

A Morecambe Bay Tragedy

"We cannot but think that a serious culpability attaches to the individuals to whom the dreadful situation of the party was made known by the despairing cries that were plainly distinguished." Lancaster Observer, June 1st 1850.



Simon Williams



A Morecambe Bay Tragedy

Having recently moved from Manchester to Knowe Hill Lodge on Shore Road in Silverdale, I was researching the history of our house, and uncovered this fascinating and sad tale.

In the production of this short history, I am grateful for the help and advice of Jenny Ager, Pauline Kiggins, Philip Sheldon, and Helen Williams.

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Five Men Drown in Morecambe Bay – Whitsun 1850

This is the story of a boating accident in Morecambe Bay on the evening and early morning of Friday 24th and Saturday 25th May 1850, which resulted in the deaths by drowning of five men. It resulted in bitter recriminatory correspondence between wealthy Manchester solicitor John Morris, who had recently moved into Know Hill Lodge in Silverdale (near Carnforth) where the five victims had been staying, and the owner, manager, staff and guests of the Kent's Bank Hotel, where the drowned men spent their last fateful and fatal evening.

After a day's boating in Morecambe Bay, and an evening's drinking and 'gaiety' at the Hotel, the five younger members of a boating party attempted to return to Know Hill Lodge across the treacherous tides, currents and winds of Morecambe Bay (more recently the scene of the deaths of twenty-three Chinese cockle pickers). They certainly never made it back to Silverdale, and it is doubtful if they even made the boat.

The argument between John Morris and the Kent's Bank revolved around whether the tragedy was the result of excessive 'gaiety' and Morris's failure to ensure their safe journey. Or, more seriously and sinisterly, whether the manager, staff and guests at the Hotel had knowingly – deliberately – ignored the cries for help of the victims. Help, which according to some witnesses, could easily have been provided.

The public row between the two parties was extensively covered in the North-Western Press, and was featured in the London National Papers.

A Morecambe Bay Tragedy

Introduction

It started as a dream, and ended as a nightmare. A well-to-do Manchester solicitor, towards the end of his career, bought a second home for himself and his family at a beautiful spot on the Morecambe Bay, shuttling back and forth from Carnforth to Manchester on the newly-built railway. He immediately remodelled and enlarged the house to suit their purposes and status, and was soon pleased to invite some Manchester friends and family to stay during the Whitsuntide holidays in May of 1850. The group included some of the smart Manchester professionals with which the solicitor's family mixed. The showing off of their new home was to include a boat trip across Morecambe Bay to the small town of Grange. But of the original happy party of twelve that set out from Lindeth that morning, only seven would return alive.

John Morris

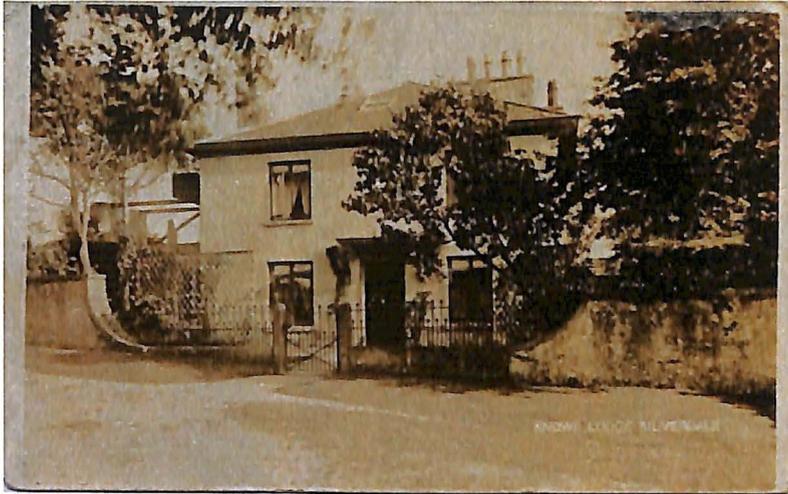
John Morris was born in 1794 and married Maria, a Yorkshire woman eight years his junior, around 1819. It wasn't long before they started a family, and between 1820 and 1827 had four daughters – Margaret, Sophia, Frances and Elizabeth. These last two were twins.

Morris prospered as a Manchester solicitor. The first records show that by 1837 he had offices in Princess Street, Manchester, moving to nearby Dickinson Street in 1849. He dealt with bankruptcies, property sales, the sale of businesses as going concerns, and the legal structures and affairs of building societies. It seems that his Managing Clerk, Thomas Faulkner Pollitt, married his daughter Sophia, and Thomas handled the purchase of Know Hill Lodge.

The Morris family lived on the edges of Manchester at Grove House, Plymouth Grove, Chorlton; a broad road made up of distinctive, large and stylish mansions built from the 1830s onwards. The address is famous as

the residence of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell who moved to number 42 with her family after the publication of her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in 1850. (The Gaskells first holidayed in Silverdale in 1843, and Elizabeth wrote many of her books there in later years, including from Lindeth Tower, next to Gibraltar Farm).

Know Hill Lodge



Knowe Hill Lodge postcard c 1920

Just as the railways opened up a connection to Carnforth in 1848, John Morris purchased a second family home – Know Hill Lodge (spelt *Knowe* since the early 20th century), overlooking the shore in Lindeth (part of Silverdale since 1932). The house stood in an estate of 19 acres, and comprised a small farm, cottage and barn, as well as a range of pastures and meadows rising up the north flank of Know Hill. The original building may have been fairly simple and agricultural; but John Morris soon had a new grander front built to the building, along with a number of improvements that brought the house up to modern standards for a well-to-do Manchester family. And the house had wonderful views across Morecambe Bay to Kent's Bank and Grange and beyond.

Once the necessary improvements had been made, the family moved in, with John Morris travelling back to Manchester for the working week.

Dramatis Personae

The Boating Party (5 women; 5 men; 2 boatmen)

Who	In Boat	Age	Description
John W. Morris	<i>certain</i>	58	Owner of Know Hill Lodge
Maria Morris	<i>probable</i>	49	John's wife
Elizabeth Morris	<i>probable</i>	22	Daughter
Frances Morris	<i>probable</i>	22	Daughter
Mr North	<i>certain</i>	?	Brother-in-law; land agent
Mrs North	<i>probable</i>	?	Mr. North's wife
George Henry North	<i>certain</i>	22	John's nephew
Alfred Jackson Coats	<i>certain</i>	24	Fiancé to Morris' daughter
James Porter	<i>certain</i>	22	Friend
John Glover	<i>certain</i>	30	Silverdale joiner; boatman
William Smith	<i>certain</i>	28	John's servant; boatman
ANO Woman			

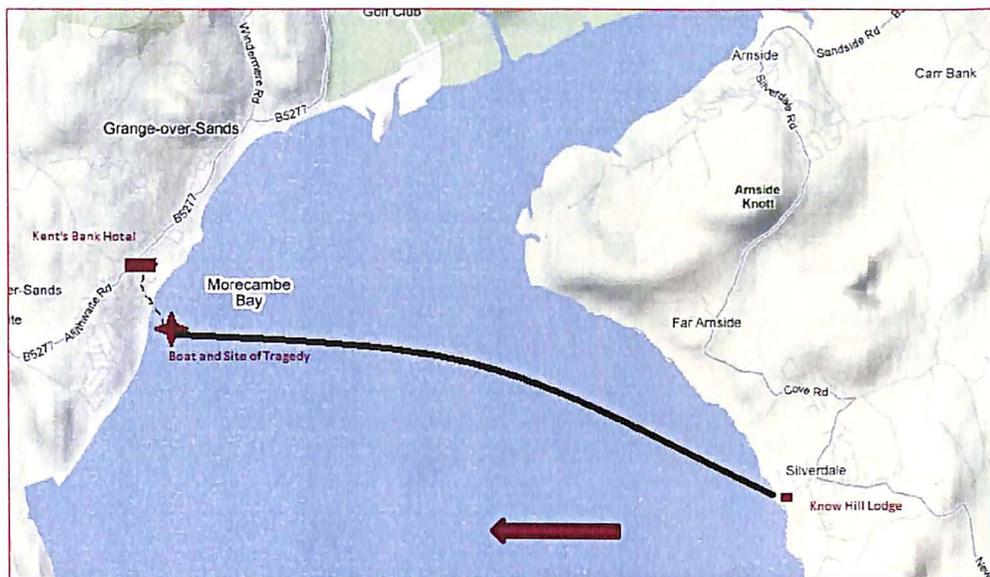
Kent's Bank and Grange

Thomas Ball		23	Acting hotel manager
John Ashburner		?	Hotel gardener
James Fisher		35	Ashburner's friend
William Ralph		40	Local fisherman
James Carter		58	Grange-over-Sands Guide
<i>John Gardner</i>		70	County Coroner
John Wren		45	Innkeeper + Jury Foreman

Widows and Orphans - Silverdale

Mary Smith, nee Beckett		25	+ Ellen, 1, and 2 others
Ellen Glover, nee Bolton		25	+ Tommy, 3, Ann, 1, and Jane Eleanor, then unborn

The Day of the Tragedy



The Morris family had invited some of their Manchester friends to join them in their new home for the Whitsuntide holidays. Friday 24th May 1850 was a fine day – with sunrise at 4 a.m., high tide a little after 10 a.m., barely a breath of wind, and clear views throughout the day. It was the ideal day for a boat trip. And it was Queen Victoria's birthday too, although she was probably busy helping her husband Prince Albert organising the Hyde Park (Crystal Palace) Great Exhibition which opened the following year.

