

Memories of a Tragic Event that Ended a Happy Holiday in Farndon

On a recent visit to Liverpool to meet up with friends to attend a book event featuring the writer Jeff Young, I was in conversation with Christine Haywood, an ex-pat Liverpoolian from Allerton, now living in Bristol, a Twitter friend for the past few years. Christine had travelled up especially for the event and the meet-up, and to spend time staying with her brother, who still lives in their old family home.

Knowing I had just travelled over from Farndon, Christine mentioned she had visited the village a few times. "We often rented caravans for our holidays, but this time we rented a cottage," Christine told me, "and one holiday in particular will never leave my memory."

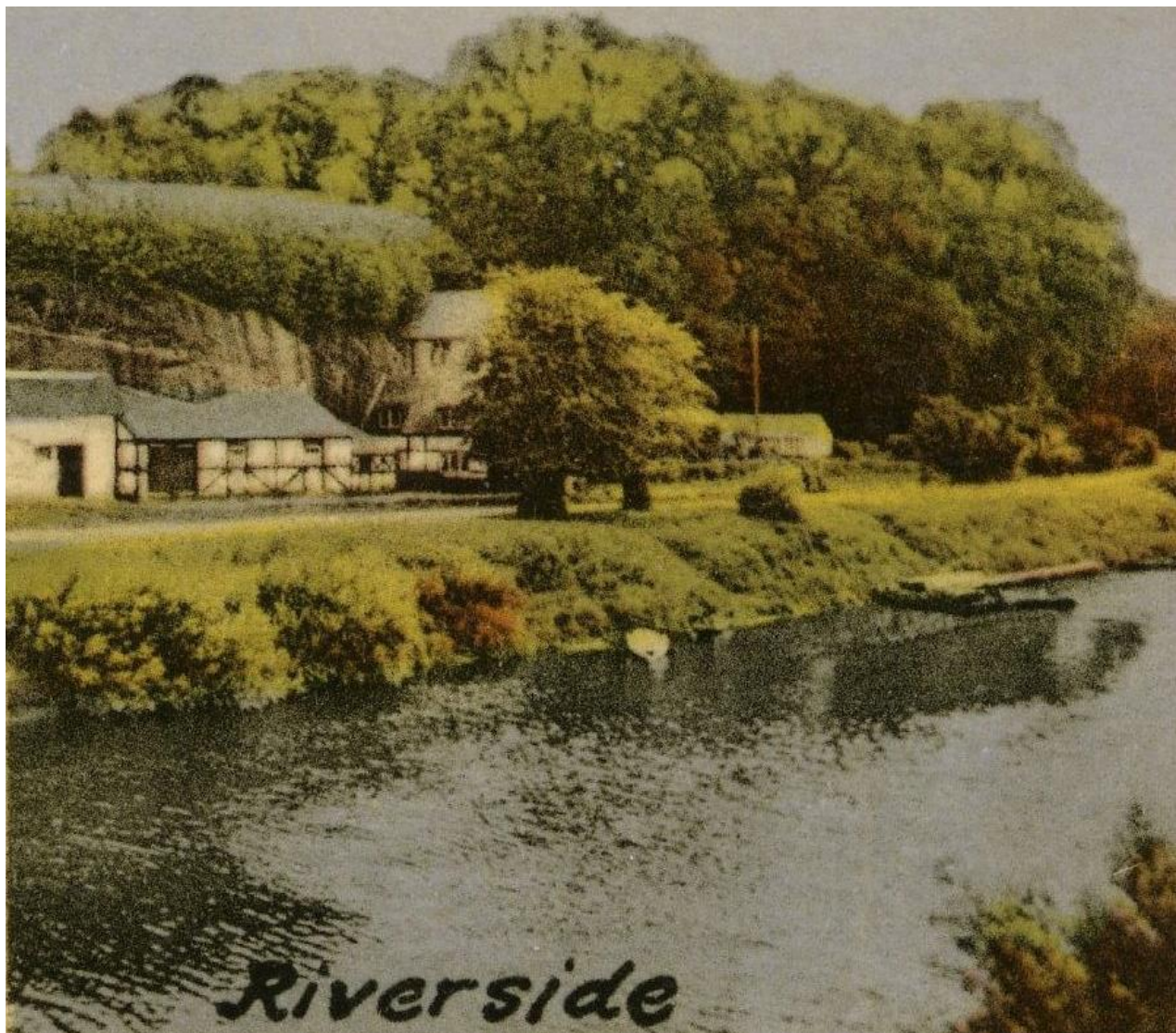
Here she takes up the story, the events still vivid in her mind, despite being so young at the time,

"In the summer of 1965, my parents rented a wooden chalet in Farndon by the side of the River Dee. We set off from Liverpool in our Mini Van. I was eight, and my two brothers were five and eighteen months old. I don't think my mum was too impressed when we got there, as it was very, very close to the river, but us kids loved it, as it seemed like a great adventure. We especially loved the wooden veranda with the leather armchair."



