

# **Account of Purley on Thames Lock Keeper's Rescue Attempt**

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*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 22 published in PPN April 1982*

## FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

### 22. Lock-Keeper's Vivid story of Attempt at Rescue

So ran the headline in the Berkshire Chronicle on Friday, 25th December 1914. In that issue, and two more editions in January, was related the sad story behind the brass plate on the south wall of the Choir at St. Mary's, Purley:

"In thankful memory of John Henry Dudley Matthews ... He lost his life on the night of Dec. 20th 1914 while crossing the river from Mapledurham, where he had preached at Evensong on the text: "The Souls of the Righteous are in the hands of God."

It had been a month of very heavy rain and the river Thames was rising fast when the 71 year old Rector, Rev J H D Matthews, decided to use the dinghy kept at the lock to cross over to Mapledurham. There was no regular ferry at this time, but Mr Matthews was a good oarsman having rowed for his college at Oxford, and he frequently went over to help his aged and ailing friend, Rev J St. John Thackeray, the incumbent at Mapledurham. Three days previously, Mr Matthews visited him and arranged to take Evensong the following Sunday. In view of the worsening conditions on the river, his family and friends tried to dissuade him from making the journey and even Miss Thackeray wrote to say that they would not expect him as the river was rising.

Nevertheless, on that fateful Sunday, 20th Dec. 1914, the Rector walked down to Mapledurham Lock and asked the lock-keeper, Mr John James Tame, for the lock boat. He told Tame that he was going to take tea with Miss Thackeray and would return at 7.30. Tame warned him to be sure and row well up river on the way back, to which the Rector replied, "That's all right, Tame, don't worry. I shall be all right."

Those who were present at Mapledurham Church that evening later recalled: "His reading of the beautiful lesson from the book of Revelations and his sermon on the departed and prayers for the dead and the nearness

of the unforeseen world will never be forgotten by those who heard him."

By 7.30 it was dark and bitterly cold and Tame put a light in his window as usual to guide the Rector back across the river. At 7.40 a light appeared on the Oxfordshire bank as Miss Thackeray held the boat for the start of the journey back. She noticed that Mr Matthews did not seem to row as high up the river as expected. Tame put on his hat and coat and went out to land the Rector.

Suddenly there was a shout which seemed to come from the direction of the top island - "Tame, Tame!". This was quickly followed by a scream and another shout. Suddenly to his horror the lock-keeper saw Mr Matthews go over the big weir bucks holding on to the dinghy. Quickly sizing up the situation, Tame ran along the weir with a boat hook calling out, "All right, I'm here. Hang on, sir." The water was about six feet below the level of the weirs which were all down at the time. Tame held out the boat hook and tried to lift the Rector on to the top of the dinghy. "All right, Tame" he said quite calmly as he grasped the boat hook. But these were the last words he uttered as, apparently overcome by the extreme coldness of the water, he seemed to roll over and disappeared.

Tame ran round to the end of the lock thinking that Mr Matthews might have been washed there, but it was too dark to see anything. He found the boat later, dashed to pieces. Despite extensive dragging of the river, the body was not recovered until five weeks later when it was spotted by the captain of a barge 15 miles away at Remenham. Identification was made by his gold watch which had stopped at 7.40 and a handkerchief marked "J H D Matthews." The Coroner's Inquest at Remenham returned a verdict of "accidental drowning while crossing the river in a boat."

The Rev J H D Matthews was buried at Purley on 26th Jan 1915 and a grey granite cross on the left side of the path to the Church marks his last resting place.

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