

“The Flood Came and Took Them All Away”:  
The 1852 Holmfirth Flood in Multimedia and Memory

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When the waters burst from the Bilberry reservoir just after one o'clock in the morning on Thursday, February 5, 1852, there was little, if any, chance that the approximately 6,000 people living in the valley below at Holmfirth could be warned. Hired hands and nervous neighbors spent the nights leading up to the catastrophe standing watch over the reservoir and its faulty embankment. Several days of particularly heavy rains had many of the inhabitants on edge, but the only alarm system prepared in anticipation for the collapse of the reservoir was the men in charge of watching it.<sup>1</sup> All they could do was watch as the embankment crumbled and a mass of water rushed down the valley, destined to leave death and destruction in its wake.

The 1852 Holmfirth Flood remains one of the deadliest and most destructive floods in the history of England, and it was a catastrophe of national significance. Newspapers throughout the country reported on the event and its aftermath through the year, while visitors flocked to the site of the calamity as early as the following day. Narratives and local histories chronicled the event in the years and decades that followed. But why was this particular flooding of Holmfirth so significant? Holmfirth had a decades-old history of severe flooding, so what was different about this one? The town of Holmfirth lies in the Holme Valley within the county of West Yorkshire. This county belongs to a larger geographic location, known as the Pennines. At the time of the flood, Holmfirth was an industrial hub for the textile industry. Because of Holmfirth's position both geographically and economically as part of the "Backbone of England," the flood was of national interest and was, by extension, a national catastrophe.<sup>2</sup> The Holmfirth Flood of 1852 was both experienced as a local disaster and perceived as a national event, and the desire to interpret and experience the disaster was satisfied by various forms of multimedia. An examination of books, sermons, newspapers, and other mass communicative media provide a

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<sup>1</sup> "The Terrible Catastrophe at Holmfirth," *Daily News* (London, England), February 7, 1852.

<sup>2</sup> "Great Floods in Yorkshire and Lancashire," *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), February 6, 1852.

foundation for understanding how the people of Holmfirth and the greater whole of society dealt with the challenges presented by the flood.

Modern historical research concerning the Holmfirth Flood is lacking in many ways. While it is referenced in various articles and books, it is most frequently considered as a source of supplementary evidence in relation to other events, such as other floods around the world, local histories, religious movements, or analyzed within the context of the engineering failures of the Bilberry reservoir amongst other things. Very little attention has been paid to the flood's significance regarding society or its aftermath. Instead, the majority of the focus has been placed on examining the causes for the failure of the reservoir. Still, there has been significant research that may contribute to our understanding of the disaster.

Daniel Frederick Edward Sykes, an author native to the Huddersfield area, wrote two separate, local histories that detail the Holmfirth Flood. In the book, *The History of Huddersfield and its Vicinity*, Sykes represents the failure of the Bilberry reservoir and the subsequent destruction as the result of pure negligence on the part of the commissioners, who were meant to maintain the structure. According to Sykes, "The commissioners who owned the Bilberry Reservoir were practically entrusted with the care and keeping of hundreds of human lives; but nothing is more common than remissness in great responsibilities when time and use have blunted the sense of their magnitude and significance."<sup>3</sup> His research dealt with the specifics of the failure of the reservoir as well as providing an assessment of the physical damages to property and loss of life caused by the flood.

In another book written by Sykes, *The History of Huddersfield and the Valleys of the Colne, the Holme and the Dearne*, he expands on his research from his former work. Sykes

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Frederick Edward. Sykes, *The History of Huddersfield and Its Vicinity* (Huddersfield: The Advertiser Press, 1898), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/003447423>.

claims that the story of the Holmfirth Flood is a significant part of the history of industrial progress and growth in the area. Specifically, he writes that it is a story of “many tragedies and many cruelties.”<sup>4</sup> Once again, Sykes recounts the history and details of the construction of the Bilberry reservoir. Looking to the immediate causes of the reservoir’s failure, Sykes pinpoints specific issues with the function of the reservoir. He asserts that the sinking of the embankment below the level of the by-wash and the failure to repair the damage, or at least reduce the length of the wastepipe, was “the immediate cause of the awful catastrophe.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Sykes adds a personal account of the flood from a survivor, Mr. Allen Kaye, recorded at the turn of the century.