The Norths were both Manchester neighbours and family; their son, George Henry North, 22, was John Morris' nephew. Two other young men in the party were also from Manchester, and one of them, Alfred Jackson Coats, 24, was engaged to one of the Morris daughters.



It must have been a jolly and excitable party that set off from Lindeth in John Morris' boat that morning – probably after 9.30 a.m., to catch the high tide after 10 a.m. However, with not a breath of wind, the two local men brought along for the purpose had to row across the bay – around 4 miles. This probably took longer than they had estimated, and as the tide turned they were forced to anchor off the hamlet of Kent's Bank rather than the village of Grange, a mile or so further along the coast.

So a small change of plan was required. Leaving the two hired hands in charge of the boat, with instructions to take it back to Lindeth on the evening high tide, the party walked half a mile and stopped for lunch in the Kent's Bank Hotel, not least because "the ladies had been a little saturated by the spray of the sea".

Here John Morris took the opportunity to organise carriages to take the party of ten back across the sands later that day at low tide. In the event, he was not happy with the prices being quoted, and decided to look elsewhere.



Kent's Bank Hotel (now "House") in 2011

Leaving the Kent's Bank Hotel, the party set off on foot along the coastal path towards Holm Island, a nearby beauty spot, to meet some other friends. It became clear however that they were running out of time – so in the village of Grange, at around 5 o'clock they successfully negotiated a price for a cross-sands carriage. This could not accommodate the whole party however, having spaces for just seven of the party. Morris needed to get back for some evening business, ironically the auction of the Know Hill Farm at the nearby Britannia Hotel (now renamed the Silverdale Hotel) which was to take place at 6 o'clock. (Know Hill Farm was part of Morris' estate and included the home of his servant, William Smith, who had been left with the boat at Kent's Bank).

The sensible solution was for Morris and North senior to take the carriage with the five ladies. Walking alongside the carriage back to Kent's Bank, the three young men (North junior, Coats and Porter) were left outside the cottage of James Carter, the Sands Guide, with instructions to obtain a second carriage for a safe crossing with him, and to do so within half an hour given the state of the tides. With some cheery farewells the first carriage set off across the sands, safely returning the seven back to Know Hill Lodge.



ANCIENT COACH ROAD OVER THE SANDS AT RENTS BANK.

From an old print.

Whether the three young men tried but failed to find the Sands Guide is not clear, although it is known that he wasn't in his cottage, but was at his station on the sands until 7 o'clock that evening. In any case, they had another solution – and why not – it was a lovely evening in May, they had at last slipped the leash of the women and elders, and were right next to a pub, the Kent's Bank Hotel where they had lunched earlier. Here they found their boatmen, and there the five men stayed, waiting for the tide, and by later reports "*high spirits*" and "*gaiety*" abounded.

According to the locals the high tide was due at half past ten that evening, with the tide expected to "begin to run again" at a quarter past eight. So nobody was concerned that the party waited until about half past seven to leave the Hotel for the boat moored half a mile or so offshore, taking beer, pipes and tobacco with them to continue their party. John Morris was to later report that he could see the group of five across the sands a little before sunset at eight o'clock. (To do this must have required a telescope). So at least there may have been some temporary comfort for the returned party at Know Hill Lodge – the three young men had adopted an alternative course, and would surely be home soon, sailing with the two servants.

However, for some reason, the men did not get into the boat, and thinking they were returning to his hotel for the night, Thomas Ball, the hotel manager for that night, “*set a fire and prepared other things for their comfort*”. But they didn’t arrive at the hotel, and by now Thomas Ball was worried. He went down to the sands, and met there the hotel’s gardener, John Ashburner. Also on the sands was a James Fisher, from Bowness. What they then heard and saw is at best hazy – and they themselves were uncertain. It seems the five men had been larking about on the sands, and were seen between nine and half past either in or alongside their boat. (The sun had set at eight o’clock, thirty to sixty minutes before these sightings). At about a quarter past nine the five men on the sands were heard to shout “Oh dear me!” and “Lost”. Whether they had previously been calling for help, or were simply larking about is disputed; but it is hardly likely that the shouts of desperation were their first and last.



Looking back from Kent’s Bank to Silverdale

Meanwhile, John Morris and others sat up, waiting for news. His bedroom looked out across the sands, and he must have spent fruitless hours looking into the darkness. He stayed up until past two o’clock, presumably getting to sleep only with the hopeful assumption that the men had changed plans and stayed overnight at the Kent’s Bank Hotel.

The Next Day

On Saturday 25th May, low tide was at half past four in the morning, just half an hour after sunrise. At half past five a local fisherman, William Ralph, 39, found the five bodies close to the moored boat. It was reported that the boat was capsized, although later, giving evidence at the inquest, the hotel gardener John Ashburner reported that it appeared that no one had been in it. Another report said that "in their death agony each had grasped the other, and they were all cast upon the beach in a mass". Others were gathered to help, and the bodies were removed to Kent's Bank Hotel. John Morris had sent a man to inquire, and the sad news was relayed back to Know Hill Lodge. At about noon, John Morris arrived at Kent's Bank to perform the sad task of identifying the bodies.

The Inquest

The inquest was held on Monday 27th May, at the Kent's Bank Hotel, before the County Coroner (John Gardner, aged 70) and a jury led by the foreman (John Wren, aged 45) who was innkeeper at the Crown in Grange. Given that doubts were being cast upon the performance of a neighbouring innkeeper (Thomas Ball, of the Kent's Bank Hotel) in this tragedy, was it wise to make this man the foreman? And was it credible to have a jury made up of locals pass judgement on the actions, or inactions, of others who were probably friends and neighbours?

The Coroner later provided the Lancaster Gazette with a transcript of the inquest, and the account below draws extensively from that newspaper's report of June 1st.

Separate inquiries were made about each of the bodies. This is understandable, but rather oddly the Coroner "shared out" the key witnesses among the bodies, rather than have them all give evidence prior to the verdicts. The first examination related to the death of Coates. The first witness called was John Morris, who said, "I am an attorney, residing in Manchester and Lindeth, both in this county, and knew the deceased. He was about twenty-four years of age, lived at Manchester, and was engaged at the leather trade. I saw him on Friday evening, a little before eight o'clock, at the Kent's Bank Hotel, in this county, along with four

others, and I was not aware that he was in any danger. I did not see him leave afterwards, but have seen him today, about noon. I have known him intimately from a child. From all appearances I have no doubt but that he was drowned on those sands within two hours from the time I last saw him alive.”

John Ashburner, gardener at Kent’s Bank Hotel, deposed: “The deceased was an entire stranger to me. About half-past nine o’clock I saw a group of men either standing together or sitting in a boat, I cannot tell which, on Kent Sands, about three-quarters of a mile from this house. Who they were I know not: they were strangers to me. I heard several give a shrill shout altogether. I saw nothing of them till next morning, when the dead bodies were found on the sands, near the place where I saw them on the previous night. Mr James Fisher, of Bowness, was with me on the Friday night, when we went to the sands. The bodies had every appearance of having been accidentally drowned. There was no blood or other circumstance to excite suspicion, or the appearance of any violence.”

This closed the inquiry into the death of Alfred Jackson Coates, and the attention of the jury was then directed to the case of George Henry North.

John Morris was re-examined, and identified the body as that of his friend, Mr North. Then Thomas Ball said: “I am manager of the Kent’s Bank Hotel. About half-past seven on Friday evening last, the deceased and four others left my house, as they said, to go to a boat they had at anchor on the sands. I saw them near this place. About half an hour afterwards I went towards the boat. I laid down on the sands and applied my ears to try if I could hear anything of them. I heard a low murmuring voice, as if in distress. I think the words were ‘Oh, dear me’, but I heard no more, nor did I believe they were then in danger. I do not think if the guide had been with me at that time that he could have saved any of them. When they left my house they were in plenty of time to reach the boat in safety.”

