Figure 10: A Shillibeer in its original design as an omnibus

The Shillibeer took them through streets lined with sightseers to their home in Briercliffe, where another crowd had gathered. An aunt met them at their front door, and told them, “Go upstairs to your mother.” Fanny now thought her father must be in bed here, but was met by her mother, who asked if she knew where her father was. When Fanny shook her head, her mother said simply, “He’s dead, Fanny.” By now the coffin had been brought in and the lid removed.

The funeral took place the next day at the Haggate Baptist Chapel, again thronged with gawpers as well as around 60 friends and family. Following the service and burial, friends and family took tea at the Methodist Chapel.



Figure 11: The Haggate Baptist Chapel (now demolished)

William Brierley was buried in Betty's family grave, alongside a son who had died in 1888.



Figure 12: William Brierley's gravestone

The gravestone inscription includes the words:

Also in Loving Memory of the
above named William BRIERLEY
who lost his life in the boating
disaster at Morecambe September
3rd 1894 aged 41 years

Once probate was granted, William's will left Betty with effects worth £560 6s. Although funds were raised at Morecambe²⁴ and Burnley²⁵ it seems unlikely that Betty received any help from

²⁴ The Morecambe fund raised £236, but was used purely to fund coffins and the transport of bodies to their homes. Any funds left were used to make payments to those who had conducted searches for bodies.

²⁵ The Burnley Disaster Fund raised £739 for the most needy Burnley victims.

them²⁶. The Prudential stated that 14 of the victims had their lives assured by them. As 18 of the victims were adults, it seems likely that Betty received some payment from this source. Fanny was later to remember that her mother, Betty Brierley, became quite depressed, but somehow carried on.

Betty started to receive visits from others involved in the tragedy. Esther Clegg, the woman who had given Fanny the pear, and who had lost her husband and youngest son in the accident, became a friend and regular visitor; Betty Brooks of Ramsbottom, another survivor who had lost her husband; and the Pugh family. Edward Pugh, his wife, and daughter, had been on the *Band of Hope*, and wrote to Betty to say it was he that had pulled the children aboard and had performed resuscitation on Ben.²⁷ Betty invited them to visit, and for a while they became friends.

Betty also had a short series of letters exchanged with the proprietors of the Bath Hotel, Charles and Mabel Murgatroyd. They had become very attached to the children, and even entertained thoughts of adopting them when it was originally thought that they had lost both parents in the tragedy. Betty sent them photographs of the children, which were immediately framed. Fanny went to visit them some nine years later, and was shown the photographs still hanging on the bedroom wall.

A few months after the disaster Betty gave birth to a son, and named him William, after the father he would never know. Betty never remarried, but kept on the house in Briercliffe. In

²⁶ Morecambe fund did not pay monies to the bereaved; the Burnley Fund's recipients can be traced, and do not include Betty Brierley.

²⁷ He had been prompted to write to Betty upon reading in the newspaper that Edward Gardner had been their rescuer. He felt entitled to the credit.

1910 Fanny married a local man, another millworker - Arthur Berry. They set up home in a house round the corner from Fanny's mother. They had no children. Two years later Ben married a local girl, Ethel Johnson. They had two children, and emigrated to Massachusetts, USA.

Betty died in 1931, and was buried alongside her husband William at Haggate Chapel. Her estate, at £144, was left entirely to her youngest son, Willie.

Fanny died in 1957, aged 73. Shortly before, she had received a last visit from her brother Ben, who re-crossed the Atlantic once more to see her.

OTHER MATCHLESS PASSENGERS

This account has focussed in particular on the experiences of Fanny Brierley and her family. But such accidents result in many personal tragedies. This disaster ended with twenty-five deaths, leaving seven widows, four widowers, forty-six children or young adults without one of their parents, and six families mourning the loss of one or more children.

Three examples of the human consequences of these losses are given below.

A group of three sisters went to Morecambe with their husbands. The women, aged between 51 and 61, stayed ashore and waved the *Matchless* off, as it took their husbands for a sail. All three sisters were made widows.²⁸

²⁸ The drowned were Elijah Monks, 60, who had cycled to Morecambe from their home near Bolton, John Heaton, 51, and his daughter Eliza, 14, from Manchester, and Wright Shepherd, 55, from Turton near Bolton.

A Burnley man had taken his widowed sister on the sailing trip.²⁹ Both lost their lives. The man left a widow and five children; his sister left four orphaned children. Much later a moneyed well-wisher from York offered to fund orphanage costs for the four parentless children. In the event, their grandmother looked after the children until they were old enough to fend for themselves.

A group of five family members came to Morecambe on a day trip from Skipton. A 50 year old widower, his unmarried 26 year old daughter, and her 5 year old daughter³⁰ were all drowned. The other part of this group was the 53 year old brother-in-law of the widower and his 21 year old daughter.³¹ This second man survived, sinking twice before surfacing to be rescued. His daughter had planned to rendezvous with a man friend at the landing stage in Morecambe. In the event this man was late, and the woman didn't board the *Matchless*; instead she boarded another boat to travel with a Skipton girlfriend. When the rescue boats returned to Morecambe, the friend was there to help the rescued man ashore, and take him to the King's Arms Hotel for restoration.

RECOVERY OF BODIES AND LATER INQUESTS

Several grieving families had their tragedy greatly extended by the length of time it took to recover a body. Just 16 of the 25 victims' bodies had been recovered within the first 24 hours.

²⁹ John Parkinson, 36, a mill overseer, and his widowed sister, Alice Greenwood, 38. She had just moved home with her children and her mother to be closer to her brother and secure a part-time post in the mill where he worked.

³⁰ Jonas Webster, 50, Mary Alice Webster, 26, Edith Webster, 5.

³¹ William Milner, 53, and Emma Milner, 21.

But, despite search parties working night and day on both sides of the Bay, a lack of new finds in the immediately following days led to experienced fishermen offering the opinion that the remaining bodies had been washed out of the Morecambe Bay by the powerful tides, and were now at sea. Alternatively, they thought, they had been buried in the ever-shifting sands, and might never be found.

All 25 of the victims bodies, however, were eventually to be found in Morecambe Bay.

But the next two³² were not discovered until a week after the accident, mostly buried in the sands beneath the railway viaduct at Arnside, some six miles from the site of the accident along the coastline and into the mouth of the river Kent estuary.



