

# The Louth Flood Walk

A linear walk, following the course of the Louth Flood of 29 May 1920, from Bridge Street car park to the Woolpack Inn, at the Riverhead

## *The Louth Flood of 29 May, 1920*

At the time of writing, in the Spring of 2020, it is one hundred years since the terrible events of the Louth Flood, when, in the space of less than half an hour on one Saturday afternoon in late May, twenty-three people lost their lives and hundreds more lost their homes. The events of that fateful day were, until only a few years ago, still remembered by many of Louth's oldest residents, but this is now no longer the case and the Louth Flood has passed into history, to be recalled only in history books and in walks such as this one.



### *(1) In Bridge Street car park*

Standing here, beside the little River Lud, flowing fairly quietly and steadily along, it is hard to imagine that such a small river could ever become a raging torrent, capable of doing great damage, of demolishing houses and sweeping men, women and children to their deaths. The river was not given its name, however, without good reason. 'Lud' or 'Hlud' is an Old English name, meaning the loud one. Just to the west of Louth, seven tributaries converge to join the Lud, so that the river's catchment area is larger than might be expected, and when there has been prolonged heavy rain on the Wolds the river can

indeed become a loud one, even – as in 2007 – a dangerous one, capable of flooding any properties in its path. And if the river has not been maintained properly, if rubbish and debris has been allowed to accumulate and form a natural dam - as happened in 1920, just three miles upstream from Louth, at Little Welton – then a wall of water can quickly build up when there is heavy rain and, when the dam gives way, cause considerable flooding and even endanger life.

If we were standing here, watching the river, at about 4.30 pm on that Saturday afternoon, on 29 May, we might notice that the Lud was a little higher than usual and flowing rather faster than usual, but there would be nothing to suggest the terrible events which were about to befall the town. It had been raining heavily in the town earlier that afternoon, particularly between 2.00 and 3.00 pm, and we would see, from the darkness of the sky, that it was raining even more heavily a few miles to the west. But we would be unaware that the heavy rain was already beginning to cause much damage in some of the Wolds villages: that the rain had swept so much soil on to the railway tracks that the train from Louth had been forced to stop at Withcall, that at that very moment the school and a number of cottages at Welton le Wold were being flooded by four feet of water, and - most ominous of all - that a lake of water up to thirty feet deep, was beginning to form at Little Welton, where the river was blocked.

Half an hour later, however, we would be running for our lives. At 5.00 o'clock, almost exactly, a wall of water fourteen feet high hit the town, demolishing first the parapet on Westgate Bridge, almost drowning Mr Osbourne and his horses as he tried to cross the bridge in his horse-drawn businette, and then rushing along Westgate, in a swathe of water fifty yards wide, sweeping anything in its path before it, including ornamental bridges, every type of garden furniture, a summer house and the pigs and hens which lived in the back yard of the Wheatsheaf Inn, before crashing into the bridge here at Bridge Street, and demolishing the parapet here as well.



*Fig. 1: The bridge on Westgate. The parapet walls have been swept away.*

## ***(2) From Bridge Street car park to the traffic lights***

We will walk down to the bridge now and – when the traffic allows – cross over the road opposite the old mill (now a private house) standing on the other side. Once we have crossed, look for the stone flood marker on the corner of the mill house, showing the level which the water reached. In 1920, this former water mill had recently been converted to become a garage, and a number of cars were standing here when the flood water crashed into the building and swept the cars away down river. Fortunately no one was drowned here, and even the twelve-year-old lad who was pedalling his bike over the bridge when the flood water struck managed to survive. Young Reg Larder would have one of the luckiest escapes. The force of the water simply carried him along Bridge Street and dumped him and his bicycle on the road in front of St James' church. And when he finally got home, bruised, battered, dirty and wet through, his mother – who was still blissfully unaware of the Flood – gave him a good telling-off for getting his clothes so dirty and dishevelled.

If we look across the road from the bridge, we can see a garden wall today running from Bridge Street House to the bridge. In 1920 three cottages stood here, but all were so badly damaged by the Flood that they had to be taken down.