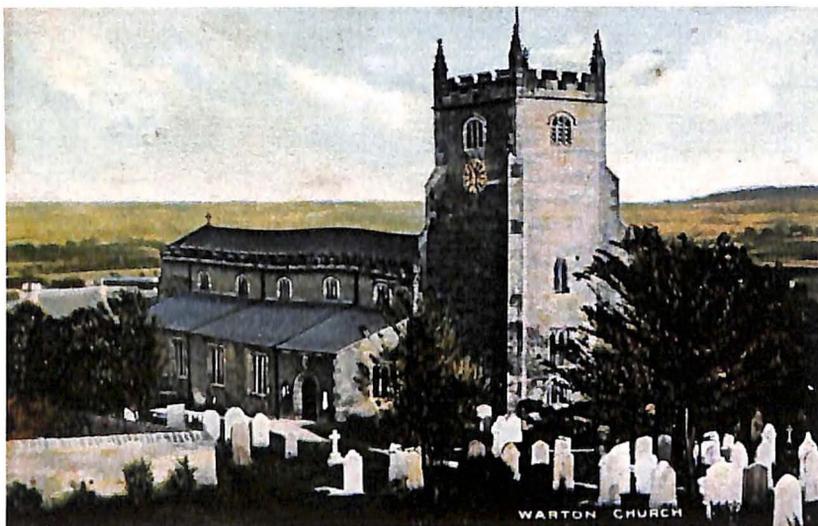
Evidence was then taken in the case of James Porter. Again John Morris was called to prove the identity of the body. William Ralph said: “I am a fisherman, and live at Allithwaite. On Saturday morning last, about half-past five o’clock, I found the bodies of five men, who were all strangers to

me, and they were brought up to this house. There were no bruises or marks of violence upon any of them, and they appeared to have been drowned."

The bodies of the two labourers, William Smith and John Glover, were successively recognised by John Morris, and sworn to.

No other evidence was taken, and the jury, following a short break, pronounced a verdict of "Accidental Death".

Burials



On Tuesday 28th May a large number of people gathered at St. Oswald's, Warton (this was before Silverdale had its own St. John's church) to witness the funerals and burials of North, Porter, Glover and Smith. The date was particularly poignant, being the 4th wedding anniversary of John Glover and his now bereaved wife, Eleanor. The body of Alfred Coats was conveyed by train to Manchester for interment. (Under the circumstances, it was perhaps surprising that Mr North, as another Manchester resident, did not want the body of his son to take the same route.)

Reports and Rebuttals



MELANCHOLY ACCIDENT AND LOSS OF LIFE
AT MORECAMBE BAY.

(The full texts of some key newspaper reports are appended)

On Wednesday 29th May, the day after the burials, the first newspaper reports appeared, including one in the Standard, a London newspaper. This was a short but factual account of events, running under the title: 'Melancholy Accident and Loss of Life at Morecambe Bay'.

This was to be the last time a broadly neutral report was carried in the press; stating the facts as known, and carefully avoiding the apportionment of blame or responsibility.

The conclusion and verdict of the inquest, "*accidentally drowned*", had been a huge disappointment to John Morris. There can be no doubt that he must have been much troubled, beyond the natural grief for the early deaths of his nephew, a future son-in-law, his servant, and two other young men. He may well have felt some blame might be attached to himself: he was the host; it was his boat and his excursion; he had failed to provide a safe return for the whole party – not least by failing to agree the price of a carriage; and in a small community (population c 250) the loss of two local men (both husbands and fathers) would have been felt keenly. Put bluntly, the playtime of some rich incomers and their posh friends had caused the loss of two fit and healthy breadwinners. Words may have been said; glances may have been interpreted. And for a solicitor, for whom an upstanding reputation counted for everything, this was potentially very damaging.

On Thursday, 30th May, the day after the "neutral" article appeared in the London papers, John Morris put pen to paper. Curiously, he wrote two quite different letters to the main papers of Lancaster and Manchester – the Lancaster Gazette and Lancaster Observer, and the Manchester Times. One might have expected a legal mind to compose his version of events extremely carefully, and then copy this for all purposes. But for

whatever reason – disturbed mind or an afterthought – Morris wrote two accounts that differ in detail, length and tone.



Lancaster Gazette and Lancaster Observer, 1st June

On Saturday June 1st the Lancaster Gazette carried a long article and a letter from John Morris setting out events and his conclusions. On the same day the Manchester Times printed Morris' other letter. The Lancaster Observer reported Mr Morris' letter in detail, and described the inquest very fully in what is effectively a transcript.

The Lancaster Gazette article starts with a full account of the accident, and takes a firm editorial line against accusations that the Kent's Bank men were careless: "... but, we believe, no parties can be condemned, and doubtless the cause of the tragic result has been the unacquaintance with the nature of the sands, and the velocity with which the tide rushes in, particularly when the spring tides are running, which was the case on Friday last." The article then covers in full the inquest, and the testimony of John Morris and the Kent's Bank men. It then introduces Morris' letter with the note: "Since the above particulars were put in type, we have received the following communication from Mr. Morris." There must have been very little time to receive and print the letter, but they managed it. Perhaps in

that introductory note there is an acknowledgement that their reporter could have taken the wrong line in apportioning no blame.

Morris states that the persons at and connected with the Kent's Bank Inn had shown "*apathy and indifference*" towards the cries, and states that the struggling men were seen up to their middles in water, calling and waving for assistance. (This, if true, seems to be important evidence not given at the inquest). Morris has also spoken with the Sands Guide, and cites his opinion that the men could have been rescued: "*Mr. Carter, the guide, says men on horseback might have reached them without much risk, even if the horses had had to swim; such men and horses are kept by Mr. Carter.*" Mr. Carter may well have been hugely embarrassed to have his conversation used in this way – in effect accusing his friends and neighbours in the local papers.

Morris' letter finishes with an appeal – the Rev A. Hadfield, who had interred four of the bodies, was the central figure among the local 'great-and-good' in raising a fund for the widows and orphans of the two local men, William Smith and John Glover.

Northern Star, 1st June

This regional newspaper quotes the Manchester Examiner's earlier coverage of the inquest, which took a very strong line against the Kent's Bank men: "*... Ashburn and Fisher confessed that they heard on Friday evening a cry for help from some parties seemingly in distress, and could even distinguish the words, 'Lost, lost' and yet they stirred neither hand nor foot to obtain assistance, but excused themselves on the ground that "it was too late at the time to do so!"*"

This is quite a different line from the carefully neutral tone of the Lancaster Gazette. "*Confessed*", "*stirred neither hand nor foot*", "*excused themselves*", and the use of a sarcastic exclamation mark. Had Morris got to the Manchester Examiner's reporter at the inquest?

Manchester Times, 1st June (Reprinted in the Leeds Mercury, 8th June)

The article in this paper starts with an introduction “*Since publishing the particulars which we gave on Wednesday...*” Sadly, that edition is not available; however it is clear that a number of newspapers had attended the inquest. The rest of the article is a letter from John Morris, although some editing may have taken place: “*... the substance of which is contained in the following account.*”

The account is similar to Morris’ letter to the Lancaster Gazette, but is written in entirely new words, and with some interesting differences. In listing the gentlemen travelling in the excursion (the names of the ladies are kept out of all accounts) Mr North senior is anonymised to “*... and another...*” presumably to protect this man’s feelings or reputation. In this version of events the excursion’s purpose was “*... to visit Kent’s Bank Hotel and spend the day there*”; his other version has the tide forcing them to anchor there rather than going direct to Grange. For the first time we learn that Morris saw the five men “*shortly before eight o’clock on the bank above the boat*”. And in this account, Morris goes much further in asserting that it was quite plain that the men were in trouble: “*...and they were actually seen running about in all directions, waving their hats and handkerchiefs, and calling out ‘Lost! Lost! Help!’*” He also asserts that there was ample time to mount a rescue, claiming, incredibly, “*There is reason to believe that for two hours the shouts of the unfortunate men were heard*”. He adds another detail that didn’t come up at the inquest: “*... and some of the people at the inn called to them, telling them which way to go, and received their replies.*” If this was true, then clearly there was a significant culpability of the Kent’s Bank folk, and a very clear case for them to answer. One further difference in Morris’ reports was that in this version he notes that “*The landlord of the hotel had several strong horses in his stable, by means of which the young men might have been rescued without difficulty; but their aid was not applied*”. So now both Guide Carter’s and the hotel’s horses have been cited as possible rescue beasts.

Once again, the letter finishes with details of the fund for widows and orphans of Smith and Glover, this time including the name of a

Manchester fundraiser – Mr. William Douglas of Old Garrat Dyeworks (perhaps the former place of employment of the drowned young man Alfred Jackson Coates, who was in the leather trade).

Lancaster Gazette, 8th June – Letter

The men of Kent's Bank were not going to take this lying down.

