

## Great Yarmouth Suspension Bridge Disaster 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1845:

### The Family of William and Alice GOTTS

William GOTTS was an exciseman baptised in Aldermaston on Christmas Day in 1791 of parents John GOTTS and Anne VOUT, who married in Cawston on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1779. He may well have seen many bad things in his line of work, but nothing would prepare him for what he went through that day. His 9 year old daughter Alice GOTTS and his wife, also Alice, aged 52, were among the 79 victims drowned as the bridge on which they were standing to watch the spectacle collapsed.

William's work as an exciseman took him round the country as he was moved from force to force: we can see his movements through the Excise records. It was a family occupation: his father John was also an exciseman and this would account for William being born in Aldermaston, his father having moved round the country.

John and William were possibly Quakers, John eventually living in Quaker Lane in Waltham Abbey when he died, and William being involved in starting a new church of some form in Hertfordshire. This may explain why his wife and daughter were buried in the Dissenters Cemetery next to St Nicholas Priory Junior School, the resting place of five other victims of the tragedy.

His wife Alice was baptised at St Albans on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1792, daughter of William HAWTREE and Susanna LAW. She married William Gotts at Heybridge in Essex in 1816, possibly at that distance from her home since this was in a Quaker church.

William's work took him to Ruislip, where three daughters (Susan, Jane and Sarah) were born, then to Walton-on-Thames, where another two children (Marianne and William) were baptised, and then to Putney, birthplace of two sons (John and James) in the late 1820s. Another daughter, Sarah, is also shown in the 1841 census as born in 1834; therefore the Sarah born in 1820 must have died before then. Unfortunately, no record of their daughter Alice's birth has been found, though it is likely that she was the youngest of the family, aged 9 according to the 1841 census.

At some point the family moved from the Home Counties to Norfolk, where the 1841 Census found them living in the Norwich suburb of Heigham:

Person	Age	Born	Occupation	Born in Norfolk?
William	45	1796	Excise officer	no (Aldermaston)
Alice	45	1796		no (St Albans)
Jane	20	1821		no (Ruislip)
Mary	15	1826		no (Waltham on Thames)
William	15	1826		no (Waltham on Thames)
John	13	1828		no (Putney)
James	11	1830		no (Putney)
Sarah	7	1834		no (Putney?)
Alice	5	1836		no(Putney?)

According to contemporary newspaper reports, a witness to the tragedy, standing on the bridge with her mother and sister, was Martha GOTTS. Martha was either another daughter whose birth record has yet to be found or Alice's sister Mary (Marianne). In the year before the tragedy, this Martha GOTTS was a witness to two other events in Yarmouth: the marriage of her sister Jane on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1844 to Henry Zachariah WILLS and that of Benjamin LEEK and Mary FOXTON on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 1844. She must, therefore, have been of age in 1844.

Shortly thereafter, they moved to Great Yarmouth and lived on the Conge, a narrow street running from George Street to North Quay. William was listed as exciseman of the Conge in Trade Directories for 1844 and 1845.

So, on that day, who would have been in the household?

William would have been working. Eldest daughter Jane (25) was married and had left. Martha/Marianne (20) was still at home. We have no knowledge of William (20), John(18), James(16) or Sarah (12), though at 12 years old it is likely that at least Sarah was there and wanting to see the spectacle.

In order to publicise the circus in town, Nelson, the celebrated clown, announced his intention of sailing, that afternoon, in a tub drawn by four geese, from the bridge on the quay to the Suspension Bridge . With the spectacle due to start at 5 o'clock, mother Alice would take her daughters Alice, Martha and Sarah down to the Vauxhall Gardens to watch. They would run onwards to the Suspension Bridge, where the best view might be had of Nelson when coming up the river.

We can only imagine the emotional swirl felt by this family on that fateful Friday: the excited dash from the Conge to the quay, the mad clamber onto the bridge to secure a prime view, despite the rain. And of what: a clown being towed up river in a bath tub by four geese.

Such euphoria was to be overtaken so quickly by such trauma, as mother and child are flung from the bridge, a mother's frantic struggle to save that child, as sisters can only watch helplessly on.

The boatmen and wherry owners all rallied round to help. All the usual means of finding them by drags and creepers were used and a great many were soon extricated. Before eight o'clock 53 bodies had been found, which were conveyed to the Norwich Arms public house near the bridge. Others were taken to the Lord Collinwood, the White Swan, and other houses, where people went in crowds in order to identify their relatives, and, as may be supposed, those who discovered among the dead the objects of their search were deeply affected.

As before nine o'clock the tide became very high, nets were thrown across the stream to prevent bodies from drifting away. The boatmen, too, continued their labours and before eleven o'clock 73 bodies had been recovered. Many children were found with their heads fast in the railing of the bridge, and were extricated with difficulty, some with broken arms and legs.

Many bodies were supposed to be under the bridge, but these could not be accessed until the broken part of the structure was raised. The boatmen continued, however, to drag the river all night, and occasionally threw up another body to the surface. Whilst they were pursuing their labours, many an anxious query was addressed to them and the stillness of the night was broken by parents mourning for their children and by anxious relatives seeking those they loved among the ranks of the dead. They had sought and obtained leave from the Coroner to remove the bodies, as they were identified: this may have been a gesture of humanity, but one which entailed the jury the necessity of viewing the bodies at the different houses.

And, finally, we can only picture a father's desperate grief in having to search round the places the bodies had been taken in order to identify the bodies of his wife and child, possibly accompanied by his sons William (20), John (18) and James (16), and returning home that night with his sons and daughters to nurse their loss. Meanwhile, Martha aged 20 would look after Sarah aged 12 as he did this. He may even have had to pay the boatmen for bringing their bodies ashore as many boatmen put in claims for this. It must have been a terrible shock to William's parents, John and Ann in Waltham Abbey in their 70s and 80s.

Little is known of Alice's other siblings, though, on a somewhat unsettling note, further distress not long after the tragedy must have affected the family with regard to Alice's brother John, a seaman, whose name entered the Great Yarmouth Gaol and Bridewell Register on two counts. He was committed on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 1845 for assaulting his sister by cutting her head and also on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1846, charged with "an unnatural offence", for which he was sent to Norwich Castle. At least Alice and her mother were spared the disgrace incurred by this apparent black sheep of the family.

Five months later, William remarried at Yarmouth on the 2nd October 1845 Elizabeth STARLING; the couple did not stay long in Yarmouth, however, for the 1851 Census found them at Stowmarket and a few years later, on the 3rd December 1859 at Bramford William died.

And yet people with Norfolk Ancestors have to keep rediscovering this disaster. This is the third time that readers have raised the subject in the *Norfolk Ancestor*: is it not time for a more lasting memorial?

Sources: Records held by Mr Ian Gotts (St Albans), Dr Ian Gotts (King's Lynn) and articles in the *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Norwich Gazette* 10 May 1845