*Fig. 2: Inspecting the remains the day after on the bridge at Bridge Street*



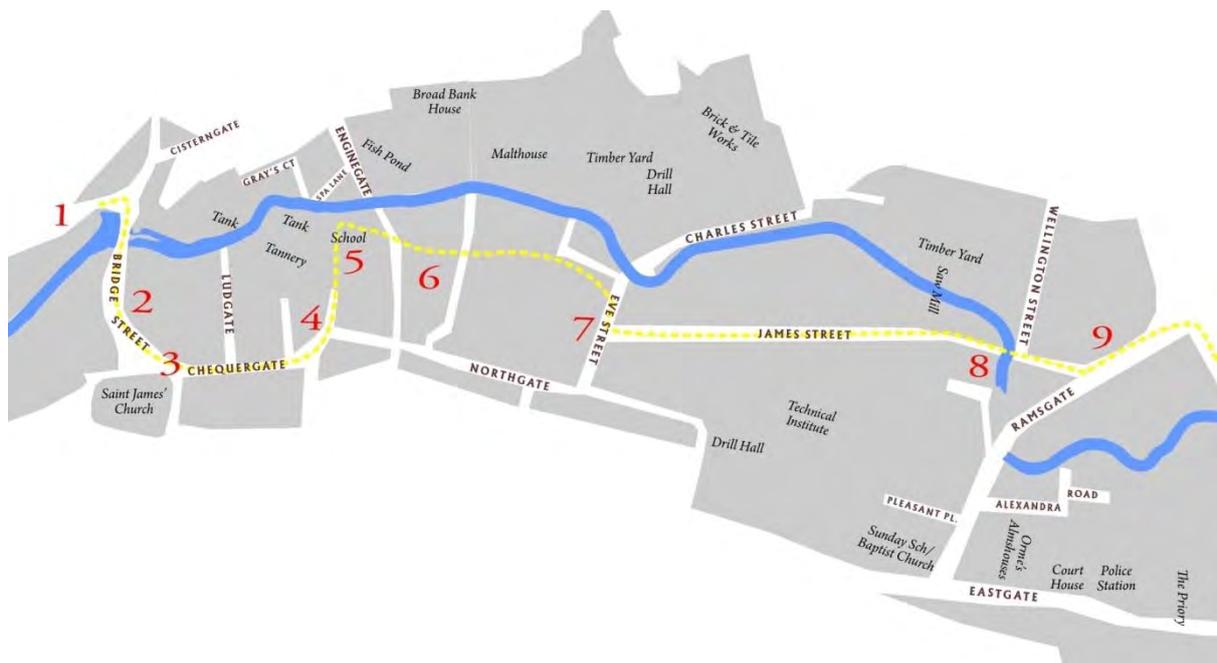
*Fig. 3: After the flood waters had gone down on Bridge Street. The three cottages can be seen just beyond Bridge Street House. The car sitting outside Bridge Street House belonged to Dr Higgins, as did the summer house which can be seen sitting in the road just beyond Hunt & Walter's Garage.*

The flood water here rose to just over six feet, and the level is still marked on a window at the back of Bridge Street House. So great was the force of the water that it simply punched its way through windows and walls at the back of the houses on the west side of Bridge Street. A piano was swept through a hole in one wall and dumped in the yard behind number 15, and as the water crashed through number 11 (then Tuxworth's bakery and now Beaumont's delicatessen) it also took with it the right-hand bay window. (See Fig. 4 below.)

Most of the inhabitants of Bridge Street escaped the flood waters by rushing upstairs as the water poured in, but one man, a gardener called John Corby, did not make it to his stairs and instead tried to open his front door. But as he reached the door the water slammed it closed and trapped his foot beneath it. Try as he might, he could not free himself, and all the time the water level was rising rapidly. Then, as it reached his chin and he felt that the end had come, the water stopped rising, the pressure on the door suddenly lessened, and he was able to prise it open and escape. However, his good fortune, it would later be discovered, was the consequence of another's tragedy. The water had stopped rising because, only a minute or so earlier, further downstream, a number of houses on Ramsgate, which had been acting as a partial dam, had collapsed, allowing the water to flood through and the water level to fall.