They wrote a letter to the Lancaster Gazette, but wanted to remain anonymous – signing it *“An Acquaintance with the facts and a Resident in the neighbourhood”*. It is rather surprising that the editor allowed an anonymous letter to be published – though the authors were probably Thomas Ball the hotel “manager” (in inverted commas, as he was actually the nephew of the manager – but the title was accepted for the inquest), and the sands guide, James Carter.

The letter sets out the “facts” that were revealed at the inquest, and makes the argument that the lives were lost through *“the folly and negligence of the unfortunate sufferers”*. The letter also states that the men were *“full of ‘gaiety’”* – i.e. they were partly or completely drunk.

The thrust of this letter is that only at the very end did it become clear that the men had come into danger. Up to that point it was assumed they were larking around, and by the time the seriousness and danger of the impending tragedy was realised, it was too late to do anything.

And it finishes with another, quite opposite, statement from the authority on safety – the sands guide: *“Carter, the guide, says it was impossible for anyone to save them after their danger became known.”*

**THE LATE MELANCHOLY LOSS OF
LIVES AT KENT'S BANK.**

TO THE EDITOR OF THE LANCASTER GAZETTE.

**SIR,—I have perused, with some surprise, the
letter of an assumed "acquaintance with the facts,**

John Morris certainly wasn't going to take this accusation and apportionment of blame without a forceful public response, if only to protect his reputation!

Writing from his Manchester home on the Wednesday, he dismisses the previous week's letter as an endeavour "*to exculpate the parties at and about the hotel*" – overlooking the fact that the inquest had already done just that. Again he states that "*the shrieks and cries of the drowning persons for help were heard for a considerable time*", but without citing the source of this information.

Next, he directs his irritation towards the sands guide, Carter, finishing with "*I can only say that in the presence of two respectable gentlemen (Morris and North perhaps?) Mr. Carter stated 'he saw no reason why the persons might not have been saved, there was no flood, the water was calm, and if it had been necessary to swim, a man and horse accustomed to the sands (such as he kept) would easily have reached them.'*"

And then his final swing at the people of Kent's Bank is to tell the harrowing story of another botched service effected by Kent's Bank people – getting a local gentleman, John Hewitson and his family across the sands in their carriage, when they survived drowning by the skin of their teeth.

This seems to be the end of the correspondence, although it probably put no end to the discussion and dispute that took place for months and years to come in Kent's Bank and Silverdale – and more widely.

The Widows and Orphans after the Tragedy

Donations to the Widows and Orphans Fund were received through the local newspaper offices, several notables of Arnside and Silverdale, and in Manchester. The Rev. A. Hadfield, who had interred four of the five men at the Silverdale chapel was the central point for receiving donations. The Lancaster Gazette acknowledged receipt of £5 from a Bristol address, signed "One from Morecambe Bay", and the donation of two sovereigns from Mrs Colonel Pennington.

On 29th June the Gazette wrote, "*We are happy to be able to announce that the sum now collected for the use of the widows and orphans of the men who were drowned at Kent's bank, a few weeks ago, amounts to nearly £80. The Rev. A. Hadfield shortly proposes calling a meeting of the principal subscribers to decide upon the manner it ought to be laid out, to be of most advantage to those for whom it has been so liberally subscribed.*"

So, less than £40 per bereaved family had been raised – not a huge sum, but approximately the equivalent of a year's wages for a labourer. It is not known how much John Morris donated, or whether he supported the bereaved in any other fashion.

The Glover Family

The widow of John Glover was a Silverdale-born woman, Ellen. She was born Eleanor Bolton – one of at least five children of a stonemason. When John was drowned Ellen, now 25, already had two small children, Thomas aged 2, Ann aged 1, and had a third baby on its way – to be named Jane Eleanor. She was christened at the Warton parish church on December 29th 1850, at which date she was still living in Lindeth, presumably still at Know Hill farm. Ellen was never to remarry. By April 1851 Ellen and her three babies had moved near to the centre of Preston, and shared their new home with Ellen's elder sister and her 13 year old child (the father had not married Ellen's sister). Somehow or other Ellen and her sister juggled life so that they could both bring an income to the house by acting as servants. (Probably the 13 year old girl had to act as child-minder to Ellen's three).

Ellen moved back to Silverdale some time afterwards.



Elizabeth Gaskell, the eminent novelist, in a letter written in July 1858 tells of an incident as she summered in Silverdale, where she met 3 children playing on the heath:

“Last Tuesday we had a party of boys & birds & girls.... We had a tame magpie, and a tame jack-daw, (the latter belonging to a little dwarf-child we picked up on a wild common one night), said dwarf – and three children of a drowned fisherman. The birds fought for precedence but the children were very good and nice – not flippantly clever like town children, but solidly-thinking with slow dignity. The birds sate at tea on the heads of their respective owners, occasionally giving a plug or a dig with their beaks into the thick curly hair in a manner which I should not have liked, but it did not seem to disturb the appetites of the owners. It was very funny & picturesque in the old quaint kitchen here...”

Tommy, the boy, would have been about eight at the time, and it seems that Mrs Gaskell became his patron in some regards, taking a hand in securing employment for him as a clerk in a Manchester leather traders.



Mrs Gaskell, writing in 1859, provided a brief letter of commendation to an unknown prospective employer:

"I am afraid I cannot give the exact dates but I will put down as much as I can remember about 'Thomas Glover' and the clergyman at Silverdale – (the Revd. Alfred Hadfield, Silverdale nr. Lancaster) would send every particular, and would I am sure, speak very highly of the boy. His father was a fisherman, drowned by the coming up of the tide on the sands five or six years ago. (NB: she is surprisingly poorly informed about the true circumstances and dates!) He left a widow, three children, two girls besides Thomas, who must now be 14. Mrs. Glover is very much respected & liked. She has had a hard struggle to live – 'has been welly hungered to live many a time' – but owing to the kindness of Peggy Hatton, a washerwoman, she has pulled through, though she is often hard put to it in the winter, when there is much less to do. A gentleman whose name I forget (NB: John Morris perhaps?) offered to pay for Thomas's schooling and he has profited well by the privilege. He writes well, is a great way on in arithmetic, and is generally an intelligent, quiet and gentlemanly boy, - with a

thoughtful dignity about him, that comes, I should think, from his having been his mother's confidant and comforter during all her hard days. About Silverdale there is very little work, even of an agricultural kind, people live on fish and their potatoe grounds in a kind of primitive fashion; and there is nothing much done in the winter; & low wages in the summer. Besides the boy's talents and acquirements fit him to be something more than a labourer; and I want him to earn money somehow, so as to be able to help his mother. Apprenticeship costs money, & though that might be got over yet there would be his living to be found all the time he was an apprentice. I should be very much obliged to anyone who would help him to employment, & I feel pretty sure that he would do me credit."

Mrs Gaskell's efforts met with success, and after staying with her in Plymouth Grove in the summer of 1859, Tommy took up a job as an office boy, took lodgings of his own in Chorlton, and as the years went by built his career in Manchester's leather trade, rising to become manager of a leather factory. He married and had a son and a daughter.

By 1861 Ellen and her daughters had moved back to Lindeth to live with her 74 and 82 year old mother and father, and 12 year old Ann was taken on as a (second) live-in servant for the Rev. Alfred Hadfield at the parsonage. In 1871 Ellen and her 20 year old daughter Jane, were living on their own, and brought in an income by being laundresses, possibly at the neighbouring Britannia Hotel. Ann had left the Silverdale parsonage but was still a servant, now in a house in Dunham Massey, Cheshire, as one of four domestic staff supporting a 77 year old widow and her two daughters. While working there she met a young local decorator, married this Isaac Bowland, and by 1881 was living with him and their three children in Birkdale, Lancashire, somewhat nearer her home village once more.

Ellen never remarried. She died in 1872, aged 47.

The Smith family

Much less is known about the widow and reported three children of the other local man, William Smith. Mary Smith, his wife, was also a Silverdale girl, the daughter of John Beckett from Waterslack, Silverdale. Mary and William had married some three years before the tragedy. The baptism of just one daughter is recorded, Ellen, in May 1849. Following the funeral, in the census of 1851 Mary is to be found as a servant working at an inn in Lancaster; probably the Blue Anchor in Anchor Lane. Sadly, no children are to be found, and this is the last we know of the Smith family.

The Morris Family after the Tragedy

1851

Life goes on. Although it must have been a dreadful reminder to look out over the bay every day, towards Kent's Bank, the family stayed on at Know Hill Lodge (as well as keeping their Manchester home). In April 1851, the house (recorded in the census of that year as Lindeth Cottage) was being used as a school, run by three Morris sisters and an assistant teacher, and with eight boarding pupils resident, aged between 7 and 19. The pupils were, in the main, the sons and daughters of Manchester friends – including the 19 year old Amelia North – probably an indication that there was no break in relations between the Morris and North families. Also present were two Douglas sisters from Manchester, perhaps the offspring of William Douglas, the Master Dyer that assisted in the collection for the widows and orphans. A three year old Mary Ellen Nicholson was visiting at the time of the census – she was the daughter of another Morris sister, Margaret Ellen – who at a later date was to sue for her share in the house. (In 1861 this same niece, now aged 13, was staying as a visitor at Ivy Cottage, Carnforth, the home of an out of business “artificial manure dealer”, presumably trading in the products from lime kilns.)

