

Memories of 15/16 March 1969 When Popp's Bridge was washed away

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NAYLAND WITH WISSINGTON COMMUNITY TIMES

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Being a rough guide to the loss of Popp's Bridge,
15 March 1969, by Chris Hunt

The anniversary of the collapse of Popp's Bridge, (or is it Pop's or Popp's?) 'Community Times' - February, certainly is an event I shall remember. In 1969 I was a member of the Nayland Fire Station. It was about 3am on that Saturday when we were called to the incident. On arrival at Horkesley Road we trained our searchlight across the water to locate the car which had come to rest about 75 yards downstream (towards the 'Anchor'), and the driver was sitting on the roof. Attempts to get our ladder across to him failed and it was even considered for someone to swim over to the car with a rope - not, in the circumstances, a very good idea but we did not know if the driver had been injured.



A fire service Rescue Tender had arrived from Ipswich and they carried a selection of equipment for water rescues. A highway worker had managed to throw a line over to the driver, (Mr Howell from Polstaed). A substantial rescue line and a lifejacket was then attached to this and he pulled them across. With a lot of shouting and a few crossed fingers we then got him to jump into the water and pulled him to the bank - cold wet but uninjured.

Some dramatic press headlines followed:- 'Nayland cut off when road collapsed into river', 'Flood sweeps bridge away', 'Villagers angry at collapse of bridge', and of course, 'Bailey Bridge was up in two days'.

Forty Sappers from 20 Field Squadron, Royal Engineers started work on the Monday erecting a steel and timber bailey bridge. By Wednesday afternoon they tested the new bridge by driving their lorries over it. A newspaper report stated that: - "thanks for their quick work the village was cut off from

In the February issue of the Community Times we featured the anniversary of Popp's Bridge being swept away in the floods and are very grateful for the responses received.



Royal Engineers erecting the Bailey bridge across the Stour, and below testing it with their lorries.



Colchester District for only four days". I have no further comment!! This bridge was to last until the by-pass was completed and open about six months later.

The events of the weekend of 15/16 March 1969 certainly put the village to the front of local news. It is interesting reading some of the comments made by villagers and officials at the time - some things never change, criticism of the local authority being one, and of course the expert view of locals - I've never known a night like it !



COLCHESTER EXPRESS

Thursday, 20th March, 1969

4d.

EXPRESS



Royal Engineers yesterday put a Bailey Bridge over the 50 foot gap at Nayland. The G.O.C. Eastern District, Major General Jack Dye (centre) visited the troops during the operation. With him is Q.M.S.I. Thomas (left) and Major P. J. Walsh, the unit's C.O.

BAILEY BRIDGE WAS UP IN TWO DAYS



The first vehicle to use the bridge carried the troops who built it.



This car was swept away with the turbulent flood waters at Nayland early Saturday morning.



A new bridge spans the Stour again.

Villagers angry at collapse of bridge

VILLAGERS at the village of Nayland are angry this week following the collapse of Popp's Bridge, their main link with the key centres of Colchester and Bury St. Edmunds.

A "Colchester Express" reporter was told this week by

villagers that the bridge should have been reinforced months ago and that police on the Essex side were slow to set up warning procedures after the bridge had collapsed.

The angry villagers say that the two hundred-year-old bridge had cracks in its foundations a month ago and that action should have been taken then.

They also complained to an "Express" reporter that warning procedures were slow to be brought into operation when the bridge did collapse — almost resulting in the loss of one man's life when his car crashed into the river.

The lucky driver was Mr. David Howell, of New Houses, Polstead. Thirty-one-year-old Mr. Howell, a non-swimmer, was driving over the bridge.

The car was swept downstream by the flood water but Mr. Howell managed to climb out of his car through its sun roof. The car stuck on a mudbank, 25 yards from the river bank.

Firemen used an extension ladder to try and reach Mr. Howell without success. An hour later he was rescued after a strong rope had been tied round him. With the aid of a lifebelt, he was hauled to the bank.

Commenting on Tuesday, Mr. Howell said: "The Suffolk Police were marvellous but there were no barricades or warning signs on the Essex side. By the time I saw the flashing white lights of the Suffolk Police cars it was too late. I was in the river."

Police Sgt. G. Beaton, of Boxford, said: "The car approached from the Colchester direction. We had signs warning motorists against crossing the bridge on our side."

Popp's Bridge crumbled into the river only a short time be-

fore Mr. Howell approached. Essex River Board officials saw the danger and tried to signal Mr. Howell to stop, but he did not see them.

Villagers were also angry on Tuesday at the circumstances leading up to the collapse of the bridge.