In the book, *History of Methodism in Huddersfield, Holmfirth, and Denby Dale*, Joel Mallinson records the history of the rise and spread of Methodism in the region surrounding Holmfirth. While Mallinson provides an explanation for the failure of the Bilberry reservoir, his contribution to the study of the Holmfirth Flood lies in its relationship to religious conversion in the aftermath of the flood. The death and destruction brought by the deluge created an opportunity to spread the Methodist message. According to Mallinson, “Many who had hitherto turned aside from the consideration of the spiritual and eternal, seriously reflected on the possible suddenness of death, and the supreme wisdom of living in readiness.”<sup>6</sup>

Shane Ewen’s article, “Socio-technological disasters and engineering expertise in Victorian Britain: the Holmfirth and Sheffield floods of 1852 and 1864”, focuses on the evolving nature of professionalism and expertise in the field of engineering. Based on a division between

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Frederick Edward. Sykes, *The History of Huddersfield and the Valleys of the Colne, the Holme and the Dearne* (The Worker Press, Huddersfield, 1906), [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The\\_History\\_of\\_Huddersfield\\_and\\_the\\_Valleys\\_of\\_the\\_Colne,\\_the\\_Holme\\_and\\_the\\_Deame\\_\(1906\)\\_by\\_D.F.E.\\_Sykes](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The_History_of_Huddersfield_and_the_Valleys_of_the_Colne,_the_Holme_and_the_Deame_(1906)_by_D.F.E._Sykes).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Mallinson, *History of Methodism in Huddersfield, Holmfirth, and Denby Dale* (C. H. Kelly, 1898), 121.

expert groups in the field of engineering, Ewen argues that “the creation and dissemination of expertise occurred on contested terrain.”<sup>7</sup> Ewen chooses to examine both the 1852 Holmfirth Flood and 1864 Sheffield Flood due to the parallels in their causes. Both of these floods were the result of failures by “commercially-designed and legally-sanctioned earthfill embankment reservoirs”, which were popular due to their cost efficiency and traditional design.<sup>8</sup>

Technological progress was limited by a series of constraints. Financial issues led interested parties, local authorities and elites, to support more traditional, cost-effective options. Waterworks companies at the time of the construction of these reservoirs were limited by a lack of technological knowledge. According to Ewen, the development of practical engineering practice was the result of trial and error, and progress was limited by finances and a customer’s willingness to risk capital on the investment of new designs. Essentially, as Ewen puts it, “The adherence to an inherently defective method of construction was the product of evolving specialist engineering knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

Further, Ewen points to a division in professional engineering experts, which he refers to as “internal experts” and “external experts.” Internal experts were the engineers in the field, whose reputation and expertise were based on their work. External experts evaluated and scrutinized the work of internal experts using theoretical knowledge. Sites of disasters became ground zero in the struggle to validate expertise between these two groups. According to Ewen, “Whereas the internal experts’ interests were inextricably bound up with the public disputes over the explanations for the failure, which inevitably emphasised the subjectivity of their expertise,

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<sup>7</sup> Shane Ewen, “Socio-Technological Disasters and Engineering Expertise in Victorian Britain: The Holmfirth and Sheffield Floods of 1852 and 1864,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (October 1, 2014): 13–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2014.05.021>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the external experts, particularly the government inspectors, were depicted as disinterested observers whose role was to objectively assess the facts of the case in order to make a balanced judgment on the causes of failure.”<sup>10</sup> It was in the interest of the internal experts to find causes for the disaster that did not involve their constructional practices, while the external experts to increase their expertise by citing the shortcomings and missteps of the engineering profession.