Figure 14: Arnside Railway Viaduct

³² Mary Alice Webster, 26, and Sarah Whitehead, 43. A 15 year old Arnside youth had been walking across the viaduct and noticed the part-submerged body of a woman. He alerted a nearby work gang working on the viaduct. They dug the body out, and soon found a second body mostly buried in sand at the Grange end of the viaduct.

Exactly four weeks after the accident the 23rd and 24th bodies were found, near Ulverston and Heysham respectively. But it wasn't until January 14th 1895 that the last body was found, caught up in the supports of a landing stage at Grange.

One consequence of bodies being recovered at intervals was that, by law, a fresh inquest had to be mounted upon each new discovery. In all, six inquests were held. The Lancashire coroner Lawrence Holden presided over five of these at the King's Arms Hotel in Morecambe. But, following the first inquest, as the next bodies to be discovered were at Arnside, lying in Westmorland, the second inquest was conducted at the Crown Hotel³³, Arnside, under the Westmorland Coroner³⁴.

This was a curious affair. Although evidence had been taken and the accident fairly fully described at the first inquest, after the formal identification of the two new bodies by family members had taken place, the boatman Samuel Houghton was again called to give evidence, and was subjected to a barrage of questions from the coroner and jurors, which elucidated nothing that was new.

The Westmorland coroner then wound up these proceedings with an extraordinary statement to the jury: "That is all the evidence I can lay before you. I take it that you will return a similar verdict to that at Morecambe. I will show you what I have entered as the verdict." He then read out a verdict he had already penned, stating that the two bodies were accidentally drowned, and asked, "Is that correct, gentlemen?" The jury foreman then meekly nodded his head, and the verdict was endorsed by the signatures of the jurors.

³³ Arnside's Crown Hotel is now named The Fighting Cocks.

³⁴ John Bolton Wilson.

The strong tidal currents and shifting sands resulted in the victims of the disaster being distributed far and wide around Morecambe Bay, much as was to happen in 2004 following the drowning of 21 Chinese cockle pickers overtaken by the incoming tide.

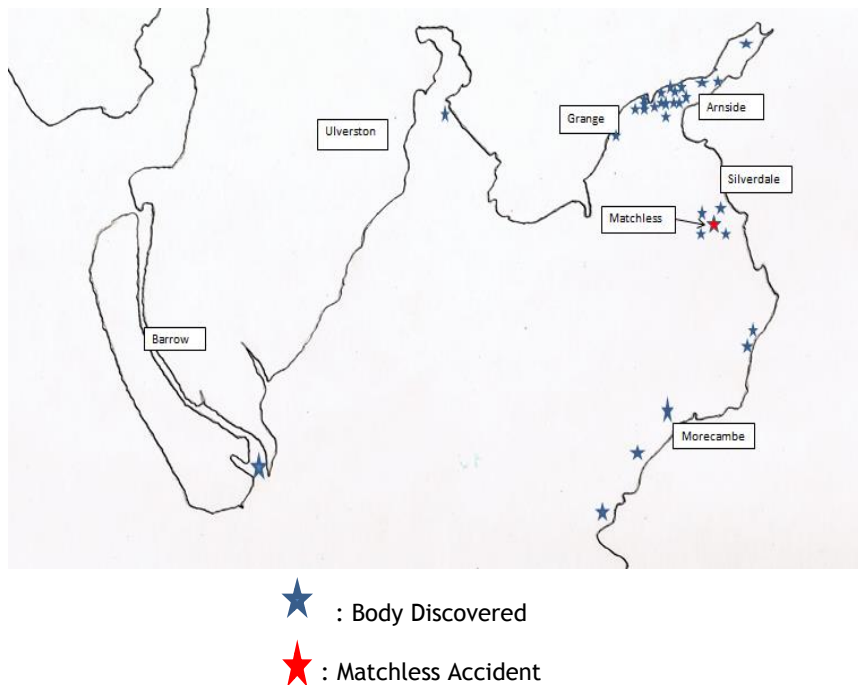


Figure 13: The approximate location of the 25 bodies

MORECAMBE AFTER THE DISASTER

This disaster was a setback for Morecambe's principal industry, tourism. Blackpool was Morecambe's main competitor, but millworkers could also travel to east coast resorts such as Scarborough and Whitby; better off people might travel to North Wales or the Isle of Man.

The most immediate visible effect of the disaster was on pleasure trips on the Bay, either by sail or steam power. Two weeks after the disaster hardly any passengers could be found. The longer term effects troubled those whose livelihoods depended on happy and carefree tourists. The 300 or so fishermen who took passengers on their boats in the summer months were keen to show a more caring side than might have been portrayed in the newspapers. Through their trade association a public letter³⁵ was issued four days after the wreck (see Appendix 3 for the full text). The letter expressed their grief, offered condolences to the bereaved, stressed how precious were their passengers' lives, and then went on to say how skilled and highly-regarded were their boatmen by "those who have any knowledge of Morecambe Bay." They argued that this tragedy was "one of those unaccountable experiences which is beyond the control of human beings." The gust of wind may have been beyond the control of human beings; the lack of life-saving equipment certainly wasn't!

The next meeting of the Morecambe Fisherman's Association was on 30th October. The final minute of that meeting was: "A vote of sympathy with Mr Samuel Houghton in his sorrow over the disaster on the 3rd September last." And a few days later a further minute was added: "It was also resolved that the

³⁵ Sourced from archived Morecambe Fisherman's Association minutes held at Morecambe Public Library.

Executive collect subscriptions from the fishermen and present the amount collected to Mr Samuel Houghton”. Belatedly, Houghton’s trade association had thought to organise a collection for their fellow member. Houghton it seems, was broken by the events that had taken place. He had also lost his boat - his livelihood.

Nine days after the disaster the Morecambe Local Board met again, with one single priority on the agenda - what to do next. By now several newspapers had printed excoriating articles about the laxness of the safety regime at Morecambe (*examples are in Appendix 4*). The town clerk had been hard at work, both examining what had led them to have such a poor bye-law on sail boat regulation, and what new measures might be adopted. He had uncovered the fact that a number of years back their Board had, in fact, wanted to adopt a bye-law limiting passenger numbers on pleasure boats, but on submitting a draft to the Local Government Board in London had been discouraged.³⁶ They had then simply adopted the “model bye-law” proffered by the Local Government Board, which gave the boatman a loosely worded responsibility to make a judgment over what was the safe number of passengers to be carried.