*Fig. 4: The corner of Bridge Street and Chequergate the next day. Chairs, tables and other furniture have been put out on the road to dry, and in the background we can see the hole which was once a bay window at number 11.*



### ***(3) Chequergate and Ludgate***

When we reach the traffic lights we will turn left into Chequergate and follow the river and the course of the flood water, as it careered eastwards through the town. There were more houses on both sides of Chequergate in 1920 than there are today, and in 1920 there was also a yard, called Ludgate, running back to the river on the left hand side of the road, approximately where the Telephone Exchange building sits empty today. And in one of the score or so little terraced houses on Ludgate a mother was about to give birth to her first child. At 5 o'clock, Dr Higgins (of nearby Bridge Street House) and the midwife were both in attendance upstairs, and Mrs Annie Kirman was in the final pains of labour, when, with a terrible crashing sound, the flood waters poured in to the kitchen below. Mr Charles Kirman, who was in the kitchen at that moment, rushed upstairs but within minutes the water was following him, and before the baby was born the flood waters were beginning to cover the bedroom floor and creep up towards the mattress of the bed where Mrs Kirman lay. Thinking that it might be their only hope of escape, Mr Kirman climbed out of the window to try to fix up a ladder, but unfortunately he was not a good swimmer and he was soon in difficulty. While the midwife attended to Mrs Kirman, Dr Higgins – who was a good swimmer – was obliged to climb out of the window to rescue him. The water was now ten feet deep but, with the help of a washing line, the

doctor managed to keep Charles afloat and the two men were then able to climb on to the roof. By the time Dr Higgins got back to his patient, however, the baby had been born and the water was beginning to recede. The family would all survive the trauma but, sadly, the baby – a little girl who was christened Frances – was later found to be both deaf and dumb. However, she would overcome this impediment and make a successful career as a hairdresser.

Also in Ludgate, Frank Thorn's garage was completely submerged and many of the inhabitants of this little street – including the Kirmans – would lose their homes, but at least no one in the court would lose their lives. However, round the corner, in Chequergate, not every family would be so lucky. At the Halligan's house, at number 8, which had been barely touched by the Flood, seven-year-old Edward had gone out to play near the river earlier in the afternoon. Before he could return, however, he was caught by the Flood and swept to his death.



*Fig. 5: Charles and Annie Kirman with new-born Frances. Charles's head is bandaged because he injured himself while trying to get help.*

#### ***(4) Spout Yard***

Continuing on down Chequergate, past the lane which is now called (mistakenly) Ludgate, we soon come to the little cobbled path called Spout Yard. Turn in here and walk down to the car park entrance on your right. In 1920 this was, like Ludgate, also an area of many small cottages, and a few, we'll see, still survive today. Within seconds of smashing in to the houses of

Bridge Street and then Ludgate, the river was flooding in to Spout Yard, and although, once again, most of those living here managed to escape, not all were able to. Forty-seven year-old Walter Bateson was having tea with a friend, seventy-six year-old Mary Bishop. Walter suffered from a paralysis of the legs and both were trapped when the water flooded in to Walter's kitchen. A neighbour managed to swim to Walter's door and managed to get into the house, but as he tried to get Walter out he was hit by a dead pig being swept along in the flood, and lost his grip. By the time he got back to the house both Walter and Mary had drowned.

Towards the bottom of the Spout Yard lane, shortly before we reach the river, there is now a very pleasant small park on our left and a car park on our right. Close to where the park is now there was in 1920 a very old tannery which was completely destroyed by the raging flood water, as was a garage and stable located nearby, where the Mason's Arms had once kept its customers' horses and now kept waggonettes and motor cars. It is difficult to imagine, standing in this lovely spot, that a hundred years ago this was a swirling maelstrom of watery chaos, death and devastation.



*Fig. 6: Devastation in Spout Yard.*

### *(5) Broadbank and the Berry family tragedy*

Leaving the Spout Yard Park the way we came in, we will continue our walk down to the river but instead of crossing over the little bridge we will follow the footpath on the right, alongside the river. Just before we reach the road you will see a large brick plaque built in to the wall beside us, bearing the words 'Engine House'. Until it was destroyed by the Louth Flood, the town's four fire engines, hoses and ladder cart were housed in the Engine House here, right next to the river and looking on to Broadbank (which was then known as Enginegate, after the Engine House). But it was not only the town's fire engines and the building that were destroyed. Thirty-six year-old duty fireman Harry Phillipson was also swept away and drowned as the huge swathe of water swept through the Engine House and crashed into the houses which we still see across the road. It was only fortunate that this was not a school day and school time, for next to the Engine House stood the Girls' and Infants' National School. About two hundred pupils were attending the school in 1920, with the infants on the ground floor and the older girls above. Nothing survives of the school today, but older residents may remember it as the town's fire station. After the Flood, the school continued for another ten years, but when it closed the building was converted into a fire station, and this only closed in 1983, when it was demolished to create the car park.



