

THE BODIAM BRIDGE ACCIDENT

On Friday, 12 September, 1947, a lorry carrying between 25 and 30 hop-pickers was crossing the bridge at Bodiam when it went out of control and plunged into the river Rother (*writes Robin Quinn*).

I first heard about the incident while doing research for a book on German prisoners-of-war. (At one time over 400,000 German POWs were detained in the UK, and some were not released until December 1948. 25,000 chose to stay on, many of them eventually becoming British citizens).

The hop-pickers – all from the South-East London area – stayed in huts in Clover Field, and usually picked on ‘their’ side of the river. This day was different, however, and in the morning they had been transported to a hop-field further away (probably at Northlands). At about 4.00 p.m. they clambered on to the lorry which was to take them back to camp. At the wheel was George Middleton from Rotherhithe. His wife and their two children, Frank (age 8) and Carole (5) were also on board. The others included two large families, the Blackmans and the Moneys. During the war they had all been evacuated to Peterborough and had lived together in one house.

The lorry was nearing their camp when – for some reason which has never been fully explained – it swerved and crashed through temporary railings at the side of the bridge, falling ten feet into the river below. ‘It all happened very quickly,’ Raymond Blackman recalls. ‘We were going along, singing as usual, everything was fine. Then, suddenly, we were in the water.’

While some of the hop-pickers were thrown clear, others were trapped. George Middleton, although slightly injured, managed to free himself and rescue his son. Then he went back into the water and saved three people, including his daughter.

15-year-old Donald Money also showed considerable presence of mind. He saw a small child floating in the river and pulled her to the bank. Then he sprinted 150 yards to a temporary camp which was occupied by German prisoners-of-war working in the area. He attracted the attention of four POWs, who followed him back to the bridge, waded into the water and began to assist the accident victims. One German produced a knife and slashed the canvas canopy covering the rear of the truck, allowing those trapped to escape.

Maureen Blackman was seven years old and small for her age. 'I was knocked unconscious in the accident,' she told me. 'They had a head-count to see if anyone was still unaccounted for, and someone said, "Maureen's missing!" My Mum had been injured, and on hearing this she passed out.' The current had swept Maureen some distance downstream. One of the Germans ran along the river bank until he spotted her caught among some reeds, and saved her from drowning.

Some casualties were taken to the Castle Inn for first-aid. Others were rushed to the Royal East Sussex Hospital, Hastings. Private motorists took some of the victims in their cars, as there was not enough room in the ambulances. While the cause of the crash remains a mystery, contemporary reports suggest that the lorry may have swerved to avoid an on-coming car. If so, this car was never traced, and no reports have been found of any person being prosecuted.

Though some people sustained relatively serious injuries, most were discharged from hospital within a few days. Things could have been much worse.

'I can't emphasise enough,' Raymond Blackman told me: 'If it hadn't been for the Germans there would certainly have been deaths.' But the prisoners do not appear to have received any official recognition for their deeds, and were never named: in all probability the British authorities were reluctant for them to be portrayed as heroes.

I am grateful for the very considerable help given by members of the Blackman family, and by Peter Venner (who contacted me via the 'Bygone Bodiam' website). Other material is from contemporary newspaper accounts and from 'Voices of Kent and East Sussex Hop Pickers' by Hilary Heffernan (Tempus Publishing Ltd. 2004). If anyone has any further information about this incident, please would they contact me via this website? I'm particularly keen to identify the German prisoners, who were probably based at Normanhurst Camp, Battle.