The town clerk went on to make several recommendations. Firstly, that a new bye-law be adopted regulating the number of passengers that could be carried. The figure would be set,

³⁶ This might be construed as “spin” by the town clerk. What the Local Government Board had actually told the Morecambe Local Board was: “The board are not prepared to assent to these proposals, as they are advised it is undesirable for the Local Board to assume the responsibility of guaranteeing the carrying capacity of boats in such a way as not to take into account the varying conditions of sea and weather.” In other words, the advice seems to have been that the local authority should draft a bye-law that took into account various weathers.

boat by boat, by a marine surveyor who would also make annual inspections of the boats prior to the licence being renewed. For each boat there would be a “fine day limit” and a “stormy day limit” as to the number of passengers. A flag would be raised each day in Morecambe to say whether the day had been designated fine or stormy³⁷. The clerk thought that a second crew member should be carried - not just for emergencies, but for the general comfort of passengers.

There was now a general discussion of these proposals - with members keenly aware of their reputation, and insisting their boatmen were the very best. Unlike some resorts where boatmen worked only the summer season, the Morecambe men were fishermen who sailed single handed throughout the winter months in all weathers, day and night. Weren't their men the first to get picked to crew boats for races on Windermere? One old fisherman said that if the pleasure boats were to have to take a second crew member on board then they had better also take a pillow - there being nothing for that man to do between embarkation and disembarkation³⁸. Lastly, they agreed the request from the Fisherman's Association to provide the materials for one of their members to make grappling lines for the recovery of bodies in the future.

By April 1895 the new bye-law had been approved, and there was in place a regime of limiting passenger numbers. In addition, any sail of more than six miles had to have a second crew member present on board. Lifebelts and lifelines now had to be carried by sailing boats. No mention was made of pillows!

³⁷ Of course weather can change during a day!

³⁸ An astonishing assertion! An extra member of crew could assist passengers board and get seated, collect fares, assist with the sailing of the boat, and act in any emergency.

Morecambe soon forgot this disaster, although Samuel Houghton never would. Morecambe Bay was a dangerous place, and during the December gales that year three other fishing vessels were lost with their crews on the Bay. And a year and six days after the *Matchless* sinking, to drive the memories away, Morecambe suffered its next public relations disaster - the partial collapse of its pier pitched dozens of holiday makers, waiting for a steamer to Blackpool, into the water, killing three of them, and injuring more. Again the coroner Lawrence Holden presided at the inquest, and again he uncovered a complete lack of any safety inspection regime. And in March, 1907 the Great Storm caused immense damage to the pier, harbour and promenade. The 1894 Morecambe Disaster had already faded into history.

A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

This story gives a fascinating insight into how people lived their lives in the 1890s, and by contrast, how cosseted our existence is today. This had been a relatively scarce opportunity for millworkers to relax and escape day-to-day cares, but it turned to tragedy.

Today, “Health and Safety gone mad” is a popular jibe. In 1894, Health and Safety was absent from much of public life, and disasters of this nature were the major cause of pressure for better practices and regulation.

The *Matchless* disaster had exposed serious faults in the assurance of public protection. The old systems of self-regulation now seem naive, where nobody inspected boats for seaworthiness, where boatmen alone decided whether to use extra crew (almost never), where the boatmen decided upon

the maximum passenger capacity (as many as they could pack in), and where boatmen decided whether or not to carry safety equipment (invariably not). Boatmen wanted to maximise their takings, not least given the vagaries of fortune of their winter fishing season.

The authorities' response to the disaster was poor. Whilst the mounting of an inquest at great speed seems to have been the general practice, making the inquest perform also as an inquiry was a shortcut, and unlikely to get to the bottom of the accident, let alone apportion blame or make for evidence-based recommendations. The Board of Trade refused to mount a separate inquiry, despite their responsibilities for public transport, citing the fact that as bye-laws covered pleasure boats, it was not up to them.

Lastly, the jury can be considered to have been fixed in such a way that outcomes were virtually pre-determined. "Accidentally drowned" was the verdict desired by the town. At least two members were highly conflicted. The foreman to the jury was the Chairman of the local authority which had put in place such lax bye-laws governing pleasure boats in Morecambe. And another member of the jury was the Secretary to the Morecambe Steamboat Company³⁹ - again a man who would want the reputation of Morecambe as a safe resort to be preserved at all costs.

³⁹ John Brown, who had leant a steamboat to the search for bodies, at the request of John Lee, Chairman to the Morecambe Local Board.

APPENDIX 1 - THE OCCUPANTS OF THE MATCHLESS

(Split into family or friendship groups, denoted by underlines)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Residence</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
<u>Samuel Houghton</u>	Survived	54	Morecambe	Boatman; fisherman
William Brierley	Died	41	Burnley	Cotton manufacturer
Fanny Brierley	Survived	9	Burnley	—
<u>Ben Brierley</u>	Survived	7	Burnley	—
Joseph F Carter	Died	26	Bradford	Sports journalist
Florence Carter	Died	23	Bradford	Wife; mother of 1
<u>Doris Carter</u>	Died	2	Bradford	—
Samuel Brooks	Died	54	Ramsbottom	Cotton mill worker
Betty Brooks	Survived	58	Ramsbottom	Wife; no children
<u>Ann Williams</u>	Died	51	Ramsbottom	Widow; mother of 2
William Milner	Survived	53	Skipton	Cotton mill mechanic
Jonas Webster	Died	50	Skipton	Cotton mill mechanic
Mary A Webster	Died	26	Skipton	Spinster; mother of 1
<u>Edith Webster</u>	Died	5	Skipton	—
John Heaton	Died	51	Manchester	Blacksmith
Eliza Ann Heaton	Died	14	Manchester	—
Wright Shepherd	Died	55	Turton, Bolton	Cotton bleacher
<u>Elijah Monks</u>	Died	60	Bolton	Tin-plater, retired
Ben Robinson	Survived	47	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
Sarah Robinson	Died	45	Burnley	Wife; mother of 8
<u>Florrie Robinson</u>	Died	15	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
James Boothman	Survived	23	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
<u>Lizzie Walker</u>	Survived	25	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
John Parkinson	Died	36	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
Alice Greenwood	Died	38	Burnley	Widow; mother of 5
Edmund Clegg	Died	49	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
Esther Clegg	Survived	47	Burnley	Wife; mother of 7
<u>Arthur Clegg</u>	Died	4	Burnley	—
Ann Ingham	Died	45	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
Sarah Whitehead	Died	43	Burnley	Wife; mother of 6
Dick Whitehead	Died	17	Burnley	Cotton mill worker
Fred Whitehead	Died	1	Burnley	—
<u>Sarah Hargreaves</u>	Died	59	Burnley	Wife; mother of 2
<u>Fred Newton</u>	Died	27	Liversedge	Cotton mill worker

APPENDIX 2

THE MORECAMBE INQUEST: 4TH - 5TH SEPTEMBER

A detailed account of the inquest has been constructed through reference to the many newspaper descriptions printed in local and national newspapers. *The main points of interest have been incorporated into the main part of this booklet; readers may choose to read the verbatim testimonies to reach their own conclusions.*

TUESDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER

The Coroner's inquest opened at half-past nine, held in the large dining room of the King's Arms Hotel, with a jury of fourteen, led by the foreman John Lee - who was no less than the Chairman of the Morecambe Local Board (the precursor to a town council). Given the strength of opinion over the lax licensing regime practised by the Morecambe Local Board, this would today be seen as a remarkable conflict of interest.

