

2.10.1874



A photograph taken by Dr William Collins on the morning of the explosion.

# Blow-up Bridge

**STANLEY HOLLAND** investigates what really happened

It is not unusual for authors to introduce real people or actual historical events into their novels, and there is little doubt that this will often help the reader to get immersed in the story and believe that it all really happened. This could well come about when people read Joan Lock's recent book entitled *Dead Image*, for this takes as its thesis the suggestion that, when the famous explosion occurred on the Regent's Canal in 1874, resulting in the total destruction of a boat, the demolition of Macclesfield Bridge, and the death of several boatmen, another body was found, that of a young woman whose identity was not known. It is an intriguing suggestion and it got me thinking about that tragedy of long ago, and what really happened then.

Macclesfield Bridge, soon to be known as 'Blow-up Bridge' as a result of the tragedy, crosses the Regent's Canal roughly at the north-western corner of London's Regent's Park – if you will accept that an area that is almost circular can have a corner. It was built very solidly with three brick arches, supported in the centre by two rows of sturdy cast-iron columns (ten in all) made in Coalbrookdale. The carriage-way on top had attractive iron railings on either side, and it was a very

handsome structure, entirely worthy of the Earl of Macclesfield, Chairman of the Canal Company, after whom it was named.

In the mid-nineteenth century when the explosion occurred, the canal was still extensively used for commercial purposes, although by the 1870s the railways were attracting a lot of traffic away from them. In the event of an accident, however, the slower pace of horse-drawn canal boats made them a safer form of transport for explosives, and the absence of a high-pressure boiler and its attendant firebox was also a factor that made them more attractive. As a result, as representatives of the boat's owners, the Grand Junction Canal Company, acknowledged in evidence at the subsequent inquest, they regularly carried substantial quantities of explosives, and the cargo carried on *Tilbury*, the doomed boat, on Friday 2nd October 1874 was therefore by no means unusual. The cargo consisted of a quantity of mixed goods, two or three barrels of petroleum and about five tons of gunpowder that had been made at the Waltham Abbey Mills and was bound for Codnor Park near Nottingham for use in blasting. *Tilbury* was one →

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## BLOW-UP BRIDGE

of several boats that had left the City Road Basin at about three o'clock that morning under tow by a steamer (the *Ready*) heading towards their destination. Behind *Ready* was a fly-boat named *Jane* (steerer Boswell) carrying a small quantity of gunpowder, followed by *Dee* (steerer Edwards), *Tilbury* (steerer Charles Baxton of Loughborough), *Limehouse* (steerer Edward Hall) and *Hawksbury* (*sic*), whose steerer was named Blewer.

Just before 5 o'clock on the fateful morning, when the *Tilbury* was under Macclesfield Bridge, the gunpowder on the boat became ignited and an enormous explosion occurred. The boat was blown to pieces and all those on board were killed. According to early reports there were four fatalities: Baxton, about 35 years of age, William Taylor, a labourer aged 25, another man and a boy, but this tally could not be relied on, partly because only the steerers were directly engaged by the carrying company and these individuals were responsible for employing any assistants they might need, and their names were not readily available.

Damage caused by the explosion was extensive. Another barge was sunk and the bridge was completely demolished. Bricks and other debris were thrown about in all directions and the heavy cast-iron columns, along with the bricks inside them, were tossed around like nine-pins. The nearby house of the Park Superintendent was completely wrecked and there was a great deal of damage to glass in the Zoological Society's



Another photograph taken shortly after the disaster

gardens. Other nearby houses also suffered extensive damage to windows, walls, furniture and roofs, and one house, although about 300 yards away, suffered badly when part of the *Tilbury's* keel fell onto its roof and went right through to the basement. Additional chaos was caused by the inevitable fracturing of gas and water mains carried on the bridge, and telegraph wires were also severed, so hampering communications during the rescue work.

The loud explosion roused many residents from their slumbers, and they rushed out into the streets in all states of undress and in complete panic, wondering whether the end of the world had come. Police and fire brigade were soon on the scene, and the colonel in charge of the Horse Guards in Albany Barracks sent a detachment of armed men to the scene to deal with what he feared might be an insurrection of some sort connected with the Fenians, who had mounted raids only a few years before in an attempt to establish an Irish Republic.