1852

A happier year! In the space of just 10 weeks the twin Morris daughters, Eliza and Frances, both teachers at the time, were married at St. Oswald's in Warton by the Rev. Alfred Hadfield, who had previously buried four of the five victims of the tragedy. (It is not known whether either of these was the daughter previously betrothed to the victim Alfred Jackson Coates). Eliza married Thomas Brown Faulkner, a silk broker, of Cheetham Hill, Manchester, and they were shortly to emigrate to Arkansas USA. Frances married a widower accountant William Gawthorpe, another man from Plymouth Grove, Manchester. (After their marriage they continued to live in Lindeth and had three daughters, including twins. They moved back to Manchester in 1860, where a fourth and a fifth daughter were born. Frances had died by 1871, and her widower was staying alone at the Royal Hotel in Silverdale at the time of the census that April. Their daughters were scattered to at least three addresses, and the twins were split up.)

1853

Travel on the sands was often hazardous, and in July 1853 the main oversands coach from Ulverston to Lancaster stuck fast in a channel running down from Silverdale, called Wilkinson's Pool. The passengers and horses were extracted, and took shelter at Know Hill until an omnibus-and-four arrived to take them on to Lancaster.

1854

On 28th February, aged 62, John Morris suffered a stroke, and died at Know Hill Lodge 14 days later, but not before writing his final will. This left everything to his wife Maria; the husbands of his four daughters formed the trustees. After her death, or remarriage, the estate was to be shared equally among the four trustees. His widow, Maria, survived another 15 years, with Know Hill Lodge providing rental income. She died in 1869. However, the estate was not sold off, and it took the action of one of the daughters, (with whom Maria had spent the last of her years) against the rest of the family, through the Court of Chancery, Lancaster, to force the sale to take place. Know Hill Lodge was finally sold in 1873.

Some Unanswered Questions

A sad story, and one which leaves much scope for taking sides!

1. Why did the inquest into the deaths hear no evidence of the men being seen shouting and waving for up to two hours before they died? Did John Morris just fabricate this, or was evidence suppressed?
2. Why didn't the sands guide give evidence as to whether the men could have been saved? Was he deliberately kept away to avoid the Coroner reaching the conclusion that the men *could* have been saved?
3. Why did the hotel manager think the men were after all coming back to the hotel, and light a fire for them? Had he seen them getting soaked, and was this to dry their clothes? If so, he had seen much more than the evidence he gave.
4. If the Kent's Bank men had heard and seen the predicament, why did they not act? Fear for themselves?
5. What really happened on the sands? Did the men fail to reach the boat before tidal channels cut them off in all directions? Or did they get out of the boat to hasten the boat's movement off the sand, and then fail to get back?

Sources

1. Newspapers

This account was largely inspired by articles carried in contemporary newspapers, available online at <http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/> as part of the ongoing digitalisation of Victorian newspapers, or through local libraries in Morecambe and Bolton-le-Sands. My researches took me to the pages of the Lancaster Gazette, the Standard (London), the Leeds Mercury, the Manchester Examiner, the Northern Star, the Manchester Times, the Bristol Gazette and the Blackburn Standard. The most important articles are transcribed in full in Appendix 2.

2. Census

Internet access to the main censuses from 1841 to 1911 enabled some understanding of the history (and future) of many of the main characters in this account.

3. Elizabeth Gaskell's Letters

Late into my researches, I met another local history researcher – Pauline Kiggins. It was her researches into the letters of Elizabeth Gaskell that provided the story of what happened to orphaned children of the drowned manservant, John Glover. I am indebted to her for her work, and for allowing me to refer to the outcomes of her research.

Newspaper Transcripts

1. Leeds Mercury, June 1st 1850

Melancholy Accident and Loss of Life at Morecambe Bay

Several families resident in Manchester have been thrown into great distress by the tidings of a most painful and fatal occurrence, at Morecambe Bay.

A large party of ladies and gentlemen had left Manchester to spend the holidays at a watering place in the neighbourhood of Morecambe Bay, and on Friday morning a boating party was formed to cross the water from Silverdale to Grange, consisting of five gentlemen, five ladies, and two men servants. The gentlemen were Mr. John Morris, solicitor, Manchester; Mr. North, land and building agent, and Mr. North, jun., his son; Mr. Alfred Coates (son of Mr. Coates, late cotton merchant, and now resident in Plymouth-grove), and Mr. Porter, also of Manchester.

In the afternoon, Mr. Morris and Mr. North, sen, returned with the ladies to Silverdale, crossing the sands at low water in a car, but the gentlemen determined to wait till the tide served in the evening, and recross the Bay in the boat. In order that their pleasure should not be interrupted by this arrangement, Mr. Morris engaged with a person who was to bring them over the sands in a cart. The unfortunate excursionists, however, disregarded Mr. Morris's injunction, and stopped some time at the hotel. They then resolved to have a moonlight sail across the bay, and the party started off to the boat, which was lying on the beach. It was then about half-past seven o'clock and they had to walk some distance before they could reach the boat. Before they had gone far on their journey down the sands, the tide was insensibly overtaking them; and when they neared the boat, they discovered too late that they were surrounded so effectually by the tide, that either to reach the boat or return was impossible. The bodies were found the next morning by a person who was fishing on the spot; and the position in which they lay, disclosed how desperate had been the struggle for life which they had made. In their death agony each had grasped the other, and they were all cast upon the beach in a mass.

An inquest was held on Monday evening, at Hest (sic) Bank Hotel, before Mr. Gardner, coroner, when two men named Ashburn (sic) and Fisher, confessed that they heard on Friday evening a cry for help from some parties seemingly in distress, and could even distinguish the word, "Lost!" and yet they neither stirred hand nor foot to obtain assistance, but excused themselves on the ground that it was too late at the time to do so! The verdict was simply "Accidental Death."

2. Lancaster Gazette article, June 1st 1850

Melancholy Catastrophe at Kent's Bank

Five Persons Drowned

We have this week the painful duty of recording a fatal and melancholy casualty which took place on Friday evening last, at Kent's Bank, and which has not only cast a gloom of sadness over the district in which it happened, but plunged many families of the highest respectability into the most poignant grief.

On the morning of the day above mentioned, a gay and happy party set out from the residence of J. Morris Esq., at Lindeth, near Silverdale, to enjoy an aquatic excursion on the beautiful bay of Morecambe. The party, which consisted of five ladies, Mr. Morris, an attorney in Manchester, but residing at Lindeth; Mr. North, sen; Mr. Alfred Jackson Coats, aged 24, leather merchant of Manchester; Mr. George Henry North, aged 22, warehouseman, Manchester; and Mr. James Porter, aged 22, warehouseman, Manchester, embarked in Mr. Morris's sailing boat at Silverdale, with light and merry hearts. In the buoyancy of their spirits, little did they dream how soon their mirth would be turned to sadness – that in a few short hours some of those whose laugh was loudest and whose hearts were lightest would be stretched in the still, cold sleep of death.

The day was beautifully fine, and all were delighted with the sail. They crossed the Bay of Morecambe, and arrived at the Kent's Bank Hotel, where, as the ladies had been a little saturated with the spray of the sea, and Mr. Morris wished to return to Silverdale in time for a sale of property, it was arranged that conveyances would be engaged to take the whole party back across the sands at low water. Some little difference took place as to the sum which should be paid for the conveyances, and eventually the party proceeded on foot to Grange, a neighbouring village. Here the only conveyance that could be obtained was one carriage, which, as it could not contain the whole party, an agreement was come to that the five ladies and the two elderly gentlemen, Mr. Morris and Mr. North

sen., should cross the sands in it, leaving the three young gentlemen to return by the boat when the tide flowed.

After the carriage and its occupants had departed for Silverdale, the three gentlemen who were left walked back to the Kent's Bank Hotel, where they spent the remainder of the afternoon, leaving that place along with two men whom they had brought to manage the boat, about half-past seven in the evening. The boat was lying at anchor on the sands between half and three quarters of a mile from the hotel, and as from the time they started, an hour and a half would elapse before the tide began to flow, there was no apprehension but that it would be reached in safety.

The parties were seen standing in a group for some time within, as was imagined, ten yards of the boat. Shortly after this a shrill shout was heard, and a cry which, although indistinct, was supposed to be "Oh! Dear me." No notice was taken of this, as the danger was not apprehended, and the gentlemen having been in high spirits during the whole of the afternoon, it was imagined they were amusing themselves.