The Coroner was Lawrence Holden, 68, Coroner for the South Lonsdale district of Lancashire, and based in Lancaster. Holden was a venerable coroner, having been in this post for 39 years, but he was not to retire until 1905, by which time he was 79 and had completed 50 years' service as coroner - a national record, it was thought.

By now all but one of the thirteen bodies so far discovered had been identified, but only in eight cases was there a sufficiently formal identification to be brought in front of the inquest. The bodies on which the inquest was held, quite by coincidence, were four pairs: Samuel Brooks and his sister-in-law Ann Williams, both from Ramsbottom; Joseph Fawcett Carter and his daughter Doris, from Bradford; Wright Shepherd from Turton, and his brother-in-law, John Heaton, of Gorton, near Manchester; and Edmund Clegg and his close friend John Parkinson, both from Burnley.

Samuel Houghton, the boatman from the *Matchless*, looking dazed and uninterested, sat at the far end of the room, with his head hanging down and his hands on his knees, with Mr Tilly, a solicitor, and Mr Baxter, a fellow fisherman who had a seat on the Morecambe Local Board, and who would generally speak up for the fishing community in debates.

Besides the coroner, jury, police, and a solicitor, there was also present a large gathering of reporters. Given the popularity of Morecambe as a watering hole for the mill towns of the north of England, several newspapers had correspondents or staff journalists there, or were able to send a journalist to cover the story. Other newspapers took syndicated copy. This news story would be a lead, or *the* lead story, in national and regional papers across the country, especially in those towns where there were bereaved families.

The Coroner opened the inquiry with an address to the jury: “Gentlemen, I am sure you must shrink from the contemplation of so great a calamity as that which took place here yesterday, when a large party in pursuit of health and pleasure went out in a boat, and though the wind and tide were both favourable, I understand the boat upset, and a large number of people, exactly how many is not known, were thrown into the sea, plunging their families and relatives into the direct distress. I only propose to call evidence of identification, leaving the question of the foundering of the boat or any question that may arise as to negligence, if there was any, to a later period. It is desirable that the bodies should be identified and taken to their relatives without further delay.”

Joseph Hamer was the first witness, and identified the body of Samuel Brooks as that of his uncle, aged about 54. He had last seen him alive and well on Friday night at home in Ramsbottom. He also identified Ann Williams (sister-in-law to Samuel) as his aunt. She was the widow of Mr Williams, a tailor. He could not say what age she was, nor could he give the Christian name of the deceased woman’s husband. He was under the impression that the deceased was 51 years of age. She left two children.

Stewart Watmough, from Bradford, was the next witness, and identified the body of John Fawcett Carter. Watmough said that he was a wool buyer in Bradford, and that the deceased was his cousin and a reporter on the Bradford Observer staff. He was married, and had one child, and he had last seen him on the Morecambe promenade at about 7 o'clock on Saturday evening.

The Coroner: He has left a widow then?

Witness: His wife is missing, and is supposed to have drowned with him. The child has also been drowned.

He then identified the child Doris Carter as the daughter of John Fawcett Carter. She was about 2 years of age.

John Heaton, of Gorton, near Manchester, a blacksmith, identified the bodies of Wright Shepherd and John Heaton. Shepherd was about 50 years of age, and was a finisher by trade. Mr John Heaton was 51, and was a blacksmith's striker. The latter was his father and he had last seen him alive a week last Sunday. The witness was particularly broken by the time he had uttered this last evidence.

The Coroner: I am sorry the trouble has come upon you.

Next, John Clegg, weaver, Burnley, identified the body of Edward Clegg as that of his father. He was an overlooker⁴⁰ in a cotton mill, and was about 50 years of age. He last saw his father on Sunday night. He confirmed that he had seen the body in the mortuary, and identified it as that of his father. He also identified the body of John Parkinson, of Burnley. The deceased was also a mill overlooker, and was about 36 years of age.

The Coroner now inquired if there was any survivor present who could give any intelligent account of the disaster and was informed that the boatman was present - clearly in breach of his stated aim of simply having bodies identified so that they could be returned to their homes. He must now have realised that the boatman's evidence was absolutely central; it was more than possible that Houghton would be found to be culpable in some way. He therefore announced that the

⁴⁰ An overlooker was a textile mill foreman.

inquiry was adjourned until half past nine o'clock tomorrow morning, when the inquests would be held on the four other bodies that had been identified, and any others found by then.

WEDNESDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER

The resumed inquest got underway in the dining room of the King's Arms Hotel on Wednesday morning, before Lawrence Holden, coroner, and the same jury. A solicitor, William Tilly, was present once more alongside the boatman, Houghton.

The Coroner, in opening the inquiry, said the jury would remember they had adjourned yesterday in order to give time for the recovery of more bodies, and he was sorry to have to say that eight more had been found, making sixteen in all. After taking evidence of their identification, he proposed, if possible, to finish the inquest that day by calling one or two of the saved passengers, and the two Gardners, who saw the accident from their own boats, and the boatman himself. Houghton was glad to have the assistance of his friend, Mr Tilly.

IDENTIFICATION OF BODIES

Then followed the sad business of formal identification being given by relatives of the drowned bodies so far recovered.

John Brierley, twister, Burnley, said William Brierley was his brother. He was 41 years of age, and a cotton manufacturer. He last saw him alive at Briercliffe. Deceased left a widow and seven children.

Daniel Whitehead, Reedley Hallows, Burnley, mule spinner, identified the bodies of Ann Ingham, his sister-in-law (a single woman, 45 years of age), and Richard Whitehead, his son, 17 years old.