Christine's mother with her younger brother James at the gate of their riverside holiday cottage





The cottage that Christine stayed in is probably the one on the right

Christine continued her story,

“We were part way through our holiday, when one day we heard shrieking from along the riverbank, just on the river bend, and we all rushed down to see what was going on. There was a young woman in hysterics, saying her husband had dived into the river and hadn’t come out. My mum was with a couple of other women trying to console the lady, while my dad stripped off and dived in, and there was another man who did so too.

They dived down again and again, but couldn’t find him, and eventually had to give up and scramble out a bit further down [probably the present kayak launching point]. I remember them talking about the current and I clearly remember my dad’s teeth chattering with the cold. Eventually, the police divers came and recovered the man’s body from the weeds on the bend.

Us kids were sent back to the chalet so we didn’t witness that, but it was still traumatic. I can still hear that poor lady’s cries of anguish if I think about that day. My mum always talked about her own recklessness in encouraging my dad to keep diving back under, possibly putting his life in danger. Afterwards, she was really upset that she’d done that, but in the heat of the moment it was understandable. I think we went home the next day, as it wasn’t a happy end to a holiday.”



Christine with her brother outside the cottage, with Farndon Bridge in the background

A "DANGEROUS" RIVER

"The Dee is a dangerous river throughout the whole of its length," said the Assistant Deputy West Cheshire Coroner (Mr. J. L. Meadows) at an inquest on Wednesday.

Recording a verdict of "Death by Misadventure" on a 27-year-old Liverpool man, who drowned at Farndon on Sunday, he added: "In cold conditions, it is foolhardy for even the strongest swimmer to go out of his depth."

The inquest was on Mr. Dennis Brian Rowland, of Anfield, who had gone to Farndon with his wife and his small children for a week's caravan holiday.

On further investigation after Christine had recounted the sad events, she turned up a copy of the newspaper report on the coroner's inquest, plus the family photographs of her stay.

Chester Chronicle, 6 August 1965

Warning On The Dee

Treacherous, Says Coroner

The River Dee is a dangerous and treacherous river throughout the whole of its length, said Mr. J. L. Meadows, Assistant Deputy West Cheshire Coroner, today.

His comments were made at the inquest on a 27-year-old Liverpool man who was drowned while bathing at Farndon, near Chester, on Sunday.

"In cold weather conditions particularly, it is foolhardy for even the strongest swimmers to go out of their depth," added Mr. Meadows.

He recorded a misadventure verdict on Dennis Brian Rowlands, a paint sprayer, of 129 Ince Avenue, Anfield.

Mrs. Mary Rowlands, aged 22, the widow, said she, her husband and their two young children were holidaying in a bungalow beside the river at Farndon.

On Sunday morning her husband decided to go for a swim. She had not seen him swim before. She watched him dive in and come up about five or six yards from the bank.

THREW ROPE

Suddenly he threw up his arms and shouted: "Help," but he went under and came up several times.

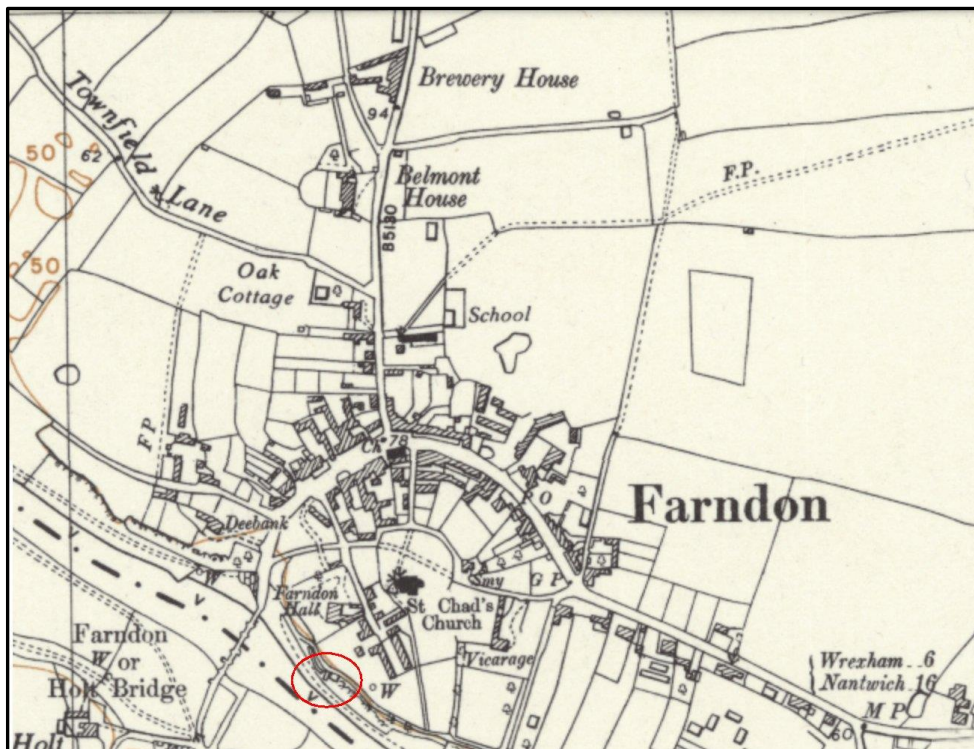
A Mr Frank Wright, in the next bungalow, brought a rope and threw it to her husband, but he did not seem able to get hold of it.