Nothing more was heard until the following morning, when the dead bodies of five men were found on the sands near to where the boat lay still at anchor. The bodies were identified as those of Mr. Coats, Mr. North, and Mr. Porter, and the two men who had accompanied them, one of whom is named John Glover, by trade a joiner; the other James Smith, a servant in the employ of Mr. Morris. The bodies were immediately removed to the Kent's Bank Hotel, and information of the melancholy disaster conveyed to Mr. Morris's residence at Silverdale, the occupants of which had long been waiting in anxious expectation of the arrival of the missing gentlemen.

Rumour, with her hundred tongues, had been busy in stating the cause of the accident, and attempts have been made to affix blame to the parties on the shore, for being inattentive to the cries of distress of the deceased gentlemen, but, we believe, no parties can be condemned, and doubtless the unfortunate cause of the tragic result has been the unacquaintance of the deceased with the nature of the sands, and the velocity with which the tide rushes in, particularly when the spring tides are running, which was the case on Friday last. All acquainted with the locality agree that when the cry of distress was heard, human aid was unavailing, and Carter, the guide, who has had long experience in this district, stated that had he been present he could have rendered no assistance.

It is reported that Mr. Alfred Coats was engaged to a young lady at Silverdale. Smith, Mr. Morris' servant, was a man 28 years of age, and has left two children

and a wife far advanced in pregnancy. Glover, a joiner who resided at Silverdale, has left a wife and three children. We understand both parties were entirely dependent upon the deceased, and consequently by this sad bereavement are thrown unprovided for upon a merciless and cold unfeeling world.

The Inquest

An inquest was held on the bodies on Monday evening last, before J. Gardner, Esq., coroner, and a highly respectable Jury, of which Mr. Wren, of the Crown Inn, Grange, was foreman.

The first witness examined was Mr. John Morris, who said, I am a solicitor, of Manchester, and reside at Lindeth, in the parish of Warton. I knew the deceased Alfred Jackson Coates. He was 24 years of age, and resided at Manchester. He was in the leather trade. I saw him on Friday evening for the last time a little before eight o'clock. He was with four others on the Kent's Bank Sands. I was not aware that he was in distress, or danger, nor did I see him alive afterwards, but saw his body about noon this day. I have known him from a child, and I have no doubt he was drowned on the sands within two hours from the last time I saw him. I think he might have been saved if proper attention had been paid to their cries of distress.

John Ashburner, was the next witness examined, and deposed as follows:- I am gardener at the Kent's Bank Hotel, and on Friday saw the deceased there. They were entire strangers to me. About half-past nine o'clock I saw a group of men standing together on the sands, or sitting in the boat, which was about three quarters of a mile from this house. Afterwards I heard several give a shrill shout all together. I saw or heard nothing afterwards until the following morning, when I saw the dead bodies laid on the sands, near to the place where I had seen them on the previous evening. Mr. Jas. Fisher, of Bowness, was with me when I went on the Sands, on Friday night. The bodies had every appearance of having been suddenly drowned. There was no blood upon them, nor was there any appearance of violence having been used. The boat was lying at anchor in the morning, and appeared as if no one had been in it.

The jury then withdrew, and shortly afterwards brought in a verdict of "Accidentally drowned".

On the inquiry into the cause of death of the other parties, the following additional evidence was taken:-

Thomas Ball, manager of the Kent's Bank Hotel, having been sworn, said - About half-past seven on Friday night, deceased, Alfred Jackson Coats, and four others

left my house, as they said, to go the boat, which was then at anchor on the Sands. I saw them near to the boat, which was on the Lancaster Sands, about half a mile from this place. I was not aware they were in danger, nor did I hear Mr. Fisher tell anyone so. I went in about half an hour afterwards down to the sands, to meet the persons who had left my house, as I thought they were coming back. I laid down on the sands, and applied my ear to listen if I could hear anything of them. I heard a low murmuring, as if proceeding from someone in distress. I think the words were, "Oh! Dear me", but I heard no more, nor did I believe the deceased were then in danger. I do not believe that if the guide had been with me at the time he could have saved any one of them. When they left my house they were in plenty of time to have reached the boat in safety.

William Ralph having been sworn, said – I am a fisherman, residing at Allithwaite. On Saturday morning last, about half-past 5 o'clock, I found the dead bodies of five men laid on the sands. They were all strangers to me. They were all brought up to this house. There were no bruises or marks of violence on them, and they all appeared as if they had been drowned.

Mr. Morris identified the whole of the bodies.

This was the whole evidence adduced, and the jury, after a short consultation, returned a verdict of "Accidentally drowned".

We are glad to find that through the humane exertions of the Rev. Alfred Hadfield, the incumbent of Silverdale, a subscription has been set on foot for the bereaved widows and orphan children of the two boatmen. Surely this is a call upon the sympathies of the philanthropic, which will be liberally responded to. The loss of those who were so near and dear to them; to whom they could look for consolation, comfort, and support, is enough for the widows to bear, without the bitter pang of not knowing how their future existence and that of the children must be provided for. What can be a more affecting spectacle than that of a tender and indulgent father snatched in an evil hour from his children, and the bosom of a disconsolate wife? The subscription list will not be confined to the district, but donations will be received in various parts of the town, and at the *Gazette* office, and we trust the appeal will be liberally responded to.

On Tuesday the remains of Mr. North, Mr. Porter, Glover, and Smith were consigned to their last resting place at Silverdale. A large concourse of persons assembled to witness the mournful ceremony of interment. On the same day the body of Mr. Alfred Coats was conveyed per train to Manchester, for interment.

Since the above particulars were put in type, we have received the following communication from Mr. Morris:-

3. Lancaster Gazette June 1st 1850 – Letter

To the Editor of the Lancaster Gazette

SIR, - There are so many statements usually circulated when accidents occur such as the melancholy event at Kent's Bank, on Friday evening last, whereby five persons lost their lives, that it becomes necessary the real facts should be made known to the press and public, and having taken the examinations of persons cognizant of the circumstances, I send you the following detail.

On the Friday morning, a party consisting of 5 ladies and 5 gentlemen left Lindeth for Grange, in a boat, under the management of the two men William Smith and John Glover. The morning was so serene and calm that the sails were comparatively useless, and the men had to row the boat. The turn of the tide prevented the crossing to Grange, and induced the party to go to Kent's Bank, where they all landed on a dry bank, and walked from thence about three-quarters of a mile to the hotel. All the party lunched, and left early in the afternoon for Grange, leaving the two men in charge of the boat. From Grange the party obtained a carriage, which held seven of them and the driver, to cross the channel. All the party left Grange at the same time (about 5 o'clock in the afternoon) and went to the guide's house to obtain a conveyance for the three gentlemen (afterwards lost) to cross the channel. The parties separated opposite the guide's house, under injunction and promise not to stay more than half an hour. It appears the three gentlemen changed their minds, instead of going to the guide's they went again to the Kent's Bank Hotel to the two men William Smith and John Glover, to return with them in the boat, and, it is in evidence, that they left the hotel about half-past seven in the evening, and got safe to the bank where the boat lay at anchor, being seen upon it from both sides of the bay for some time afterwards, and when the tide got round them they were heard by persons at and near the inn to cry for help, the calls for assistance continuing till half-past nine, the distance from the shore being so short that the words "help", "lost", "Oh, dear", "Oh, dear", &c. were distinctly heard by the persons at and connected with the inn.

No effort was, however, made to save them, and the reason alleged is, they (the persons) thought they were making fun until it was too late for any assistance to be rendered. It appears the guide left the bank about seven o'clock, and was at his house the whole evening. He says had he been applied to there is little doubt the whole party might have been saved, that there was nothing to prevent their being reached by resolute men on horseback.

An inquest was taken on Monday last, and verdicts of “accidentally drowned” returned, but one cannot but regret that so much apathy and indifference should have been manifested. Had a messenger been sent to Mr. Carter, the guide, proper assistance would have at once been got, and there can be little doubt the whole party might have been saved; the evening was calm, there was no particular current, the five persons were seen moving about from place to place up to their middles in water, calling and waving for aid, and their bodies were found early next morning, lying upon the sand, where they appeared to have perished. Mr. Carter, the guide, says men on horseback might have reached them without much risk, even if the horses had had to swim; such men and horses are kept by Mr. Carter.

The body of one of the gentlemen, Mr. Coates, was on Tuesday morning conveyed to Manchester to be interred there; the other two gentlemen, Mr. George Henry North (my nephew), and a Mr. James Porter, from Manchester, with the two men, William Smith and John Glover, were interred the same day at Silverdale Chapel. Smith and Glover have left widows and five small children comparatively destitute. A few benevolent persons are assisting to raise a fund for them by subscription; may I beg the favour of your assistance through the medium of your widely circulated paper. The Rev. A. Hadfield, the Incumbent of Silverdale, has kindly consented to act for them, and will along with myself, John Hewitson Esq., Thomas Rodick, sen., Esq., J.P., of Challen Hall, Thomas Rodick, jun., Esq., of Moor Cain Cottage, Arnside, Robert Rodick, Esq., of Woodclose, Arnside, gladly receive the smallest subscription on their behalf.