Peter Webster, Sandy Lane Bottom, near Bradford, stationary engine tender, said Jonas Webster was his brother. He was a mechanic, and 49 years of age.

Henry Hargreaves, Reedley Hallows, Burnley, roller coverer, identified the body of Sarah Hargreaves as that of his wife. She was 59 years of age. He last saw her alive on Saturday morning about six o'clock.

Benjamin Robinson, mule spinner, Burnley, identified the bodies of Sarah Robinson and Florence Robinson as those of his wife and daughter. The former was 45 years of age, and the latter 15.

Godfrey Bottomley, High Town, Liversedge, wire drawer, identified the body of Fred Newton, who was 27 years of age, and a carrier. He last saw him alive about a fortnight ago. It was very curious that Godfrey should be the formal identifier here - he had, after all, *failed* to identify the body, and had gone back to bring his wife to the mortuary, where *she* identified Fred Newton.

JAMES BOOTHMAN'S EVIDENCE

The Coroner then proceeded to call evidence as to the disaster, the first witness being James Boothman, 23, mule spinner, Burnley, who said: I came to Morecambe on Saturday morning, and on Monday formed one of the party on the yacht *Matchless*. We started soon after ten o'clock. The tide was just rising, and there were about thirty passengers on board as near as I can tell, the boat being in charge of one man. All went well until we got near Silverdale, up to which time the boatman remained in charge of the rudder.

The Coroner: *Did he leave the rudder for any purpose at all?* - No.

So far as your observation went he was at the rudder when the boat capsized? He did not move from his seat until the actual moment that the boat heeled over? - No.

Had anything been said about his collecting fares? - He said he was going to collect the fares.

Had any of the passengers moved in the boat stood up or changed places? - Three of us were stood up in the front.

Were you standing all the time, or did you get up all of a sudden? - We were stiff with sitting, and got up to stretch ourselves.

Up to that time the wind had been calm, had it not? - Yes.

Did you feel any sudden gust of wind come upon you? - Yes, it took my hat off and blew it into the water.

That was previous to the boat being capsized? - Yes, just before.

The boat being over you were all in the water in a moment? - Yes.

What became of you? I am happy to think you survived! - I can swim.

That is a good thing, and I am glad to hear it. What happened next? - I missed one boat, and was rescued by a rope thrown from behind the second boat.

What became of your boat? - It went from under us.

Has nothing been seen of it since? - Not that I know of.

Did you retain consciousness? - Yes, all the time.

There were no life buoys or belts on the boat, were there? - Not that I saw of.

And you want the jury to understand that the passengers were in perfect order; no getting up or moving from their places at the time the boat capsized? - Yes.

By Joseph Howes (a juror): I do not know who gave the first note of alarm. I have no idea of the depth of water.

The Coroner: *He had plenty of water to swim in. (To witness): Did you go to the bottom? - No.*

Howes: *Was there plenty of room in the boat for the passengers to move about, or were you all jammed in? - We could not all sit.*

The Coroner: *But I understood you to say you had sat? - We were sat in the bow.*

Howes: *Was the sail being changed at the time? - I can't say that he was changing it.*

The Coroner: *Did Houghton say he was going to collect the fares at the time? - I did not hear him.*

BEN ROBINSON'S EVIDENCE

Benjamin Robinson, 47, Burnley, said he came to Morecambe on Saturday morning, and by his watch the time they set sail was ten minutes past ten. He did not count the passengers, but should say they would be 28 or 30.

The boat was in charge of one man? - Yes, he was a big man.

All went well until you came off Silverdale and then what happened?

What part of the boat were you in? - I was next to Boothman. We both got a bit stiff and jumped up, but we had been stood up some time before the disaster happened. The wind took Boothman's billycock. I clung to the side of the boat, and when I was thrown into the water I "lasted" to the other boat was coming to the rescue.

Can you swim? - I did my best to swim. I could just swim when I was a boy.

When it is once learned it is always there. You would have a good view of the boatman, did you see him move from his seat? - No, he never moved. He was all the time from starting in charge of the rudder.

Did you hear him say anything about collecting the fares? - No, I never did.

He did not move from his seat to handle the sails or change them in any way? - Not at all. All went well and they were all singing when the wind came and Boothman's billycock went and the boat heeled right over; nothing could stop it.

EDWARD GARDNER'S EVIDENCE

Edward Gardner, fisherman and boatman, Morecambe, was next called.

The Coroner: *Were you sailing your boat with passengers from Morecambe to Grange on Monday?* - Yes, at the very same time, between ten and eleven o'clock.

How many passengers had you? - I think I had about seventeen and a half - a child.

Had you anyone to assist you? - No, sir, just myself.

Was it high water? - It was high water that day about 1.45, that would make it two o'clock at Grange.

What depth of tide? - 18 or 20 feet:- There would be about 20 feet of water. I am only saying this; the tide table would tell you exactly.

Well, you know, you are a sort of walking tide table? - Well, yes; it was what we should call a 20 foot tide.

Did you experience anything of this gust of wind? - Yes; I cannot say I felt it with the same force as Houghton; but I felt the same breeze, because I was near to him, and it came from the same direction.

You boatmen have some experience of seeing these gusts by the surface of the water being ruffled, have you not? - Yes, we can see a breeze a mile away.

Did you see this? - I saw it coming on the water.

How far off? - I will describe it to you as it came. We had just got over the junction in the channel, and were making a direct course for

Grange, when this puff seemed to catch the boats right ahead and actually filled the sails aback. I just looked over the weather side and thought the next breeze will be an ordinary breeze, and so I never altered the course of the boat, but the breeze seemed to catch the boat right abeam. It was more like a whirlwind than anything else.

How far were you from Houghton's boat at the time? - I should think about 100 yards.

Then you could see everything that was going on? - Yes. I cannot say that I saw Houghton do anything.

Did you see the boat heel over? - Yes.

And then I take it you made all haste you could to render aid to the people in the water? - Yes, we worked round and made for the biggest mass of people that were afloat.

How many people were you the means of saving? - Six alive and one dead.

What became of Houghton's boat? - I watched it fill and go down. It appeared to go right from under their feet.

Mr Tilly (solicitor acting for Houghton): *How long have you been connected with sailing?* - About five and twenty years.

I believe this is the first accident of this kind that has happened? - Yes, it is to my recollection.

Do you know Houghton's boat? - Yes I have known her very well ever since she was a boat.