Mr. K. Norman, of Bridge Cottage, Nayland, told the "Express," — "This old bridge should have been pulled down months ago. People here have been expecting it to go since work on the by-pass was started last September. I remember when only a trickle of water flowed under the bridge. Now we have reached a ridiculous state of affairs. The bridge was never made to take the amount of water or the amount of traffic that it was supporting."

Mr. B. R. Forster, another local man from High Street, Nayland, called it "absolute ineptitude." "The trouble started when the by-pass started. When they

pulled the river banks down of course, it flooded Popp's Bridge."

The "cart horse" bridge has now been flooded six or seven times in the last year and according to the landlord of the Anchor public-house in Nayland, Mr. John Curtis, the attitude of the council (the West Suffolk County Council) seemed to be "somewhat apathetic."

"The bridge," said Mr. Curtis "will be obsolete anyway when the by-pass is complete and it seems that the council didn't really want to spend more money than they had to."

"It used to be dry most of the time and you could walk across it," said Mr. B. Lees, of Stour House, Stoke-by-Nayland. "Now not only is the water excessive but the traffic is as well."

Mr. A. A. H. Beddington, deputy county surveyor, said on Tuesday that he had no comment to make.

More pictures on page 11.

Lucky motorist Mr. David Howell, of New Houses, Polstead, escaped from this car after it had plunged into the River Stour early on Saturday morning. The photograph shows all that remains of the Volkswagen with a "life-saving sunshine roof."



Nayland cut off when road collapsed into river

SAPPERS worked so fast on erecting a Bailey bridge across a tributary of the river Stour at Nayland, after the old stone bridge had collapsed during the floods last week, that the village was linked with the Colchester area again on Wednesday—a day earlier than expected.

Forty men from 20 Field Squadron of the Royal Engineers took only two days to put up the new bridge, which will serve Nayland until another bridge slightly up-river is built as part of a major by-pass scheme. But, thanks to their quick work, the village was cut off from the Colchester district for only four days.

The 200-year-old Pop's bridge collapsed in the early hours of Saturday morning as raging torrents of floodwater were sweeping the entire lengths of the Stour and Colne valleys.

Soon afterwards 31-year-old Mr David Howell, of New House, Polstead, was stranded in the middle of the river for over an hour after his car had plunged into the yawning gap where the bridge had been.

ON TOP OF CAR

Mr Howell, a non-swimmer, managed to open the sunshine roof of his vehicle and perch precariously on it while Nayland and Ipswich firemen made two unsuccessful attempts to rescue him. They finally managed to haul him to safety through the fast-flowing water after passing him a lifejacket.

"We attempted to reach him by a 35ft ladder," said Nayland fireman Mr S. T. Rumens, "but it was swept down by the current, and even when we extended it we couldn't reach him. One of the road workers had thrown him a line, so we sent out a lifejacket and a good stout rope, which we used to pull him in.

"He was not in the water more than 10 to 15 seconds. But it was very cold and turbulent, so as soon as we got him to safety we took off his overcoat and got him in a warm car."

Mr Howell was taken to St Leonard's Hospital, Sudbury, suffering from shock, but otherwise he was unharmed.

Essex River Authority officials were busy at the weekend keeping an apprehensive eye on the two flooded valleys. Over large areas neither the Colne nor the Stour could be seen, because they had overflowed their banks so much that huge lakes had formed.

Although the Stour Valley was not so badly flooded as during the previous heavy flooding last autumn, the Colne Valley was more affected than at that time. The water came perilously near to some houses at Stratford St Mary.

Police alerted the residents and sandbags were placed at the ready, but no evacuations were necessary. Period cottages near Colchester North Bridge over the Colne were also sandbagged as a precaution against the rising floodwaters.

Telephone engineers were kept busy throughout the weekend coping with hundreds of faults caused by floodwater getting into cables. The Coggeshall exchange, which serves over 500 people, was threatened by rapidly-rising floods. But the cause — a tree trunk lodged near a bridge over the Colne — was removed, and the threat subsided.

More than 80 telephones at Tiptree and 60 at Ramsey were put out of order, but the steel duct carrying the telephone cable from Colchester to Sudbury survived intact when the bridge which it ran along collapsed.

After working through the weekend till late into the night, engineers had brought the situation on the telephones front more or less back to normal.

The team of 40 Sappers who erected the new Bailey bridge began work on Monday. It was anticipated that it would be open to the public by yesterday evening, but in fact was in use late on Wednesday afternoon.

The Bailey bridge, which is expected to entail one-way traffic, will serve Nayland for at least six months. Then the new by-pass bridge will take the traffic.

FLOOD SWEEPS BRIDGE AWAY

And a man drives into the gap

A 31-YEAR-OLD motorist climbed to safety through the sunshine roof of his car when it plunged into the turbulent River Stour at Nayland in the early hours of Saturday morning. The man, Mr David Howell, of New House, Polstead, was stranded in the middle of the river for over an hour after he had tried to drive across the yawning gap where Popp's Bridge had crumbled into the swollen river.