Mr Joseph Patrick Costello, of Cobham Road, Moreton, went into the water but could not find her husband.

Dr. Horace Ingham, pathologist, said Mr. Rowlands was a perfectly healthy man and there was no apparent physical reason for his collapse.

The Coroner said Mr. Rowlands apparently dived into the water and got into difficulties. "Whether he got an attack of cramp or whether the currents and eddies of the River Dee were too much for his swimming capabilities I do not know."

Liverpool Echo, 4 August 1965



Following the inquest, Dennis Rowlands who had married Mary Garrett just two years' previously, was laid to rest in Anfield Cemetery on 6 August 1965.

Farndon was a popular place to visit for Liverpool people (and hopefully still is!), and many Liverpudlians came to work in the village each year as migrant workers on the strawberry fields. Others spent holidays in the plotlanders cottages that line the river to Almere. In fact, my own first visits to Farndon were on day trips with my parents and younger sister in the sixties.



My mother, Hazel Royden, taken in 1968 on the boardwalk path on the river bend, on one of our many day trips to Farndon

This tragedy made me think more of an incident that happened on one of our family trips to the same spot three or four years later. After we had parked up, I was eager to go off fishing, and headed along the tree lined path upstream, now laid out with a boardwalk. I scrambled down the muddy slope to a large tree and sat on a thick

overhanging bow where I could cast my bait below. About twenty minutes later my mother came to see where I was, and was horrified to see me in what she thought was a precarious position overhanging the river below. I said I was fine, no danger at all, but off she went to fetch my Dad. They swiftly returned, and my Mum wanted him to immediately scramble down and get me back up to safety.

Despite my repeated protests that I was perfectly fine and it was such an excellent spot to fish from, my Dad was determined, with hysterical wails coming from my Mother behind him, to clamber down to grab me and save me from impending doom. Still trying to dissuade him, I warned him not to come down as it was very muddy, but too late - he flashed past me, sliding down the mud, and on down a vertical drop of around fifteen feet into the river below – which was at its deepest point being on a bend on the river, before the approach to the bridge. Well, I found this absolutely hilarious, especially as I saw my father re-emerge several yards downstream, from where he couldn't get up the steep bank, and then had to swim further down to where the bank levelled out. The noise from my mother had now reached a level of decibels I'd never previously experienced, amongst which was 'get yourself up here now'.

Well clearly the game was up and I reluctantly clambered up to the path to follow my distraught mother to rescue my Dad from his unexpected adventure. He was already on the bankside as we emerged from the path and stood in his shoes and clothes dripping wet, still gasping for breath. We gave him a few minutes then helped him up the bank, and when a passing walker quipped "been in for a dip?" I thought he was going to explode and throw him

in too. On returning to the car he then went through the indignity of having to remove his wet clothes, but luckily there was a towel in the boot, so he got behind the wheel with it wrapped around him, and in we got. The end of a nice day out. With my sister and I stifling giggling in the back seat all the way home.

Many years later, after moving to Farndon, my mother came for her first visit, and I recounted the story again to her as we walked along the boardwalk, pointing out the same tree and point where my Dad had set off for his neat dive. She still shuddered at the thought.

But now over fifty years' later, regularly watching the fluctuating water levels and the strength of the current, I too shudder at the thought of my Dad going in there from such a height and not being able to scramble straight out. He was a strong swimmer, but there are regular incidents on this stretch of the river, and he did well to survive that day. I certainly wouldn't be laughing now, especially after hearing Christine's story, as both men had gone into the river within yards of each other.

Mike Royden

With grateful thanks to Christine Haywood

(Follow Christine on Twitter - [@nosugartea](https://twitter.com/nosugartea))

www.farndon.org.uk



The same riverside location today

Come to Sunny Farndon



Then and Now



1950s



2023