Among those who hastened to the scene was Dr William Collins, who lived nearby at Albert Terrace, Primrose Hill. Later that day he took photographs, one of which passed in 1946 to a grandson, Leslie Collins of Highgate, who kindly let me have a copy. Dr Collins gave evidence at the subsequent inquest and left a written account of the explosion and its aftermath, in which he described the "loud and deafening report which fearfully shook the very foundations of the premises," and "the tremendous crash" from the breaking of plate and glass. Out in the street he witnessed "an extraordinary scene – men, women and children, rushing about in a state of semi-nudity and uttering the most hideous cries. One lady in her nightdress clung to me exclaiming, 'Is it come? Is it come?' We were enveloped in a dense, suffocating smoke; the wild beasts in the gardens screaming too, for their very lives."

At the inquest on those on board *Tilbury* who lost their lives, the dangerous cargo on the boat was duly noted, as also was the fact that there was an open fire in the cabin, and also a lamp. Although the effects of the explosion were serious, it was



An artist's impression in the *Illustrated London News* on 10th October 1874 showing dredging for bodies under way.



realised later, when the dust had, quite literally, settled, that the damage and loss of life could have been a lot worse. The explosion occurred where the canal is in a cutting, so that its force was to some extent directed upwards, where it would obviously do less harm. On the other hand, the cutting channelled some of the blast along the canal causing damage, albeit of a lesser kind, much further away. The timing was also fortunate. As the *Illustrated London News* pointed out on 10th October, had the explosion occurred half an hour earlier or later, or in the tunnel under Islington, the effects could have been inconceivably worse.

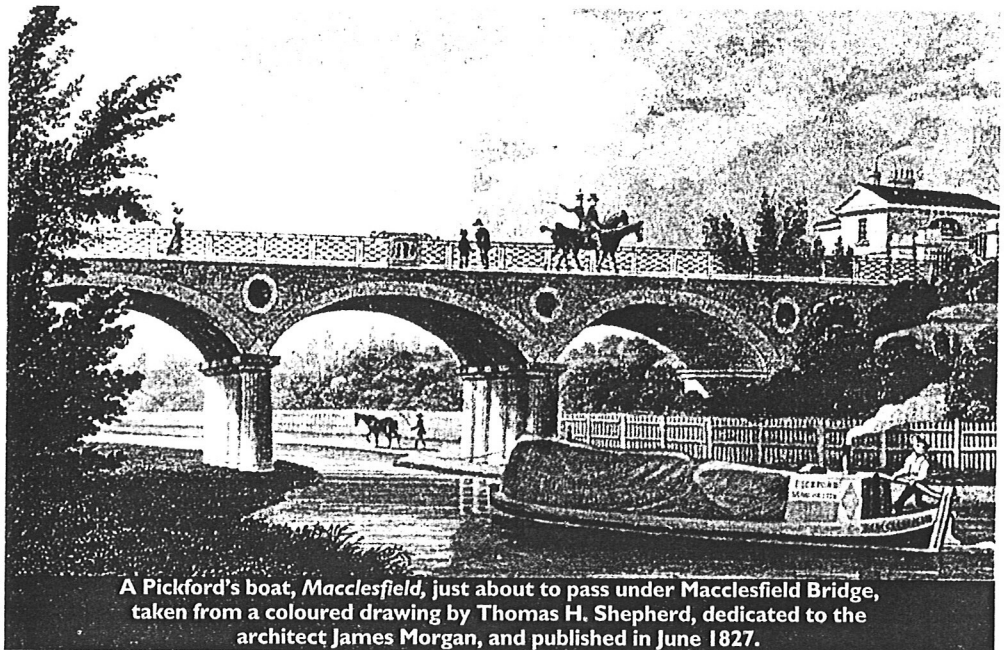
They quoted an expert as saying, "that dip saved London". Even so, the shocking news of the disaster had spread so widely, no doubt losing nothing in the telling, that the newspaper felt obliged to reassure readers that "London is still standing."