Yours respectfully,
Jno. Morris,
Know Hill Lodge,
Silverdale, near Lancaster,
30th May, 1850.

4. Lancaster Observer 1st June 1850

Melancholy Accident on Morecambe Bay – Loss of Five Lives

We regret to have to record another of those distressing accidents with which the Sands of Morecambe Bay have become so painfully associated, resulting in the death of five individuals, and conveying the deepest affliction to many respectable families. Several very incorrect versions of this melancholy affair have appeared in the papers, but we have been favoured with the following particulars from a

gentleman who formed one of the party on the occasion, and their accuracy will not admit of dispute.

On Friday morning last, Mr Morris, of Manchester and Silverdale, accompanied by five ladies and four gentlemen who were on a visit to his house, and two servant men, William Smith and John Glover, left the residence of Mr Morris, at Lindeth, for an excursion to Grange, by boat, which was under the management of Smith and Glover. The morning was so serene and calm that the sails were comparatively useless, and the men had to take to their oars. The ebb of the tide, however, prevented the party reaching Grange, and they therefore repaired to Kent's Bank, and succeeded in landing on a dry bank, and walked from thence about three-quarters of a mile to the hotel. After securing the boat on that spot, the party lunched at the hotel and left early in the afternoon for Grange, leaving the two men in charge of the boat. From Grange the party obtained a carriage, and seven of them including the ladies, and Mr Morris, and Mr North sen., were driven home, the remainder of the party being the unfortunate gentlemen whose careers have met such a melancholy termination, and whose names were Mr Alfred Jackson Coates, aged 24 years, Mr George Henry North (nephew to Mr Morris) aged 22 years, and Mr James Porter, also 22 years of age.

From Grange the whole party proceeded to the guide house, with the view of engaging a conveyance for the three gentlemen with which to cross the channel, and the party separated opposite the guide house with an injunction and promise not to stay more than half an hour. It appears, however, that the three unfortunate gentlemen altered their determination, and instead of following Mr Morris with the vehicle which the guide would have procured, they returned to the hotel at Kent's Bank, to the two men, with the intention of returning with them in the boat. By the evidence of the manager of the hotel, it seems that they left that house about half-past seven in the evening and advanced safely to the bank where the boat was anchored, being seen upon it from both sides of the bay for some time afterwards, and when the tide surrounded them they were heard by persons at or near the inn to cry for help. The cries for assistance were continued until half-past nine, the distance to the shore being so short that the words "Help" "Lost" "Oh dear" were distinctly heard by individuals about the inn. No effort was, however, made to save them, and the excuse alleged by the parties on shore is that they imagined the gentlemen were not in earnest; and this delusion appears to have impressed them until any efforts for the preservation of the party were too late to be of effective service.

The correctness and reality of the occurrence, however, were fearfully revealed the following morning by a fisherman named Ralph, who discovered the bodies

lying together, not far from the bank, and their position implying that they had been endeavouring to return to the shore.

We cannot but think that a serious culpability attaches to the individuals to whom the dreadful situation of the party was made known by the despairing cries that were plainly distinguished. The evening was calm, and there was no particular current, and the unfortunate gentlemen were seen moving about half immersed in water, and yet no effort was made to save them.

The guide, it appears, left the beach about seven o'clock, and was at his house the whole evening. He states that had he been applied to, there is little doubt but that the whole party might have been rescued, as there was nothing to prevent the spot being reached by resolute men on horseback. This might have been done without any risk, if the horses even had been compelled to swim, and men and horses for the purpose might have been obtained from Mr Carter.

The body of one of the gentlemen, Mr Coates, was on Tuesday morning conveyed to Manchester, while the other bodies were interred the same day in Silverdale. An inquest was held on the bodies on Monday, at Kent's Bank Hotel, before Mr Gardner, by whom we have been favoured with a transcript of the depositions on the occasion. Separate inquiries were made on each of the bodies. The first examination relates to the death of Mr Coates. The first witness called was John Morris, who said, "I am an attorney, residing in Manchester and Lindeth, both in this county, and knew the deceased. He was about twenty-four years of age, lived at Manchester, and was engaged at the leather trade. I saw him on Friday evening, a little before eight o'clock, at the Kent's Bank Hotel, in this county, along with four others, and I was not aware that he was in any danger. I did not see him leave afterwards, but have seen him today, about noon. I have known him intimately from a child. From all appearances I have no doubt but that he was drowned on those sands within two hours from the time I last saw him alive."

John Ashburner, gardener at Kent's Bank Hotel, deposed: "The deceased was an entire stranger to me. About half-past nine o'clock I saw a group of men either standing together or sitting in a boat, I cannot tell which, on Kent Sands, about three-quarters of a mile from this house. Who they were I know not: they were strangers to me. I heard several give a shrill shout altogether. I saw nothing of them till next morning, when the dead bodies were found on the sands, near the place where I saw them on the previous night. Mr James Fisher, of Bowness, was with me on the Friday night, when we went to the sands. The bodies had every appearance of having been accidentally drowned. There was no blood or other circumstance to excite suspicion, or the appearance of any violence."

This closed the inquiry touching the death of Mr Coates, and the attention of the Jury was then directed to the case of Mr North.

Mr Morris was re-examined, and identified the body as that of his friend, Mr North. Thomas Ball said: "I am manager of the Kent's Bank Hotel. About half-past seven on Friday evening last, the deceased and four others left my house, as they said, to go to a boat they had at anchor on the sands. I saw them near this place. About half an hour afterwards I went towards the boat. I laid down on the sands and applied my ears to try if I could hear anything of them. I heard a low murmuring voice, as if in distress. I think the words were 'Oh, dear me', but I heard no more, nor did I believe they were then in danger. I do not think if the guide had been with me at that time that he could have saved any of them. When they left my house they were in plenty of time to reach the boat in safety."

Evidence was then taken in the case of Mr Porter.

Mr Morris was called to prove the identity of the body, as that of his unfortunate friend. William Ralph said: "I am a fisherman, and live at Allithwaite. On Saturday morning last, about half-past five o'clock, I found the bodies of five men, who were all strangers to me, and they were brought up to this house. There were no bruises or marks of violence upon any of them, and they appeared to have been drowned."

The bodies of the two labourers, William Smith and John Glover, were successively recognised by Mr Morris, and sworn to.

No other evidence was adduced, and the Jury, on these depositions, pronounced a verdict of "Accidental death".

Smith and Glover, the two men in charge of the boat, have left widows and children totally unprovided for. A few benevolent individuals have opened a subscription for the purpose of making some provision for the two bereaved families, and contributions will be thankfully received by the Rev A. Hadfield, the incumbent of Silverdale, John Morris Esq., of Lindeth, John Hewitson Esq., Thomas Rodick Esq., Challon Hall, Thomas Rodick jnr. Esq., of Woodclare, Arnside, and at the *Guardian* office, Lancaster.

5. Northern Star 1st June 1850 – quoting Manchester Examiner

The *Manchester Examiner* supplies the following particulars, and the result of the inquest:-

Before they had gone far on their journey down the sands, they must have found that the tide was insensibly overtaking them; and when they neared the boat, they discovered too late that they were surrounded so effectually by the tide, that either to reach the boat or return was impossible. The bodies were found the next morning by a person who was fishing on the spot; and the position in which they lay, disclosed how desperate had been the struggle for life which they had made. In their death agony each had grasped the other, and they were all cast upon the beach in a mass.

An inquest was held on Monday evening, at Hest (sic) Bank Hotel, before Mr. Gardner, coroner, when two men named Ashburn (sic) and Fisher, confessed that they heard on Friday evening a cry for help from some parties seemingly in distress, and could even distinguish the words, "Lost, lost" and yet they neither stirred hand nor foot to obtain assistance, but excused themselves on the ground that it was too late at the time to do so! The verdict was simply "Accidental Death".

6. Article in Manchester Times June 1st

The Catastrophe In Morecambe Bay

Since publishing the particulars which we gave on Wednesday, in relation to this melancholy event, by which the lives of five men have been sacrificed, we have through the kindness of Mr. J.W. Morris, of Know Hill Lodge, Silverdale, received a more detailed account of the circumstances of the case than was then in our possession, the substance of which is contained in the following account:-

On Friday morning last, at the coming up of the tide, a party of ladies and gentlemen, with two servants, set out in a boat from Silverdale, to visit Kent's Bank Hotel, which is near to Morecambe Bay, and spend the day there. The party consisted of five ladies and five gentlemen, the latter being Mr. Alfred Jackson Coats, of Plymouth Grove, Mr. George Henry North, Mr. James Porter (of Manchester), Mr. John Morris (of Silverdale), and another, with two men, named William Small (*sic*) and John Glover, to assist in the management of the boat.