Mr Howell, a non-swimmer, perched on the roof of his car, which had been swept some way downstream, while Nayland and Ipswich firemen made two

unsuccessful attempts to rescue him. They finally managed to haul him to safety through the fast-flowing water after passing him a lifejacket.

Nayland fireman, Mr S. T. Rumens, of Marlow, Birch Fall, Nayland Heights, told a "Gazette" reporter: "He must have been sitting on top of the car for a good hour to an hour and a half before we got him to safety."

LIFEJACKET

"We attempted to reach him by a 35ft ladder, but it was swept down by the current, and even when we extended it we couldn't reach him. One of the road workers had thrown him a line, so we sent out a lifejacket and a good stout rope, which we used to pull him in."

"He was not in the water more than 10-15 seconds but it was very cold and turbulent, so as soon as we got him to safety we took off his overcoat and got him in to a warm car," he explained. "He remained very composed the whole time," Mr Rumens added.

"It was fortunate for him his car had a sunshine roof," commented Mr Rumens. "Otherwise he would have had to clamber on to the roof from one of the side doors and without anything to cling on to things might not have gone so well for him."

Mr Howell, who is a member of Lloyd's of London, was returning from London when the accident, which he described as "rather unpleasant," occurred.

'NO SIGNS'

"There were no warning signs on the Colchester side to say that the bridge had collapsed," he said. "I was going through the flood before the bridge and as the water was suppose to be eight to nine inches deep, I was in a fast gear and the car made a lot of spray."

"By the time the visibility on the windscreen had cleared I was on the bridge and it was too late," he said. He saw lights being waved on the Nayland side of the bridge, "but it all happened as I went over the top," he explained. "By the grace of God I had a sunshine roof," said Mr Howell. "It was put in specially when I got the car about four years ago."

"The force of the water is unbelievably strong there," he added.

After his rescue — the people there were tremendous, he said — Mr Howell was taken to St Leonard's Hospital, Sudbury, suffering from shock, but otherwise completely unharmed.

On Saturday, the car was still almost submerged beneath the fast-flowing water. Mr Howell plans to wait until the water has

subsided before pulling it out.

ALERTED

Much earlier the authorities were alerted that the bridge was down by Mr Steve Cawdell, an employee of Essex River Authority, who was checking flood levels in the area. At 1.30 am he contacted Essex River Authority to say the head wall of the bridge had collapsed, taking part of the

Story by Wendy Sheppard

Pictures by Eric Cheek

road with it. The police were informed and Mr Cawdell said he was trying to stop the traffic until they arrived.

Twenty-five minutes later Mr Cawdell reported that the bridge was completely gone.

Ps G. Beeton, of Boxford, said he was contacted about 1.45 am and when he arrived to find the bridge had been swept away he collected "road closed" signs and red lamps to warn motorists on the Suffolk side of the bridge. "The other side is not in my jurisdiction, but there was movement about 120 yards away and I was aware of vague figures and headlamps," he told a "Gazette" reporter. It came as a surprise to him when "suddenly a car fell into the river from the other side of the bridge," he said.

'WARNED'

Mr H. Wilson, of the White Horse Inn, Lavenham, who is working on the by-pass at Nayland, received a phone call from West Suffolk County Council at 2.50 am and assisted in the rescue. "The man was

BRIDGE FALLS

* Continued from page 1

warned before he got to the bridge," claimed Mr Wilson.

A spokesman at Colchester police station said that at 2.15 am a message was received from the highways department saying the bridge had been washed away, and "road closed" signs were placed on the Colchester side of the bridge.

"At 3.25 we had another message to say that a car had gone into the river. If he chose to ignore the signs there is not much we can do about it," commented the spokesman.

Commenting on the situation later on Saturday West Suffolk County Surveyor Mr R. L. Williams said: "We are in touch with the military authorities, who will make arrangements for a Bailey bridge to be put up on Monday, we hope. A Royal Engineers officer is coming down to review the bridge now."

Mr Williams said the bridge, which he thought was quite an old one, would not be rebuilt because the building of the new by-pass meant the road was going to be closed and a new bridge would be constructed on the by-pass.

Mr L. Parkin, a highways department official, said they had been keeping an eye on the bridge but there was no sign on Friday it was going to come down. "This is the second major flood we have had," he added. "The last one was in September."

For an hour of darkness this was David Howell's perilous perch



* Continued on page 4

THE WET WEEKEND



And Popps Bridge is no more. A twenty-five yard gap divides Suffolk from Essex and will do until the Bailey bridge is complete.



"Too deep for cars," says the notice on the far side of the Nayland gap.