*Fig. 7: Broadbank the day after the Flood. The National School for Girls is on the left with one of the fire engines and the utterly destroyed Engine House to the right of it. The houses on Spaw Lane and further up Broadbank can be seen in the background.*

The houses standing on Broadbank today facing the Broadbank car park have changed little in appearance in the last hundred years. But just after five o'clock on that fateful afternoon a hundred years ago, this was a scene of terror, panic and dreadful tragedy. At the first house, next to the bridge and opposite the National School, Herbert Rawlings and his wife and five children were all downstairs when they heard a great roaring sound and a wall of water burst through the front door. Even before they could reach the stairs they were up to their waist in water, but all managed to reach the upper floor, where they would await rescue while the water continued to climb the stairs and creep through the floorboards, threatening to destroy the house beneath them.

Next door the family could not make it to the stairs but escaped by smashing a window and climbing up a drainpipe to the bedroom above. At number 7 (now 20) Mrs Berry, the wife of a local butcher, was in the kitchen at the back of the house with four of her five children, Mary, who was ten, Jack (five), Hubert (four) and her one-year-old baby, Edith. Mrs Berry was also heavily pregnant, expecting her sixth child. Her eldest child, George, had been given permission to go to the cinema, and her husband was still at work. The terrible events that followed as the water crashed in to the kitchen are described by David Robinson in his book, *The Louth Flood*:

‘As the water rushed in the back door she managed to get three of the children on to a dresser while she climbed on the table with the baby clinging round her neck. When the furniture began to float Jack was terrified and fell in to the water. As his mother tried to rescue him, Edith fell in and Hubert also slipped off the dresser. Mary managed to catch hold of him and got him on to the table where Mrs Berry fastened him by the sleeve of his jersey to a bacon hook in the ceiling, but the jersey gave way and he fell into the water again which was now too deep to allow further rescue. Meanwhile the gas lamp was extinguished by the rising water and escaping gas almost stifled Mary and her mother now clinging to the dresser.’

The three youngest children all drowned. Mrs Berry and Mary managed to open a window to get fresh air, and were later rescued. The first to reach them was a young man called Overton who worked in Mr Berry's shop. He could only reach the house by swimming through the nearby yard of cabinet maker George Cuthbert, and then climbing on to the roofs of adjoining houses.



*Fig. 8: The Berry house in 1920*



*Fig. 9: The Berry children. Baby Edith (aged 1) sits on her big sister's (Mary's) knee, with Jack (aged 5) on one side and Hubert (4) on the other. Big brother George stands behind.*

***(6) Across the Co-op car park to Eve Street***

Beside the Berry house today there is a short road running into the Co-op car park. Before we go down here, however, see if you can find the Flood Level marker stone on the corner of the Louth Museum, just a few yards to the right

on Broadbank. The Museum had been opened just ten years earlier but it largely escaped the flood, being a crucial few feet higher up the slope which runs up to Northgate. The water only rose to eighteen inches above the floor level and less than two inches of water and mud entered the building. The marker stone had not originally been set up here, however; it was moved here from the National School building when the latter was demolished in 1983. When it had been there it had been set up high on the wall for, at its highest point, the water here reached a depth of twelve feet.

In 1920 this little road into the Co-op car park did not exist. It was only made when the Co-op supermarket was built in the 1980s. We will walk across the car park towards the pedestrian exit on the far side, which takes us into the staff parking and delivery area. If we stop just before we reach this exit we will be close to the site of the next tragic incident in this sad tale. In 1920, the area occupied today by the east end of the supermarket was partly taken by the Louth Steam Laundry Company. The building had previously been used by the Waterloo Dye Works and in 1920 a row of eight terraced houses, still known as Waterloo Terrace, ran north-south from the laundry approximately to where we are standing. The laundry stood very close to the river, for, like the earlier dye works, a good supply of water was an essential resource. When the wall of water hit the laundry, shortly after 5 o'clock, two young women – fifteen-year-old Maggie Winton and the slightly older Lizzie Casswell - were still working in the laundry office. As the water flooded in they both climbed on to the long counter, but a moment later the end wall of the laundry completely collapsed and the counter, with the terrified young women clinging to it, was hurled across the room, flinging them against the window on the south side of the laundry. Lizzie managed to grab hold of a drainpipe, which was just outside the window, and she felt Maggie momentarily clutching at her skirt, but then Maggie was gone, swept away into the ten feet of raging flood water. Lizzie was shortly afterwards pulled to safety but Maggie drowned. Her body was found the next morning in the laundry yard, lying in a pile of coke.

