

Death on the canal

This article records a selection of deaths canal-related deaths in the World Heritage Site area in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is not comprehensive, being mainly derived from those newspapers on-line at the time of the research in 2014.

William Evan

William Evan of Vron, aged nine, used to help his uncle drive the donkeys and steer his boat. One morning in 1874 he had gone before sunrise to fetch the donkeys which had been let loose for grazing. At about 8am the uncle found the donkeys close to the boat, and he assumed that William had gone home. The following day he met the boy's mother who said that he had not come back. A search was started; late that afternoon the boy was found in the canal.¹

John Williams

In 1877 John Williams, the assistant foreman at the Pentrefelin wharf of the Llangollen Slate & Slab Company, had fastened two slabs weighing about 5cwt in total on the chain of the travelling crane and given the order to move them over to the waiting boat when one side of the beam broke. He was guiding the slabs with his hand, and his leg was crushed when they fell; a week later he died of his injuries. The crane was used about every other day for a couple of hours at a time, and on that day it had already been used several times, including for weights significantly more.²

Children

The most common circumstances leading to canal deaths was young children playing by the water and falling in. This particularly applied to the age group from two to four years old. Older children were more aware of the danger, incidents were fewer, and the children were generally doing a specific activity, rather than just playing.

After a child had fallen through a gap in the railings on Chirk Aqueduct in 1914, wire netting was fixed to prevent a recurrence.³

Because of climate change, canals used to freeze over more often than they do now. Ice skating (or sliding) was popular, and several deaths were recorded when children attempted to go onto ice that was dangerously thin.

Elizabeth Thomas

Drunkenness was by far the most common contributing factor to the death of adults not working on the canal system.

Elizabeth Thomas was returning with her husband from Llangollen to their home at Llantisilio in 1873 — they went by train to Berwyn station, then descended to cross the Chain Bridge and called in at the inn there. Later they walked along to the footbridge over the entrance to the canal feeder at Horseshoe Falls, which then had no handrail. She thought she was stepping onto the bridge but fell into the water; her husband was in no state to rescue her.⁴

Samuel Wynne

An unprotected bridge was also partly to blame for the death of Samuel Wynne Jones in 1883. He had been manager of the Gardden Lodge Colliery at Ruabon and of the Brynkinallt Colliery at Chirk, but at the time of the accident was out of work. That day he was trying to find a new house. On the way home in the evening he called in at the Canal Tavern, Pontcysyllte. He left it about 9.30pm on a very dark night, with the intention of following the tramway route home, but at the bridge over the Plas Kynaston Canal he fell into the water, striking his head on the kerbstone of the canal. His body was found the following morning. He left eleven children, most of whom were very young.⁵

David Roberts

In 1887 David Roberts of Froncysyllte was found floating in the water, just to the south of Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. That afternoon he crossed the aqueduct to meet someone at Cefn Mawr, and he returned over it at about 8pm, by which time it was dark and the towpath was icy. Because of the bruising he suffered, it was speculated that his foot may have caught on the iron grating on the towpath, causing him to stumble, and that in the fall into the water he hit his head on the iron edge of the towpath, stunning him. He was certainly not intoxicated.⁶

Algernon Fletcher

Drowning was not the only risk from swimming in canals. When in 1900 Algernon Fletcher, an expert swimmer, was giving lessons in the Plas Kynaston Canal to some of his fellow workers he caught typhoid from the water polluted with effluent from Cefn Mawr and died a fortnight later.⁷

Edward Hughes

Another death involving the Plas Kynaston Canal occurred in 1894 when Edward Hughes (aged 19) attempted to jump across it, as he often did. He stepped backwards to get a run for his jump but fell 40 feet into a disused lime kiln.⁸

Jane Davies

Canals are good places to hide corpses. They usually first sink, and when they reappear a week or two later it may be several hundred yards from where they were put into the water. This delay in finding a body was quite usual: after a period depending on the age and size of the victim, the gases created by the contents of the stomach decaying would cause the body to rise to the surface of the water. By far the most common type of murder was of a newborn child or very young baby. Usually nothing more was known.

Margaret Davies gave birth to Jane in Corwen Workhouse but when she returned to her mother's house at Llansainffraid Glyn Ceiriog in snowy weather on Saturday 10 March 1855 she did not have the child with her, claiming it had died at Corwen and was buried in the churchyard there. The investigating police officer did not believe her story and arrested her. Later Margaret said she had walked from Corwen to Llangollen and then on to Froncysyllte, where she went down to the canal, crossed the bridge and followed the

towpath hoping to get a lift on a boat to Newmarton Locks. The child had wet itself, and just short of the tunnel she went up the bank over a stile intending to change its clothes. However, she then turned back, thinking that somebody had called her name, went to the mouth of the tunnel. There she took the shawl off the child, and holding it by its feet bathed it with its head in the water — showing the Constable the manner of her doing so, swinging herself backwards and forwards. Then she said, ‘I pushed it in the water and ran off to the Glyn.’

At the trial, the constable to whom she had confessed added some dramatic details to what he had told the inquest. He related that Margaret Davies had told him that when sitting on a wall by the canal she felt some evil influence — the Devil, she averred — seized her and called her by her name. She took the child ‘by its little feet’, put it in the canal and left it. After that she kept hearing a voice telling her to return and take it out, but thought it would be no use. She then wandered about in great misery. John Jones, a Llangollen surgeon, carried out the post mortem examination. The body had no marks of violence. He had told the inquest that the cause of death was drowning, but in the trial he said he could not tell whether it was drowning or suffocation.

Margaret had pleaded ‘not guilty’; the jury found her guilty but strongly recommended mercy. The judge, Lord Chief Justice Jarvis, put on the black cap and sentenced her to be hanged, but said he would convey the recommendations of the jury. Her sentence was commuted to transportation for life but the following year, whilst in Millbank Prison, London, she died of tuberculosis. The matron said she had been in the infirmary since her reception, and the surgeon attested that during her illness she had been supplied with everything she asked for — she would have died even if she had not been in prison.⁹

John Probert

In 1893 a boatman named John Probert was found in Chirk Tunnel drowned, with an ugly gash on his forehead, having been in the water about three weeks. He had left home with a woman and a child to go to Black Park Basin to collect a load of coal but got off at Chirk Bank to go drinking at the Bridge Inn. The woman left in charge of the boat went on without him — and nothing more was heard of him until his body was discovered.¹⁰ This is almost certainly the same man as was accused of murdering Charles Moston on the canal near Chester in 1877: both John Proberts were reported as living at Pant (near Llanymynech). Coincidence? Or revenge?

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Notes and references

LA: *Llangollen Advertiser*

WA: *Wrexham Advertiser*

SU: Shropshire Union Canal Company Executive Committee minutes

¹ WA, 12 February 1870

² WA, 9 June 1877

³ SU, 14 October 1914

⁴ WA, 20 September 1873

⁵ WA, 8 September 1883

⁶ WA, 15 January 1887

⁷ WA, 21 July 1900

⁸ LA, 27 July 1894

⁹ WA, 14 April & 4 August 1855, 19 April 1856

¹⁰ WA, 30 December 1893