What sort of a boat was it with regard to its size? - I should call it the very best of boats, and the biggest.

And Houghton himself, is he an experienced sailor and fisherman? - Yes, I should say he is thoroughly experienced, as far as experience at sea goes. He is one of the most experienced of our men, and I should say very competent.

Can you tell us what particular sails he had set? - He had a mainsail and topsail. We were both "dodging"⁴¹ at the time. He had also a jib out and the foresail down.

How was the Matchless constructed with regard to working the ropes and sails? - Being brought up single-handed we have a way of having

⁴¹ "Dodging" presumably means tacking.

the boars so rigged so that everything, as in driving a horse, is close at hand at the tiller.

Then sitting at the tiller you are able to work the whole of the sails? - Yes.

So then assuming that Houghton was sitting at the tiller all the time, he would be in the proper place for managing the boat? - Yes, in the proper place.

You say you are all brought up to work these boats single-handed? - Yes; all the year round, both fishing and sailing. We go as single-handed men to sail yachts at Windermere.

What is your practice in Morecambe Bay with regard to taking someone extra at the bow? - When it is a breezy day we have a practice followed by all the companies of taking another man, who goes to assist in dropping the anchor, getting the boat alongside at the far end, and then starting off, but there is nothing else for him to do. If Houghton had had another man with him he would have had no further command over the breeze. It was an exceptionally queer one, and you might never have another like it. I was over the ground yesterday towing in the boats that had been in search, and the wind was in the same direction. There were gusts of wind, but none like that. It seemed to go from west to east, and the boat seemed to fill on the leeward side, and when it had got sufficient water it seemed to stand up and then back down stern first. The passengers of course went to the higher part of the boat, but it left them in the water. I put our boat about and then sailed round, and there were passengers here and there shouting and struggling, but I made for the mast where the biggest lot of people were. We saved what we could, and gave every assistance we could.

The Coroner: *Yes, we are sure about that.*

Mr Tilly: *Can you suggest anything that Houghton should have done - that is, assuming he had seen the gust coming?* - I can't say that he could have done anything, unless he had let go the sails. I mean letting the sheets fly; not letting the sails tumble.

Was the boat of sufficient capacity to carry thirty people? - Yes, quite. Its sitting accommodation would be six and twenty. Then they sit on the fore-castle and close to the man at the tiller as well. They were all inside the boat when she was sailing up the channel. She is

much bigger than most of the boats going now. It was fine before and after the gust came. Sometimes the wind strikes down and not so much along the water. In such cases it is much more serious.

The Coroner: *Is your boat your own property, or the property of the Company?* - It is my own.

JOSEPH WILSON'S EVIDENCE

Joseph Wilson, fisherman, Clark Street, Morecambe, said he was sailing in the same course as the *Matchless* with about 30 passengers, and was alone in charge of his boat. He would be about half a mile ahead of the *Matchless* when the accident happened, and saw her going down by the stern before she finally disappeared. He shouted to another boat, and they both headed down as quickly as possible. He picked up two persons out of the water, but they seemed quite dead. There was an odd bluff or two, but he did not experience anything extraordinary.

RICHARD GARDNER'S EVIDENCE

Richard Gardner, fisherman and boatman, Morecambe, said he was coming up the channel about half a mile ahead of the *Matchless*. He had only about eleven passengers, but his boat would have held as many again if he could have got them. Happening to look round at the time he saw the *Matchless* heel over, and made all haste to reach the scene. It was rather puffy, but Houghton's boat seemed to have had the wind "extra to what they had", but he never had to alter his course. The *Matchless* was a very powerful boat and was quite capable of carrying thirty-odd passengers. They could not hurt a boat with carrying passengers if they could all sit comfortably.

The Coroner: *But would you call it comfortable if they had to go and sit at the bow?* - Witness: They would go and sit there if there were only four or five inside. They like it.

By Mr Tilly: I had no one to help me. The *Matchless* is constructed to work from the tiller.

SAMUEL HOUGHTON'S EVIDENCE

Samuel Houghton, the boatman who was in charge of the *Matchless*, said he was the owner of the boat, which was built by Mr Woodhouse,

of Overton, about seventeen years ago at Whitsuntide. She had never been even caulked since she was built, and did not require pumping more than once a week. She took about 2½ tons of ballast, and her tonnage would be about 5 tons. He set sail about a quarter past ten, with 26 people on board and a few children, as near as he could tell.

The Coroner: *Well, we can account for 33, and we want to know what you say?* - I counted 26 up-grown people, and there was a little girl beside me, a little boy beside the pump, and a young man held a child.

If the evidence shows there were 33 passengers you could not contradict it? - No I can't.

How many passengers at the most have you ever carried? - I had 30 from Grange a few years since with a double-reefed main sail. Last year I had a school trip, with teachers and scholars, to the number of 34. I have been at Fleetwood with 25, but it being fine on Monday I said I had quite plenty, although more wanted to get in. All went well until we were just past the weir raised in the Warton land scheme. Some of the party were singing, and I never went lighter.

When all of a sudden the boat capsized? - She rather came aback, and was thrown on her side, as if the bluff had caught her alongside.

Did you see anything of the bluff coming your way? - It seemed rather dark over my bow, but just before that a passenger had said "we have stopped altogether," and then the jib came abaft, and the first move was that it pitched the boat right over.

Did you let go your ropes at the tiller? - There was time for nothing. It struck her, and she went right overhead.

What became of you? Can you swim? - When she heeled over, I got hold of the beam, and a seat came out about twelve feet long, and I kept afloat with that.

You never answered my question about your being able to swim! - I could only swim a little as a lad, and I never was in the water for 30 years or more.

Had you any life-buoys or belts on board? - No, sir.

Supposing you had had a man at the look-out at the bow of the boat, would he not have been of some assistance? - If I had had the sheets in hand he would have been of no use at the sheets.

Therefore, if you had had time to turn your boat round you would have saved the passengers? - Oh, yes.

What became of the boat? - It has gone overhead.

Buried in the sand? - Yes.

Nothing to be seen of it? - A dead eye⁴² was showing yesterday.

Have you got your licence? - It is at home.

At this point Houghton was sent home to get his paperwork, from which the Coroner read extracts stating that the boat was sound, and that the licensee would maintain it in good condition and in a state of efficiency. He obtained it from the Local Board in May last, by applying to Mr Bond, the Surveyor. He did not go over the boat with Mr Bond before the licence was granted.