As we go through the Co-op Staff Car Park and come out onto Eve Street we see Eve Street Bridge on our left. When the flood water crashed into the laundry, a group of boys, who had been sitting on the bridge, watching with interest the unusually full and fast-flowing river, ran for their lives in terror. All escaped, but any who ran up Charles Street would have seen an awesome indicator of the power of the flood water. A large, three ton lorry which had been parked in Thompson's Yard (on the north side of Charles Street) was picked up by the water as if it were a toy and flung fifty yards into Frank Darnill's brickyard (now the tennis courts) and dumped there upside down.



*Fig. 10: Darnill's ruined brickyard on Charles Street, with overturned truck in foreground*

### ***(7) James Street***

After crossing under Eve Street Bridge the river turns a sharp left to run alongside this lower part of Charles Street, but the flood water carried straight on across Eve Street and hurtled down James Street towards Ramsgate. So that is where we will go too.

Such was the degree of damage inflicted on the James Street houses, particularly those on the north side, closer to the river, that as we walk down James Street today we can see that, on the left hand side (the odd numbers side) very few pre-1920 houses survive, and most of the buildings we see are relatively new. Although the right hand side still looks very much as it did in 1920 (apart from the very new buildings close to the Eve Street corner), we can see that the left hand side has been largely rebuilt. None of the houses which are shown in the foreground in the photograph below are still standing today



*Fig. 11: James Street, after the Louth Flood, looking eastwards, from Eve Street*

We know the depth of the water as it came rushing down the street, like a great wave, because, once again, we have a Flood Level marker to show us. These were put on all public buildings affected by the Flood, and we will find the James Street one on the Technical Institute building, which is now a nursery school, on the right hand side of the road, about half way down. We will find that the water was about seven to eight feet deep at this point; just deep enough to drown anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in it.

And two people were indeed caught in it, and just at this point, where we are standing. As the great wall of water crashed into James Street, so two ladies – Mrs Margaret Bromfield and her daughter Clara – were cycling down the road, cycling back to their farm in South Somercotes after an afternoon together doing some shopping, happily unaware of the horror about to engulf them. As they reached this point, just outside the Technical Institute, they first heard and then saw the great wave racing down on them. According to eye witnesses, they attempted to escape the flood water by climbing up on the large gate posts of the Institute, but the water swept them away. Two more lives lost but also others terribly and irrevocably affected. Margaret had only recently been widowed – she had lost her husband, Samuel, to the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918 - and she was the mother of four other children (Clara was her eldest). Her four orphaned children had not only lost a mother and an older sister; they were soon to lose each other as well, for they would later be separated, one of the girls being taken to live with an aunt in Stockport, the two boys being sent

to live with distant relatives in Canada, and the youngest, nine-year-old Florence taken in by a family in Mablethorpe.

Clara and Margaret were also not the only ones to die in James Street that day. Across the road, at number 71, sixty-eight year-old Mrs Elizabeth Smith was not able to reach her stairs in time and drowned. Others came very close to death. Two doors down from Mrs Smith, at number 75, Frederick Ingham and his daughter Phyliss, also did not make it to the stairs. Instead, they climbed on to the piano, but as the water quickly rose the piano began to float and tipped them off, and they only survived because they were able to tear off the ceiling plaster and hang on to the beams. Further on down the road, at number 95 (close to the junction with Ramsgate Road) Mrs Betsy Kelly had a similar close escape. She was having her tea when the water burst in. Terrified, she climbed on to the table, but it soon became a raft, threatening to tip her off as well, but by managing to hang on to the window frame she – like the Inghams – was able to just keep her head above the water level until rescue came. And in a stable at the back of number 75 – where the James Street Surgery is now – a young horse also came very close to being drowned, managing to save himself by keeping his forelegs on the stable crib.

