

The *Princess Alice* disaster of 1878

The *Princess Alice* disaster, now largely forgotten, is the worst maritime disaster to have occurred on the Thames. Whilst the Thames River Police could do nothing to prevent this, they and the other members of the Metropolitan Police were there to ensure that the aftermath of the unfortunate event was handled as safely and securely as possible.

On the evening of 3rd September 1878, the *Princess Alice*, a paddle steamer owned by the London Steamboat Company, was returning from Gravesend with a large number of passengers, some of them coming back from a day trip, others returning from holiday, when she sailed into the stretch of water known as Gallion's Reach. Commanded by Captain William Grinsted and named after Queen Victoria's daughter, she was a familiar sight on the river, famed as the "Shah's boat" as she once carried the Shah of Persia and his retinue, with the Persian sun and lion still painted on her paddle boxes. Coming the other way, on a return trip to Newcastle-on-Tyne from Millwall Docks, was the *Bywell Castle*, a collier (a ship designed to carry large amounts of coal). She was commanded by Captain Harrison, but was being steered by a Thames Pilot called Christopher Dix.

As these ships neared each other, a horrible accident occurred. When passing each other port-to-port, standard practice for ships even today, inexplicably the *Princess Alice* swung in front of the *Bywell Castle* causing the larger and heavier *Bywell Castle* to collide with the paddle steamer. The scrapes later measured on the *Bywell Castle's* hull were 5ft long, showing how far she had cut into the other vessel.

The *Princess Alice* was very crowded. In many cases whole families were aboard, including many members of Captain Grinsted's own family. No record was made of how many had boarded the *Princess Alice* downriver but it is clear that she was packed with over eight hundred people. The impact from the collision caused the *Princess Alice* to break in two.

As soon as the danger was evident, the *Bywell Castle's* crew did their utmost to save lives. This was not an isolated part of the river and there were many vessels and people who launched boats to rescue survivors, including men from the local gasworks. Despite the immediate response of those nearby, the disaster occurred swiftly. The *Princess Alice* sank in the space of three to five minutes, with those below deck standing little chance of survival; nor was being on deck much safer, as most Victorians could not swim. Additionally, many people were dressed in clothes that prohibited them from swimming even if they knew how. Women's long, heavy dresses were particularly dangerous. However, in one reported incident, a woman was wearing a padded woollen dress, which acted as a float, thus saving her life.

During Victorian times, the Thames was heavily polluted, owing to the large amount of sewage and industrial waste that was poured into it, and was infamous during hot summers for the horrible smell that it produced. The site of this disaster was not far from a sewage outlet and those who survived in the water were in many cases plagued by bad health for some time afterwards. At a conservative estimate, at least six hundred people died within the space of a few minutes. As there was no definitive list of people on-board, it is impossible to ascertain accurate numbers but the real figure is probably over seven hundred. This does not include those who survived the disaster but may have later died of health problems caused by the foul river water.

As the news slowly filtered down to Woolwich and further into London, different divisions of the police began to organise a response. Due to the sheer speed with which it had happened, there was never any chance of the message reaching any police unit, including Thames Division, for a rescue to be dispatched, let alone arrive, in time. Thames Division still exclusively used rowing galleys, and the Division's Superintendent Alstin had to specially commandeer a steam-powered launch to supervise matters at the scene. Given the time-frame of the disaster, had Thames Division vessels been steam powered, it would have made no difference to rescue efforts. Land police at Woolwich

organised mortuaries so people could identify the dead. Sadly, not all bodies could be recognised.

Thames Division arrived on the scene not to rescue the living but to aid in the recovery of the dead and to deal with the wreck of the *Princess Alice*, which now lay on the bottom of the river. They worked long shifts around the clock to recover bodies. They themselves had not escaped unscathed; Constable Edward King had been on the *Princess Alice* with his wife, Frances, and six-month old son, Edward. Constable King survived, as all Thames Policemen were required to be able to swim. The bodies of his wife and child were identified by relatives. He was not the only officer to lose his family; an officer who was still on the force in 1891 had lost his wife and all his family, save for his young son, during the disaster. Another officer had a narrow escape; he had just missed the *Princess Alice* at Sheerness and watched it sail away.



Inquiries at Woolwich Police Court

During the weekend following the disaster, several hundred deceased were pulled from the river by Thames Division and their assistants. Mortal remains were still being recovered later in the week, with Superintendent Alstin on his launch bringing up the bodies of a man, woman and child whilst on his way to Erith. Operations were hampered by the thousands of people that came to see the scene of the disaster. Pickpockets roamed throughout the crowds and at least one man was arrested for robbing a corpse. Both land and river police tried to keep order, the latter having to do so amidst the flotilla of boats that appeared upon the river.

Matters were made worse by the raising of the wreck, with many people trying to break off parts of it as souvenirs. Two such people were Arthur Mills and Richard Shepard. They were confronted by Thames Division Constables Pullen and Vine, whom they threatened with a knife, but were subdued and arrested, and later sentenced to fourteen days hard labour, without the option of paying a fine. Thames Division guarded the wreck day and night, alongside the men of the Thames Conservancy, paying special attention to the recovered boilers and engines, as these were attractive targets for metal thieves.

A memorial to those who died now stands in Woolwich Cemetery.



Recovering the *Princess Alice*