On reaching Kent's Bank, the boat was moored at about three-quarters of a mile's distance from the hotel, and the excursionists went ashore, and took some refreshment, and the servants were instructed to take charge of the boat, and return by the next tide, at eight or nine o'clock, to Lindeth. Leaving these men

behind, the excursionists started for the hotel at about four o'clock, intending to go to Holm Island to meet some friends from Silverdale; but, on reaching Grange, as they did not think there would be sufficient time to effect that object, they again set out, designing to attend a sale at seven o'clock; and it was resolved to return by the nearest way, and obtain two conveyances to cross the channel.

One of these was procured at Grange; and another was to be got at the Guide's house, on the way to the ford, and in it the three young gentlemen, Coates, Porter and North, were to journey home. On reaching the guides house, these three were left behind; and it appears that instead of acting according to their previous purpose they changed their minds, and returned to the two men whom they had left at Kent's Bank. The people at the hotel report that the young men left that place at about half-past seven, and took with them pipes, tobacco, and beer; and Mr. Morris, who was looking out for them, saw them shortly before eight o'clock on the bank above the boat; at which time all appeared to be right. Mr. Morris remained up at his house waiting for them until after two o'clock, very uneasy at their non-arrival; and in the morning he sent a messenger to make inquiries, and from him, in the course of an hour, learned the melancholy truth that the whole of the men had been drowned.

On investigation of the circumstances of the case, the conclusion seems inevitable that none of the party need have been lost, had only slight exertions been made to save them. The party must either have reached the boat and been unable, from the state of the tide, to get into her, or have remained amusing themselves on the high bank till the latter became completely surrounded by the tide; and they were actually seen running about in all directions, waving their hats and handkerchiefs, and calling out "Lost! Lost! *Help!*" but the persons who witnessed all this refused to render them any help, imagining (as they would make it appear) that the men were only making these cries "for fun". There is reason to believe that *for two hours* the shouts of the unfortunate men were heard, imploring the help of those who were within hearing; the evening was calm and light; and some of the people at the inn called to them, telling them which way to go, and received their replies. The tide at this time had covered the low ground around the bank on which the men were, and it is evident that they had become bewildered, fearing to make for the shore lest they should get out of their depth, not knowing the ground. At last the tide covered the bank, and in a short time the people at the inn and at the waterside heard one last agonising shout, and all was over.

It is the opinion of persons well acquainted with the sands, that the whole five men might have been got away without any difficulty, had simple and easy means

been used; and thus the whole party were lost through the apathy of the persons in whose sight they were. The landlord of the hotel had several strong horses in his stable, by means of which the young men might have been rescued without difficulty; but their aid was not applied.

Both the servant-men (Smith and Glover) have left widows to lament their loss; the former has left three children and the latter two. These poor creatures are in very poor circumstances, and we are glad to find that a subscription list is being opened, to save them from that utter destitution into which otherwise they must fall. John Coulston, Esq. manager of the Lancashire Banking Company; the Rev. A. Hadfield, incumbent of Silverdale; J. Herritson, Esq., Thomas Rodick, Esq. of Channel (*sic*) Hall; Thomas Rodick, Esq. jun. of Morecambe Cottage, Arnside; Robert Rodick, Esq. of Wood Close, Arnside; J. W. Morris, Esq. of Know Hill Lodge, Silverdale; and Mr. William Douglas, of Old Garrat Dyeworks, Manchester, have kindly undertaken to receive contributions for this charitable purpose; and we sincerely trust that this appeal to the benevolence of the public will not be entirely disregarded.

To the above particulars of this calamity, we may add that the body of Mr. Coats was, on Tuesday morning, conveyed to Manchester for interment; and that Mr. George Henry North and Mr. James Porter, with the two men-servants, were inhumed the same day at the chapel in Silverdale.

7. Lancaster Gazette letter, 8th June 1850

TO THE EDITOR OF THE LANCASTER GAZETTE

SIR, - A letter appeared in your paper of last week signed by a Mr. Morris, relative to the late melancholy accident that happened near Kent's Bank by which five men lost their lives. It seems that he (Mr. Morris) wishes to throw (doubt?) upon the manager and persons connected with the inn, but I think when the following (facts?) are exposed to the public any *indifferent* (person?) will feel satisfied that no such blame can (be rightly?) attached to them, but that it was (through the?) folly and negligence of the unfortunate sufferers themselves that they came to such an untimely end, and that when their real situation became known, it was beyond human aid to save them.

The facts are these: - A party of gentlemen with two boatmen arrived at the Kent's Bank Hotel on Friday the 24th May last, in a boat from Lindeth. At half-past seven in the evening they left again to return to their boat, which was anchored about three quarters of a mile from the (shore?), and as the tide would not begin to run until about a quarter past eight, they had ample time to reach it in safety, but

being full of "gaiety" (we?) supposed they had amused themselves about the boat until they were overtaken by the tide. It is in evidence that at half-past eight Thomas Ball, the manager of the Hotel, saw the unfortunate men on the sands, and from their appearance thought they were coming back again to the Hotel to stay all night; he in consequence set on a fire and prepared other things for their comfort, but on their non-arrival about half an hour after, he went down again to the sands for the purpose of meeting them, and there met with Ashburner, another witness, who said the men were sitting in their boat. The two witnesses heard them shout, but could not then tell what they said, and never for a moment thought they were in danger. Ashburner shouted to them, but they did not shout in reply, and it was not until about a quarter past nine that their real situation became Known to the witnesses, by hearing the last and shrill shout of "Oh dear me," "lost". It was then too late to render any assistance. Carter, the guide, says it was impossible for anyone to save them after their danger became Known.

Yours, &c.,

AN ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE FACTS AND A RESIDENT IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

8. Lancaster Gazette letter, 15th June 1850

THE LATE MELANCHOLY LOSS OF LIVES AT KENT'S BANK.

To the Editor of the Lancaster Gazette.

SIR, - I have perused, with some surprise, the letter of an assumed "acquaintance with the facts, and a resident in the neighbourhood", inserted in your paper of Saturday last, endeavouring to exculpate the parties at and about the hotel, when the late melancholy event occurred at Kent's Bank; the tenor of the letter evidently shows the source whence it emanates. If the acquaintance with the facts was present at the inquest why was not his evidence tendered? He must have known that the general feeling was that blame attached somewhere, and also that the shrieks and cries of the drowning persons for help was heard for a considerable time.

If Carter has *since* declared it was impossible to save the persons, why has he not been required, in justification of the *apparent* apathy and indifference of the persons at and about the hotel, to make a public declaration of the facts? I can only say, that in the presence of two respectable gentlemen, Mr. Carter stated "he saw no reason why the persons might not have been saved, there was no flood, the water was calm, and if it had been necessary to swim, a man and horse accustomed to the sands (such as he kept) would have easily reached them."

This is not, I am informed, the first instance where proper caution, or consideration for the lives of others, has been wanting at this place. Last autumn John Hewitson, Esq., (present at the late inquest), was returning from the Lakes by way of Kent's Bank to Silverdale, in his carriage, accompanied by his wife, four children, and a friend, where they applied for a change of horses, and were told they could not then pass the channel; they were accordingly detained at the hotel until nearly dusk (although Mr. H. says he had from the time of his arrival seen persons crossing the channel), and, that when about to start the driver said to the young man, Bowes, the superintendent, "had we not better have the guide." Who answered, "Oh! no; you'll do very well." They crossed what appeared to be the channel, and in answer to an inquiry made, to relieve Mr. Hewitson, the driver said they had no other water to cross. They had not, however, proceeded very far before they found themselves in the midst of what appeared to be another channel, and shortly found the water washing through the carriage, and the horses swimming, the driver at fault and unable to give any explanation; one of the horses broke its traces and the carriage remained fixed in the sand, the current passing through the carriage, carrying away their luggage. It was with great difficulty the party were saved; had the carriage gone fifteen yards further it would have been completely emersed (sic) and every soul must have perished. This is one event which speaks volumes and shews the necessity of competent persons being fixed at such places as Kent's Bank.

Your insertion of the above in your paper of Saturday next will oblige.

Yours respectfully,

Jno. Morris.

Grove House, Plymouth Grove, Manchester, 12th June, 1850.

9.Lancaster Gazette, 29th June 1850

The Late Accident at Kent's Bank

We are happy to be able to announce that the sum now collected for the use of the widows and orphans of the men who were drowned at Kent's bank, a few weeks ago, amounts to nearly £80. The Rev. A. Hadfield shortly proposes calling a meeting of the principal subscribers to decide upon the manner it ought to be laid out, to be of most advantage to those for whom it has been so liberally subscribed.

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