### ***(8) Wellington Street and Ramsgate***

Approaching the end of James Street, close to the warehouse of the former carpet factory (see the blue plaque), we find ourselves crossing the bridge which carries James Street over the river. It was at this point that the lesser surge of the flood water, which had followed the course of the river, now met up with the main surge down James Street, and the two now joined to smash into the houses standing on Ramsgate, looking down James Street, and also into a line of cottages on the right hand side of James Street, which ran up to the corner with Ramsgate.

If we stand by the bridge and look towards Ramsgate we will see that to the right is a short row of early nineteenth century cottages but immediately to the left of these the row of houses is set back a little and dates from a more recent period. In 1920, before the Louth Flood, the row of early nineteenth century cottages had continued all the way down to the junction with Newbridge Hill, where Ramsgate turns right. When the flood water smashed into these houses it did not simply fill their ground floors with water, destroy carpets and furniture and force the inhabitants to flee upstairs. Three of the houses, numbers 32, 34,

and 36, were utterly destroyed, and at numbers 42 and 44 great holes were punched through the front walls, and those houses to the left of these were also so badly damaged and weakened that it was later decided to take them all down. Not only had two courses of the flood wave come together to wreak such damage. On their way they had swept through Hoggard's wood yard and picked up many large pieces of timber, including twenty foot long tree trunks. Most were deposited in Wellington Street (on our left as we walk towards Ramsgate) but some became battering rams, to be smashed by the awful force of the water into the Ramsgate houses.



*Fig. 12: Wellington Street, filled with timbers from Hoggard's wood yard after the flood.*

Here, where James Street meets Ramsgate, there would be more fatalities than anywhere else. Of the twenty-three victims of the Louth Flood, eight would die very close to where we are standing now.

At number 34, seventeen-year-old Ernest Frith was at home with his parents when the water crashed into the house. All three managed to get upstairs in time, but as the water continued to rise they climbed out of a window and on to

the roof at the back of the house. But even this could not save them, for where Ernest and his father were clinging on, the house collapsed beneath them, sending them tumbling in to the wreckage below. In spite of his injuries and the force of the water, Ernest managed to reach a tree in the garden and this saved his life, but William Frith, his father, was swept away.

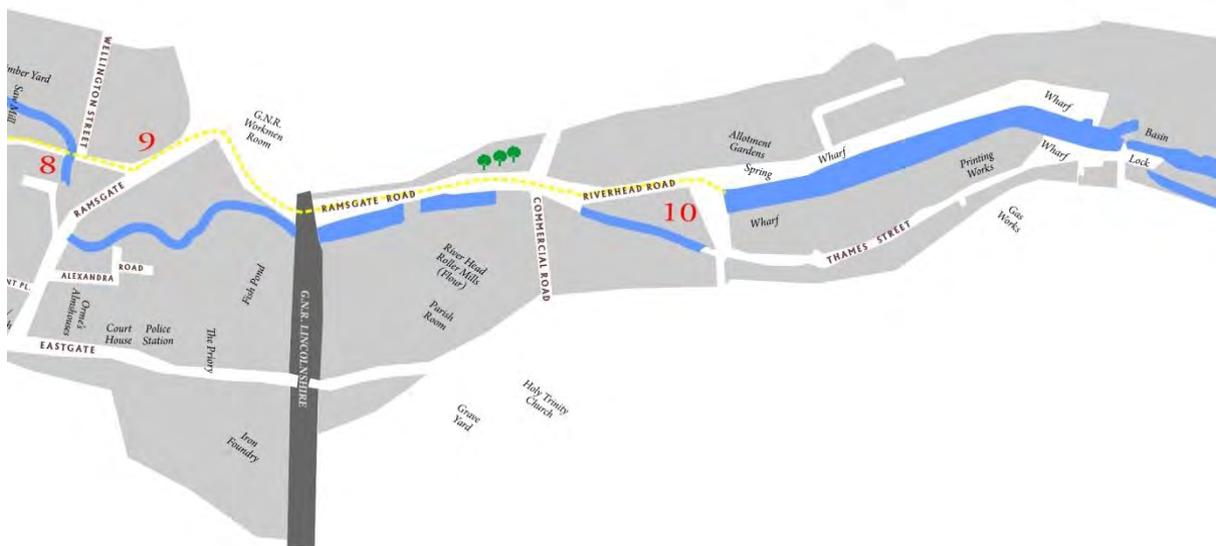
Next door, at number 36, William Fytche and his elderly parents were having tea when the water suddenly invaded their house. Unable to reach the stairs, Fred tried to open the door but it was jammed by the pressure of the water. However, he managed to smash a window and succeeded in getting both his parents out of the flooded house and then carried them to what he hoped would be the safety of one of the garden trees. But such was the force of the water that, having smashed down the front wall of the house, causing it to collapse, it quickly uprooted the tree and although William managed to swim to safety, and climb onto a house roof, his parents both drowned. His father's remains would later be found nearby but the body of Mrs Hannah Fytche was not discovered until three weeks later. She had been swept down the river and her body had become trapped under the arch of the railway bridge on Ramsgate.

