

Coate Reservoir burst 1 May 1866

'Bursting of the Canal at Coate. Great Alarm in the District', *North Wiltshire Herald*, Saturday, 5 May 1866

—On Wednesday last, a leak was discovered in the culvert which conveys the water of a spring beneath the reservoir at Coate. The ordinary method of proceeding, that of throwing clay overboard just above the spot, was resorted to, and with apparent success, as the leak sensibly diminished. On Thursday afternoon, however, the water which flowed from the culvert was found to be rapidly increasing in volume, and ere the men under the charge of Mr. Day, keeper of the reservoir, could proceed to the spot, part of the meadows adjacent in the occupation of Mr. Jefferies and Mr. Barnes, were under water. Attempts were immediately made to lower an iron hatch from the bank above, but having been unused for many years it could not be moved until a sledgehammer was procured. Meanwhile men had been dispatched to convey warning, while the whole neighbourhood was in a state of alarm, and the foot-traffic upon the highway road suspended, as it was several feet deep in water. At length, however, the hatch was forced down and the danger ceased, although from the necessity which then arose for shutting down another hatch at the upper extremity of the culvert in order to prevent the water of the reservoir escaping there, it is feared that considerable damage will be occasioned to the grass crops by the accumulation of spring water denied a passage through the culvert, and it is stated that a field in the occupation of Mrs. Baden, of Dayhouse Farm, is already partially flooded. When it is remembered that the reservoir is far over fifty acres in extent, the alarm of persons below is not surprising.

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‘Threatened Inundation at Swindon’, *Swindon Advertiser* 7 May 1866.

THREATENED INUNDATION AT SWINDON.—On Tuesday afternoon, about two o'clock, an accident which had it not been for the strenuous efforts of those present, might have resulted in a fearful catastrophe, occurred at the Coate Reservoir, near Swindon. The Coate Reservoir is the property of the Wilts and Berks Canal Company, and was built by them in the year 1822, for the purpose of supplying their canal with water. The reservoir, which is about 90 acres in extent, and from 20 to 30 feet deep, is supplied by a stream of water running in at the south-west end, and has an outlet through the embankment at the east end. By the side of the first-mentioned stream there is another stream, which has to be carried through a brick culvert the whole length of the reservoir, where it is emptied into a brook. For some time past there have been several leakages in this culvert, and it has been noticed on several occasions that a large quantity of water had been running out at one end whilst there was none running in at the other, and it was only a week before this occurrence that Mr. Choules, of the Sun Inn, Coate, with several friends, were walking in his garden, when he noticed there was a large quantity of mud and clay coming down the stream. Thinking that all was not right, Mr. Choules went up to the reservoir and spoke to the keeper about it, and they both proceeded to the upper end in a boat. On arriving there they found the water quite clear, when they at once commenced to make a search for the leakage, and the keeper continued to do so until Tuesday morning, when he came into Swindon and got the assistance of another man. They then returned together, and having found the hole, commenced ramming hay and clay into it to stop the flow of water. They had not been thus engaged long before they were startled by the sudden disappearance of the hay and clay altogether, and it was immediately apparent that they had knocked the top of the culvert through. The men then immediately ran to shut down the hatchways, but this was found to be impossible, as they had not been worked for upwards of twenty years. The water continued to rush through the hole and out into the adjoining meadows, carrying with it something like fifty tons of clay and brickwork, and in a short time the road to Marlborough and the fields along the side of the stream were all under water to a considerable extent. In less than two hours the water in the reservoir had sunk several feet, and it was expected every minute that the rush of water would undermine the embankment, and cause that also to give way; but fortunately for those living in the immediate neighbourhood, the

men at last succeeded in shutting down the hatches and stopping the rush of water. The scene in the village on the appearance of the water was one of the utmost confusion; people were running about expecting every minute that they would be washed away. A poor Irishwoman happened to be going along the road at the time the water came down, and before she could get out of the way the water had reached to her knees, and she, not knowing which way to run, stood still, and called out to some persons in an adjoining field to know if they had often such sudden floods in that part of the country. The force of the current was so strong that two large oak posts, of great weight, lying in Mr. Choules' garden, were carried across several fields, where they were ultimately found. In consequence of the hatches being shut down, the stream of water at the other end of the reservoir has been bayed back, and has extended over the land for a considerable distance, there being no outlet for it whatever. Several engineers have since visited the scene of the accident, and have given it as their opinion, that if the water had been allowed to run a short time longer, the bank must have given way, and had this happened the consequences would have been most disastrous. The water rushed on for several miles before it was distributed, and in the evening several persons arrived from Marlston, four miles off, to ascertain the cause of the flood.