The newspaper made very forceful comments about the risks to the public resulting from the transport of explosives. There was already a Gunpowder Act of 1860, but its provisions were inadequate and not being properly observed, leaving the carriage of gunpowder, nitro-glycerine, and substances of a similar kind virtually unregulated. They urged the government to take prompt action to introduce proper safety controls and, as a result of this and other protests, the Explosives Act was passed in 1875 in order to introduce essential safeguards. This was a positive benefit to come out of the disaster.

The event left another reminder of a lasting kind. When the bridge came to be rebuilt, it was found that the iron columns had survived the explosion, so they were reused. Rather quaintly, they were installed with the rope marks on the 'wrong' side, presumably so that the other side could take some of the wear for a change.


The inquest, held in the Marylebone Workhouse, had to be adjourned several times, partly because a vital witness, William White off the *Dee* (he was a labourer whose only home was on the boat), had been in hospital and too ill to attend, but with the help of his evidence the jury was eventually able to reach a verdict on 19th October. By this time, it was possible to get a more accurate picture of the events: the canal had been cleared and reopened within five days of the tragedy, and the exact number of those killed was known. There were only three after all: Charles Baxton, William Taylor and Jonathan Holloway of Oldbury, who all met their deaths, according to the verdict "by an explosion of gunpowder on board the *Tilbury* . . . caused by the ignition of the vapour of benzolene by fire or light in the cabin of *Tilbury*". The jury further found that "in the stowage or transport of the cargo, the GJCC omitted proper precautions and were guilty of gross negligence". They added, "We further say that the existing statutory laws are entirely inadequate to ensure the public safety in these matters".

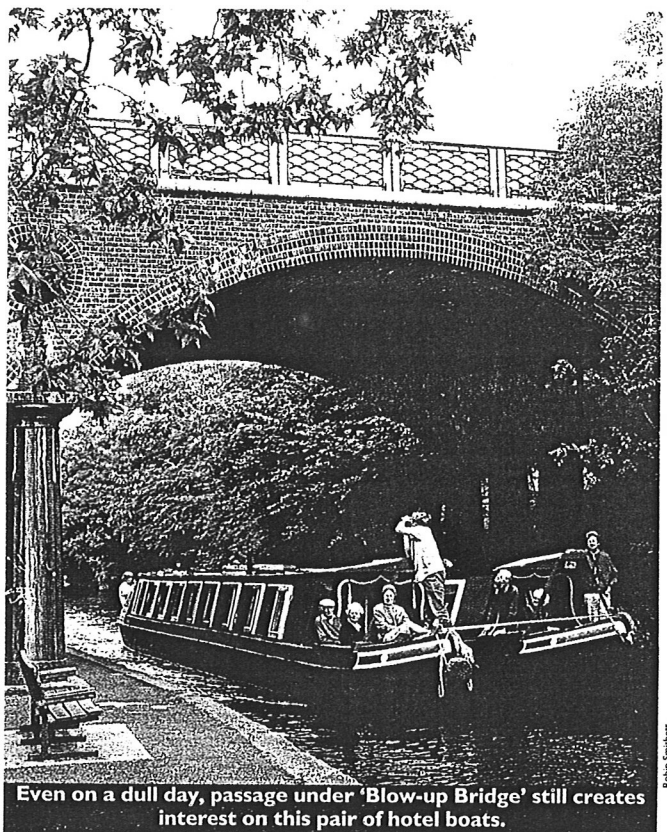
On behalf of the GJCC it was announced at the inquest that since Wednesday 14th October they had stopped carrying



A Pickford's boat, Macclesfield, just about to pass under Macclesfield Bridge, taken from a coloured drawing by Thomas H. Shepherd, dedicated to the architect James Morgan, and published in June 1827.

gunpowder altogether. If carried safely, it was profitable cargo as it was charged at twice the normal rate, but impending compensation claims had obviously got them worried. Ironically, the differential rate did not apply to benzoline, which had caused the initial explosion that ignited the gunpowder.

So that's the real story, and the actual number of people who died. Or is it? In the light of the early confusion, it seems quite possible that Joan Lock could be right, and there was indeed a young woman on board. It's a spooky thought. 



Even on a dull day, passage under 'Blow-up Bridge' still creates interest on this pair of hotel boats.