At number 32, however, the family had a miraculous escape. This was Robert Freeman's butcher's shop and Mr and Mrs Freeman were both at home, together with their son, Cyril, and a friend who had called, Miss Mary Hall. When the water came crashing in Mrs Freeman and Mary both fled upstairs while the men bought a little extra time by holding the front and back doors open, letting the water flow through the house, before joining them. To their horror, however, they then saw their next door neighbour's house collapse. They then rushed to a rear extension, where, standing on a bed they clung to the roof, terrified, while the rest of the house literally collapsed in front of them.

Others were less fortunate. A few doors down, at number 44 Ramsgate, John and Susan Swingler, who were both in their sixties, and their daughter, twenty-three year-old Marguerite, were swept away and drowned when the water punched a hole through their front wall, and across the road, at the corner of Ramsgate and James Street, both Mrs Thorpe and her daughter Betsy also perished. Mrs Thorpe was seventy-seven and paralysed, and could not be moved. A neighbour managed to reach the house but the force of the water prevented him from reaching Mrs Thorpe, and Betsy – who might have been saved – refused to leave her mother to die alone.



*Fig. 13: Houses destroyed and damaged on Ramsgate. The hole on the left is in both 42 and 44, and further to the left can be seen the gap in the terrace made when numbers 36, 34 and 32 collapsed. The rear extension where the Foremans sheltered can just be seen, still standing.*



### ***(9) Along Ramsgate to the Riverhead***

We will now walk down Ramsgate, past the newer houses which have replaced those destroyed in 1920, to the corner with Newbridge Hill, and then turn right to follow Ramsgate and the course of the Louth Flood down to the Riverhead. In 1920 this corner was a cross roads, for where we now see relatively new houses, built in the 1980s, in 1920 there was another road, running up to the railway station. Some of the eyewitness accounts of the horrors of that Saturday afternoon in Ramsgate come from those who were standing at the station waiting for their train. From the safety of the little hill on which the station stands they had a very good view of the great tide of water, about six feet high, suddenly emerging from James Street and then dashing against the terraced houses on Ramsgate

When we reach the corner we are standing on the northern edge of the flooded area, whose width now extended all the way across to Eastgate, a distance of about 300 yards, cutting the town in two. As we continue our walk along Ramsgate, towards the Riverhead, we remain above the flood level, but all the lower lying land which we can see through the trees, on our right, including the large garden of the Priory Hotel (in 1920 a private house), was deep under water. A flock of twenty-five sheep were being kept here in 1920 but their owner had just enough time, as the flood beat against the temporary dam of the Ramsgate houses, to drive them, waist deep, to the safety of higher land. When the flood water later receded, from about 7 o'clock that evening, the sad mortal remains of Mrs Bromfield would be found amongst the debris deposited by the water here.

About a hundred yards along Ramsgate (from the corner) we reach what remains of the former railway embankment, which, until it was taken down in the 1980s, stood almost twenty feet high. The bridge which once carried the railway over Ramsgate has gone but the bridge over the river, where Mrs Fytche's body lay hidden for three weeks, can still be seen. The water poured through both this bridge and the one which carried the railway over Eastgate, 150 yards to the south, but not all the water could get through and the embankment had the effect of pushing the water further south so that the Edwardian terraced houses which still line the south side of Eastgate, were also flooded, and the flood water even reached as far as the Monks Dyke Road and the lower part of Priory Road.