Then I take it he issued the licence without having seen the boat? - Yes. He obtained a requisition stating that he intended to apply for a licence, and afterwards attended before the Local Board, who granted the licence. He was not aware that anyone surveyed the boat on behalf of the Board.

Joseph Howes (juror): *Is there any restriction at all as to the number of passengers a boat may carry?* - No.

Howes then proceeded to put a number of questions to witness and also to Mr Tilly (Clerk to the Local Board), from which it transpired that the Board granted licences also to hackney carriages, but required that each carriage should be surveyed before the licence was granted. The number of passengers to be carried by each conveyance was also specified.

The Coroner produced and read Bye-Law No 3, passed in 1855, when Mr Tetley was Chairman of the Local Board, which stated that no boatman or person in charge of a boat should at any time carry a greater number of passengers than was consistent with a due observance of precautions for their safety, remarking that the matter was left absolutely to the discretion of the boatman.

⁴² A dead-eye is a small round wooden disc with holes in, and is part of the rigging system of sailing boats

Howes: But they do not leave it to the absolute discretion of a hackney carriage.

The Coroner: That is an observation I cannot deal with.

Tilly (to Houghton): *Is it true that your boat was “stable and the hull sound, and its equipment complete and in good condition”?* - Yes.

The Coroner: *When was the boat last overhauled?* - Last back end.

Since that time she has not been looked at? - No; she was tight from keel to gunwale.

Were any questions put to you when you applied for your licence? - I can't remember now.

POLICE INSPECTOR HODGSON'S EVIDENCE

During the interval in which Houghton went for his licence Inspector Hodgson was called in evidence. He stated that he first received information of the disaster about a quarter past one on Monday, when he heard that a man had been drowned. He at once made for the Prince's Landing Stage with a number of men, and found a boat with four bodies, which he at once had removed to the mortuary. Sixteen bodies had hitherto been recovered, nine persons were rescued, and nine were still missing.

The missing were:-

Alice Greenwood, 38 years, Burnley

Arthur Clegg, 4 years, Burnley

Edith Webster, 5 years, Skipton

Mary Alice Webster, 26 years, Skipton

Florence Carter, 26 years, Bradford

Sarah Whitehead, 42 years, Burnley

Fred Whitehead, 14 months, Burnley

Elijah Monks, 60 years, Bolton

Eliza Ann Heaton, 14 years, Gorton near Manchester

Altogether, including the boatman, there were 34 people on board. The police had obtained the names of the missing from friends and relatives, who had given information that they knew positively that the persons named had been on the boat.

The Coroner said he might as well take that opportunity of saying that he was very pleased with the conduct of the police. He thought every praise was due to them for their smartness and energy in recovering the bodies, and no one could have been more assiduous, and they were deserving of that recognition for their promptitude.

John Bland (a juror): Might I ask why the Local Board do not restrict the number of passengers carried by these boats? - The Coroner: Because they have not the power. (This was not exactly correct - The Local Board could easily have acquired the power to restrict passenger numbers, as turned out to be the practise at some other resorts).

The inquest was then adjourned for an hour, for lunch, and upon its resumption the Coroner addressed the jury.

THE CORONER'S SUMMING UP

The Coroner said they had arrived at the end of this appalling disaster, which must have left many households in sorrow for long years to come. If by any means such disasters could be prevented in future by any means which they might be able to suggest those people might not have died in vain. A casualty like that was sure to call the attention of the entire kingdom through its overwhelming consequences, and public attention being called to it should be satisfied that everything had been done which could possibly, by legal means or human precautions, be done to save the lives of the passengers.

The day and the tide were both perfectly favourable to an excursion on the bay. The boatman was an experienced hand without any question; that he was perfectly sober was beyond all question; his boat appeared to have been well founded, although it had not been overhauled for some time, but he presumed it had been sailing daily on the bay, and nothing had happened to it until this fatal morning, when all of a sudden a squall came on, and he as well as his passengers were overwhelmed in the bay.

He asked the jury to look for a moment at what might have happened if ordinary precautions had been used. A few life buoys or belts might have been the means of saving them all. Why, therefore, should no stipulation be made by the authorities that no man should embark so many human lives without taking ordinary precautions for saving them when danger threatened?

A boatman could not sail his boat without a licence, and the only stipulation which the Local Board made was as to the condition of the boat; the number of persons carried was left entirely at his discretion. Some unhappy omnibus man who took an odd passenger standing on the foot-board was liable to the criminal law for exceeding his licence, whereas the man was in no danger whatever, and was often an assenting party to standing there. There should be some power, local or imperial, to put such restrictions upon the owners of the boats as would render passengers less liable to danger.

The Local Board had no power whatever to limit the number, or they would have done so. They granted the licence to the boatman upon his statement as to what the boat consisted of, and they had to take his word as to whether it was well formed. But there should also be restrictions as to the number he should take unless he had other hands on board to assist him in managing the vessel and life buoys or belts on board to use in case of danger.

It did not commend itself to one's judgement that a man could take thirty passengers on board without some assistance. It seems to be the rule at Morecambe. To put it pithily it was a 'one man one boat' system. But supposing Houghton had had a boy or man at the outlook, how was it possible for them to tell that he might not have seen the bluff coming on and called attention to the fact that it was coming broadside? If he could have turned his boat round a yard or so there would have been no danger whatever.

They had, however, to deal with the law as it stood. The Local Board seemed to have no power, and if they had not they ought to have - (*hear, hear*) - but the Board of Trade *had*, and he should call their

attention to the matter and send along certificates, and state the opinion that some restrictions should be placed upon the number of passengers, and a survey of the boats made before the licence was granted.

Passing over this question for the time, the jury had now to decide how these people came to their deaths, and was anyone blameable for it.

Houghton had given his evidence very well indeed - credibly and creditably. He had stated nothing to suggest he was disabled by any means in the management of the vessel. Gardner said that as far as he could see the vessel was going on all right until the squall came. But the result was that they were all immersed in the sea.

The boatman could not swim, and he believed no Morecambe boatman could. There was no precaution for the safety of passengers, and no less than twenty-five were overwhelmed in the sea and drowned. Of course none of the passengers were to blame. They seem to have kept their seats and did not rush about; in fact, the squall was too sudden.

The boatman held on to his tiller. All sorts of wild rumours had been flying amongst the passengers, as to his collection of fares, but his evidence and that of the passengers was that he never let go the tiller until he was cast into the sea. He did not think the evidence warranted any reflection upon the skill of the boatman - (*hear, hear*) - or upon his management of the boat.

