Water, Water Everywhere: Drowning in Tudor England

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Sixteenth-century England was a dangerous place. There were plagues and wars, childbirth was perilous and infant mortality high. But what risks did people really face in going about their everyday lives? And what does that tell us about what they did all day, when they weren't busy with the grand events of Tudor history?

Our new research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, is aiming to find out, using some nine thousand coroner's inquest reports of accidental deaths preserved in the National Archives. Coroners had to investigate any sudden or violent death, principally to establish whether it might be a case of murder or suicide. They summoned a jury of local men to view the body and reported on the circumstances of the death, handing in the reports to the assize judges as they toured around the kingdom. The records are not complete – some coroners were more efficient than others, some areas of the country, notably the city of London, filed their returns separately, and there are a few files missing – but they present a unique picture of daily life.

People had accidents at work, at home, at play and when travelling. But one of the most striking findings to emerge from our research so far is the role played by water in accidents of all types. In the first years for which we have analysed the records, 1558-60, nearly half of all accidental deaths were drownings. In 2010 the equivalent figure was less than one in fifty. So why was water so dangerous?

Working on and around water when few people could swim was bound to be risky. Watermills for grinding corn and fulling cloth presented a dangerous combination of fast water and moving machinery, but more accidents happened with boats. One of the most public came on May Day 1559, when John Penne was on the Thames taking part in the entertainments for Queen Elizabeth. A small barrel of gunpowder caught fire and John's face was burnt. Fearing a bigger explosion, he and his crew-mates rushed to the other side of their boat with predictable results and he was pitched into the water. There were boats everywhere, for fishing, ferries and carrying cargo of all sorts. Water transport was cheaper and easier than road, but it had unpredictable risks. Matilda Richardson was sitting on the side of a boat carrying wood through the York suburb of Clementhorpe on the River Ouse when a large tree trunk floating in the river crashed into the boat and knocked her off.

Travel across and beside water was as risky as travel on it. Rickety bridges, slippery banks, panicky horses and fords where the depth of the water or the speed of the current were hard to judge all posed threats. Everyone was at risk, from a labourer like John Hayward, walking the six miles from Broadway to market in Evesham across the brook at Childswickham on a dark December morning, to a yeoman like Richard Mongombery, riding the eight miles from Uppingham to Kirby late on a February afternoon beside the flooded River Welland.

Animals and water were a dangerous combination. The easiest way to wash a horse was to ride it into deep water, but falling off could be fatal, as Griffin Home found when he rode a black horse into the 'horse pool' at Bishop's Castle and it stumbled. Even taking excitable horses to drink was risky. William Hill, aged 17, took two colts to the River Soar at Burton on the Wolds on 15 June 1558, but they ran into the river and pulled him in after them. Sheep needed washing before they were sheared and that too could have tragic consequences. One June morning in 1560 Alice and Katherine Bonde were washing sheep in the River Hodder at Slaidburn. A wether jumped up and knocked Alice head over heels into a whirlpool. Seeing her sister in trouble, Katherine went after her, while John Swinglehirst jumped in from the bank to help. All three drowned. Children's curiosity could get them into

trouble with anything that moved. John Choppinge, a Hertford toddler, followed a gosling into a pond in the yard of his family home in April 1560 with fatal results.

One drowning in every ten involved women fetching water for cooking or washing. They died this way three times as often as men, as we might expect from their predominant role in domestic work. Deep wells, slippery-sided streams and great rivers like the Tyne at Newcastle, where Elizabeth Garret fell in on 26 June 1560, all posed problems. Washing linen in rivers could also prove fatal for women. And in the devastating epidemics of the late 1550s, men and women alike drowned in the attempt to slake their fevered thirst. Some were even described as losing their reason in the heat of the fever, like Dorothy Cawthorn of Belton in Lincolnshire, who got out of bed between 4 and 5 a.m. on Thursday 19 October 1559 and smashed a hole in the kitchen wall so she could get out into her mistress's hop-garden, where she drowned in a pit five feet deep.

The drownings that have surprised us most are those that run counter to our preconceptions about Tudor cleanliness. Medical advice in the sixteenth century was that bathing was dangerous, opening the pores to infection. Anyone sweaty from work would do much better to change his shirt. Yet nearly one in eight drownings involved people washing. Some washed their hands and faces, one his feet, going down a well on a ladder to do so. But half a dozen men, mostly labourers, stripped off and went into rivers, streams and ponds in the heat of June and July to cool down and get clean. They may not have had the option of changing their shirts, but they may have been cleaner than those who had.

Even they might not have drowned had they been able to swim. But swimming seems to have been a rare skill and one confined to men. It enjoyed a revival in the Renaissance, as young scholars and aristocrats were inspired to imitate the manly swimming Romans. The first swimming manual published in England was a Latin treatise by a Cambridge don, Everard Digby's *De arte natandi* of 1587. Digby himself warned of the risks of learning to swim in the wet and windy English climate, in ponds with thorny banks and muddy or stony bottoms, filled with weed or wooden stakes or 'slimy filth'. It was enough to deter anyone. Cambridge students used to swim in the river at Grantchester, but accidental drownings were persistent, sometimes of two or three students at a time. In 1571 the University vice-chancellor, alarmed at the death toll, forbade all students to swim on pain of a public beating for the first offence and expulsion for the second. But there seem to have been as many drownings after the ban as before. There was a ghastly inevitability about the fate of James Astrell, who went into a pond at Winwick in Northamptonshire on 2 July 1559 intending to teach himself to swim, but got into deep water and drowned. All the while there was water everywhere and little chance to learn safely how to survive in it, drowning would remain a potent threat.

One sixteenth-century accident that could just as easily have happened today struck Robert Potter of Tebay in Westmorland (now Cumbria) on 1 December 1559. He was a husbandman or small farmer, who was walking over Lune's Bridge when his hat was blown off by a sudden strong gust of wind. Reluctant to lose it, he clambered down to the River Lune to retrieve it and followed it into the water, where he must have lost his footing or been stunned by the cold and drowned.

Children often drowned when playing in or around rivers or mill ponds, but eight-year old Catherine Burney died in a stranger accident than most. She lived at Graveley, near Hitchin in Hertfordshire, and her father Thomas Burney, a labourer, was dead. On 21 June 1560, perhaps a drowsily warm day, she lay down under a crab-apple tree by a pond in the yard of John Alen, another local labourer. There she slept from 3 till 4 in the afternoon, but, as the

jurors explained to the coroner, ‘in her awaking and rising from sleep’ she ‘did slide into the said pond’ and there she drowned.

Water posed particular dangers to the infirm, who drowned washing their hands, fetching water to drink, relieving themselves or just walking too near rivers. Richard Pers was described as being much weakened by an extreme and long-drawn out illness when he drowned at Buckden in Huntingdonshire on 7 July 1559. He had gone to a water-pit to wash his shirt, but leant too far over the water, putting his weight on the frail walking-stick clutched in his right hand, and when the stick suddenly broke he fell forwards to his death.

Some effort was made to prevent accidents at open wells and London parishes generally replaced theirs with pumps in the course of the century. But incomplete safety arrangements could be lethal. John Cave, a labourer of Stoke d’Abernon, Surrey, was out and about between midnight and 5 a.m. on 6 December 1559. Walking from his home towards a brewhouse owned by Thomas Lyfeld, gentleman, he came to a newly built well which, the jurors explained, did not have any kerb around it, was more or less level with the surrounding ground and was only partially covered with hurdles – wattled fencing panels – and boards. Not remembering the well was there, nor able to see it in the pitch darkness, he fell into it and drowned.