A little further on and we come to the former flour mill building, now converted to flats, and here the road begins to dip as it approaches the Riverhead. Consequently, in 1920, from this point on the water ceased to stop at Ramsgate

Road but instead poured over the road and flooded in to the garden of the large house which still stands on higher ground across the road, The Grove, and here it claimed another victim, its twentieth. As the water shot across the road here it hit sixty-six year-old Charles Borman, a carter. He tried to grab hold of a tree but that too was swept away, and the water carried him into the garden of The Grove. He was still just alive when he was pulled out of the water by two men, PC Barratt and Mr Hall, who had to rope themselves to one another to reach him, but he died the next day.

Another victim nearby was three-year-old Lily Metcalfe from Grimsby who was staying with her aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Harold Skinner, in Ramsgate. Her poor little body was later found in a greenhouse.

When we reach the junction with Victoria Road and Commercial Road we are standing close to where the picture below was taken, as the water began to go down. One young man has had a lucky escape. Fit and strong enough to ‘shin up’ a lamp post, he still hangs on, waiting for the water level to fall further:



*Fig. 14: A lucky escape at the Ramsgate Road crossroads*

Just across the road from where this picture was taken, at number 17 Commercial Road (which can be seen in the background), the Louth Flood took yet another victim: sixty-one year-old Mrs Ellen Kirkham. Taken utterly by

surprise, she was trapped in her kitchen. The water mark on her wall showed that the water was six feet deep here.

At this corner, we will cross over to Riverhead Road and complete our walk at the Riverhead, beside the old warehouses and the eighteenth century canal pub, The Woolpack, which we can see about a hundred yards in front of us. The old pub and the two warehouses, both dating from the earliest years of the canal, are almost the only buildings on this part of the road which were here in 1920. It is a corner of Louth which has changed in appearance many times in the last hundred years. Among the buildings which are long gone is the house that was then number 1 Riverhead Road, which stood close to the corner with Victoria Road. This was the home of Charles Mitchinson, who would be the Flood's last victim and its oldest one. (See Fig. 15 below.) Although he still worked at the canal, for T. E. Smith & Son, he was eighty-two years old and lived alone. Like his neighbour, Mrs Kirkham, he was caught by the sheer speed and force of the water. When the water flooded into his house he was trapped and unable to escape. His body was later found under an upturned sofa.



*Fig. 15: Riverhead Road the next day. The water level mark on the cottages left by the Flood can be clearly seen. Charles Mitchinson died in the house in the foreground. Behind it can be seen the shattered remains of the corrugated iron Trinity Church Institute, and behind this the roof of the Woolpack Inn.*

*(10) Beside the canal*

We will finish our walk at the head of the canal, where Riverhead Road bears right and runs up to Eastgate and Eastfield Road. When the flood water hurtled into the canal, and struck the surrounding warehouses and cottages, it would do a great deal of damage. The wreckage which it wrought on the first lock, the Town Lock, was sufficient to cause the owners of the canal to decide that the end had finally come. Its closure had long seemed imminent, as much of its business had been taken away by the railway, but it was the damage to the canal caused by the Louth Flood that prompted the decision to close.

The canal was no longer as busy as it had once been, but it was still an active inland port with horse-drawn sloops and keels still making the journey from the Humber. They were loaded principally with coal, chiefly for the Louth Gas Light Company, which still had its gas works on Thames Street, on the south side of the canal, close to the Town Lock. A small community had grown up here, and many of the cottages of those who lived and worked here in 1920 can still be seen, as can many of the warehouses, particularly those on the south side. Almost all the cottages standing behind the principal wharf, on the north side of the canal, were flooded, as was the chemical manure works of T. E. Smith & Sons (Charles Mitchinson's employers), but the gas works, standing on slightly higher ground, escaped.



*Fig. 16: Boats swept from their moorings and piled against the Town Lock.*

When the rain stopped, at about 5.30 pm, and the water level began to fall, about an hour later, the Riverhead was a scene of devastation. And, indeed, so was the rest of the flooded area of the town. Altogether, in the space of less than half an hour, twenty-three people had been killed, fifty houses had been destroyed, another 250 needed extensive repairs, a further 500 were badly damaged by flood water, and 800 people had been made homeless. The number of deaths may have been higher still had it not been for many acts of heroism and bravery. The misery for many, however, had only just begun. Those who had lost their homes were at first housed in tents on High Holme Road, and when winter came the tents were replaced by sixty wooden huts, and some families were still being obliged to live in these seven years later, including Charles and Annie Kirman and their little girl, Frances.

Copyright Richard Gurnham 2020