There was only one verdict therefore that they could return, and that was that the disaster was entirely the result of an accident which no human foresight could control. If the appliances he had named had been on board their duties would have been less severe and melancholy.

The jury considered the evidence in private, and after ten minutes' retirement the Foreman said they had unanimously arrived at a

verdict of “*Accidentally drowned*”, and that no blame was attached to anyone. They wished to exonerate the boatman from any carelessness or blame whatever, and also to thank the Coroner for his summing up, and for his promise to recommend certain things to the Board of Trade. The jury also wished him to mention the heroic conduct of the boatmen, Edward and Richard Gardner, and asked the Coroner to mention their conduct to the Humane Society with a view to securing some award for them.

The Coroner: I will do so with pleasure. I entirely concur in the verdict, and am obliged to the jury for their reference to myself.

The Foreman: The jury also wish to express their deepest sympathy with the relatives of those lost.

The Coroner: With that I need hardly say I entirely concur.

Addressing the two Gardners the Coroner said the jury wished him to thank them both for the prompt aid they had rendered to these people, and especially Richard (*he meant Edward!*) for having rescued so many lives.

Both men briefly replied.

The Foreman said there was a whole host of search parties who had spent a considerable time in searching for the bodies, and the only way in which they could be acknowledged was through the Coroner.

The Coroner briefly expressed his thanks and those of the public. He understood that the Local Board were liberally supporting an appeal, in some measure to repay the searchers for their work and assistance. (*Hear, hear*).

Mr Bland mentioned that there were about 40 persons out at that time.

The Coroner: I think it will be quite in consonance with the feelings of the Morecambe people.

The Foreman said the Local Board had formed themselves into a committee to receive subscriptions, and had undertaken to pay all expenses for the carrying of the corpses to their houses.

The Coroner: That is very good.

APPENDIX 3

The Morecambe Fisherman's Association and the Distressing Drowning Calamity at Morecambe.

**TO THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN BEREAVED BY THE BOATING DISASTER
WHEREBY 25 PERSONS LOST THEIR LIVES.**

Dear Friends,

It is with inexpressible grief that we, the fishermen and boatmen of Morecambe, are hereby called upon to mourn with you the melancholy accident to one of our yachts on Monday, the 3rd inst., whereby 25 persons lost their lives.

It is with sincere sympathy that we beg to offer our condolence to those who have been bereaved on this occasion, and we hasten to tender our heartfelt sorrow because we deeply deplore along with you the serious loss of life.

It has always been the daily care of every boatman on the bay to preserve life, and we have always considered the lives of our passengers as precious as our own.

This being the first accident of the kind in Morecambe Bay in connection with our yachts, we cannot express too strongly our surprise and distress at the sad calamity, and we feel sure that those who have any knowledge of Morecambe Bay and the boatmen will exonerate us from all imputations of carelessness or incompetency.

We desire to say that we have been reared from childhood as sailors in the district, and we are thoroughly conversant with the management of any and every kind of sailing craft used on the Bay. We work the same yachts single-handed during the winter months in all kinds of weather, and we seldom have the slightest mishap. We

traverse the Bay at all times of the night, in deep darkness, during squalls and gales, and we rarely have to lament the death of one of our comrades.

That accidents have happened, and will happen, is beyond doubt, and we explain this to the bereaved to assure them that the cause of the accident was one of those unaccountable experiences which is beyond the control of human beings.

The awful calamity is one which calls forth our Christian friendship, and this letter of condolence conveys the loving sympathy of ourselves, and our wives and families, to all who have been called upon to suffer by the disaster, and we hope that you will accept the sincere assurances herein expressed as emanating from those who have hearts to feel for those who suffer.

Signed on behalf of the Morecambe Fishermen's Association,

We are,

Yours faithfully,

WALTER BAXTER, JOHN BIRKETT, JAMES ALLEN, JOHN GARDNER, LUKE WOODHOUSE, JOSEPH BELL, EDWARD GARDNER⁴³, Secretary

Morecambe, 7th September, 1894

⁴³ It is not known whether this is the Edward Gardner that was the principal rescuer. It is more likely to be an older Edward Gardner who lived in Morecambe at that time, also a fisherman.

APPENDIX 4 - PRESS COMMENTARY

Whilst most of the scores of press articles were concerned with the facts of the case, a number decried the lack of a safety regime in Morecambe, and criticised the inquests too. The following extracts give a flavour of the language directed at the proceedings in Morecambe.

... in the height of the holiday season the love of pelf (*i.e. money*) may lead capable boatmen to encounter risks which ought not to be undertaken.

Burnley Express, September 5th

... Nothing can be more noticeable than the difference that exists between one seaside resort and another. In some cases the boatmen appear to take just as many passengers as they think fit; in others the greatest care is shown not only to keep the number well within bounds, but also to have on board men enough to have the vessel absolutely under control, whatever might befall.

... At Filey, for instance, only five persons are allowed to sail together in a coble, and they must be in charge of two men.

Bradford Observer, September 5th

... For one man to take out thirty odd persons is to invite a catastrophe.

Manchester Evening News, September 5th

... But if it is considered safe at Morecambe to allow boatmen to crowd their boats to the point when “standing room only” is available, to go out singly in charge of thirty four persons, and to carry no lifesaving appliances, visitors may be excused if they give the boats a very wide berth.

Manchester Evening News, September 6th

... everything has ended as comfortably and as smoothly as the local authorities could desire; and we are only surprised that the jury did not see their way to add a rider to their verdict congratulating the

people of Morecambe on the successful issue of their boat-hiring system from the trying ordeal to which it has lately been subjected.

Birmingham Daily Post, September 6th

... All persons acquainted with seaside resorts are aware of the fact that residents have to keep up the reputation of the place they live in - their sympathies are with their fellow resident, and not with visitors; and under these circumstances I cannot regard the verdict in this case as unbiased.

Birmingham Daily Post, September 7th

... The want of all adequate regulation for the pleasure service at Morecambe is a public scandal, as well as a public danger.

Bury and Norwich Post, September 11th

... It was considered remarkable that the chairman of the Local Board, a body which might under some circumstances have been held by the jury to be some extent responsible for the accident, should be permitted to act on the jury.

... Inquests are dealt with on a very different system to this in these parts, even in immeasurably smaller matters; but perhaps the two coroners in question would think that we greatly overdo the thing.

Bradford Observer, September 13th