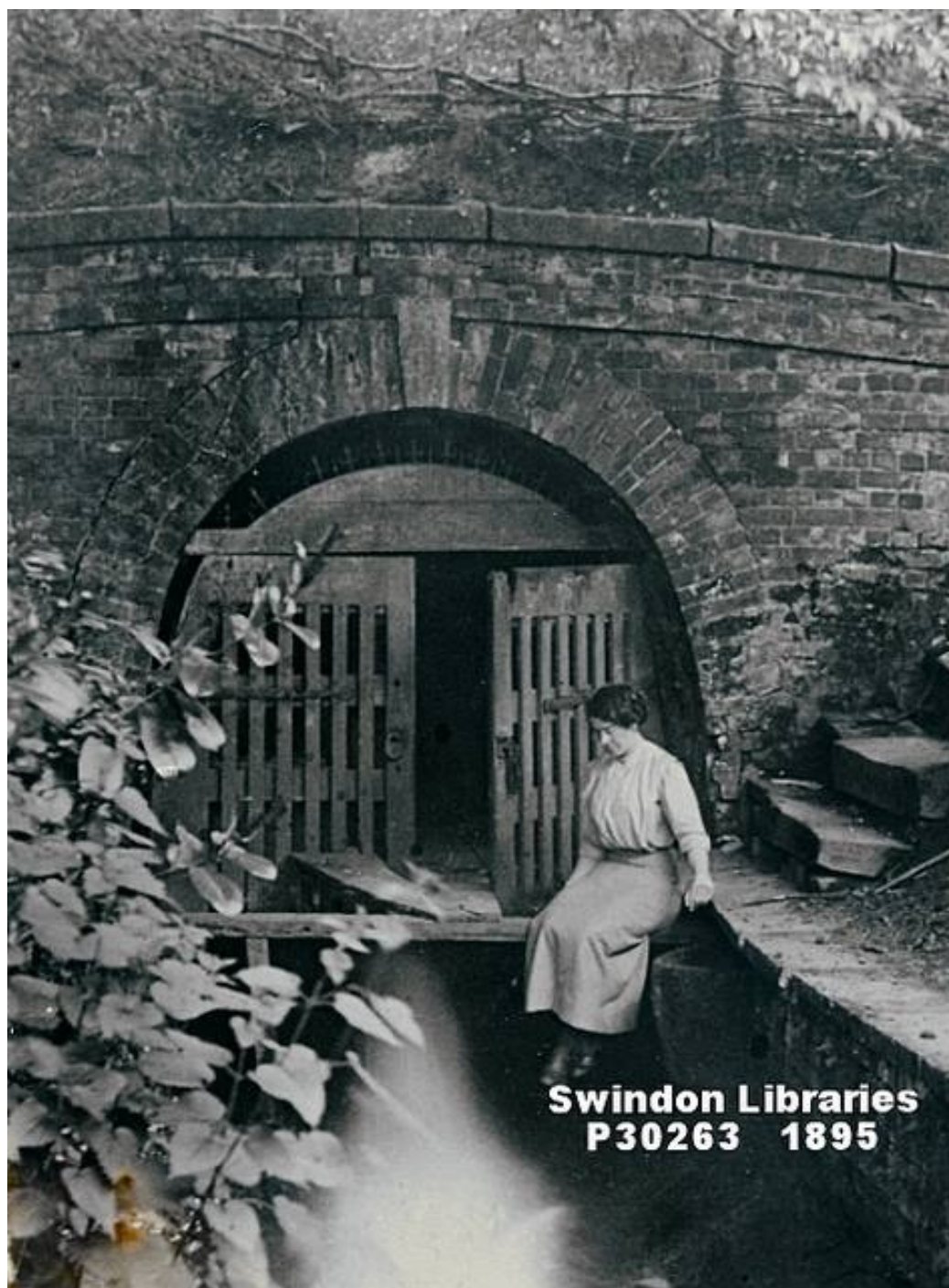
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Richard Jefferies would have been 17 years of age at the time of the incident. He had started working for the *North Wilts Herald* in March 1866 and may have been responsible for the initial report. He wrote about the Wilts and Berks Canal and Coate Reservoir in his 'History of Swindon and Antiquities of Its Environs' for the *North Wilts Herald* in 8 parts from Oct 1867–Feb 1868 under the name Geoffrey (See Talks and Articles No 128). This extract mentions the incident.

There was a spring rising immediately without the upper bank of the reservoir, which it was found impossible to make run into it; moreover, it was wanted by the farmers and inhabitants of the vale beneath. This, then, must run under the reservoir. A brick culvert was accordingly constructed, but an unfortunate oversight occurred. That part of the bottom of the reservoir over which it was necessary the culvert should be carried at the latter end of its course, had originally been but one remove from a morass, in short, was very "shaky." Upon this unstable foundation the culvert seems to have been placed, and with the result which might have been

anticipated. The weight of the brick-work, with a superincumbent load of earth and sand thrown on, proved too great for the soft ooze upon which it was placed. The culvert gradually sank in places, the brickwork cracked, and leaks have ever since been more or less frequent. One occurred of a very serious character, when the meadows below were flooded by the escaped water of the reservoir, and had not a hatch been beaten down by sledge hammers, it has been thought that the reservoir bank must have been washed away, and the thousands of tons of water it contained would have been precipitated into the vale, the effect of which would have been an enormous damage to property and probable loss of life.



The main outlet from Coate reservoir