Ultimately, Ewen’s research concludes that the failures of these reservoirs stemmed from a combination of neglect on the part of the engineers and their commissioners. Both George Leather and his nephew, John Towlerton Leather, who built the Bilberry reservoir and the Dale Dyke respectively, spent very little to no time on maintaining the integrity of their project in the years after completion. This was, according to Ewen, a common practice amongst engineers at the time. Much of the upkeep and required repairs were left in the hands of those who commissioned their creation. It was their responsibility to contact engineers for future repairs. The result was a system built on weak communication practices, poor record keeping, and shifting blame.<sup>11</sup>

*On the Trail of the Holmfirth Flood 1852* is a booklet written by Enid and Gordon Minter that both literally and figuratively traces the floods path from the Bilberry reservoir to Holmfirth. Citing a lack of modern, historical research on the topic, Gordon and Enid Minter attempt to provide more recent research on the topic. Although their efforts contribute more information regarding the formation of the commission that was responsible for the construction of the Bilberry reservoir, the majority of the information provided by the booklet is simply an update of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

older sources. The focus of the text is to identify the cause of the flood, while detailing the negligent practices of the commissioners.<sup>12</sup>

“Legal Liability for the Bursting of Reservoirs: The Historical Context of Rylands v. Fletcher” is an article written by A.W.B. Simpson in which Simpson suggests that the study of the development of tort law not be limited to the procedural context of the practice of law. Instead, it should be viewed “in a somewhat wider context”, specifically considering the historical context.<sup>13</sup> The significance of this work is found in Simpson’s analysis of the Holmfirth Flood and its legal impact concerning liability. Simpson identifies the potential reasons that would have provided the commissioners with limited liability, despite the fact that their negligence was considered the clear cause for the dilapidation of the reservoir.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the influx of charitable donations provided the reparations that tort law would not.

Several scholars have written on the subject of the 1852 Holmfirth Flood. The focus of their research has varied from the religious, to the legal, and to the socio-technological. There has necessarily been an acknowledgement of the details and contributing factors that led to the flood and its aftermath. However, none of their research has approached the topic of the Holmfirth Flood as a cultural event, and it is the goal of this work to remedy that shortcoming in the historiography. The research of which the remainder of this work is devoted to incorporates these perspectives and applies them to the society that was trying to make sense of the event. Society is complex, so it should be no surprise that its attempts to evaluate and react to an event

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon Minter and Enid Minter, *On the Trail of the Holmfirth Flood 1852* (H. Barden & Co., 1996), [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/On\\_the\\_Trail\\_of\\_the\\_Holmfirth\\_Flood\\_1852\\_\(1996\)\\_by\\_Gordon\\_and\\_Enid\\_Minter](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/On_the_Trail_of_the_Holmfirth_Flood_1852_(1996)_by_Gordon_and_Enid_Minter).

<sup>13</sup> A. W. B. Simpson, “Legal Liability for Bursting Reservoirs: The Historical Context of ‘Rylands v. Fletcher,’” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 1984): 209–64, <https://doi.org/10.1086/467740>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

such as the Holmfirth Flood would be equally complex. In order to have a better understanding of this, it is necessary to look once more at the origins of the event before compartmentalizing it.

As mentioned before, significant flooding was not new to the inhabitants of Holmfirth, but the flooding of 1852 was by far the deadliest and most destructive flood they had experienced. There were three major floods that affected Holmfirth prior to 1852. The first occurred in 1738 when rainstorms caused the River Holme to flood the valley, significantly damaging farmland in the area. In 1777, a storm that July caused the river to flood once again, which resulted in three deaths and the destruction of a church originally built in 1476. It was later rebuilt. The last flood before the catastrophic inundation of 1852 happened in September 1821. There was no loss of life, but there was property damage. All of these floods occurred before the creation of the Bilberry reservoir, and none of them were nearly as deadly as the flood in 1852.

The story of the 1852 Holmfirth Flood begins nearly fifteen years earlier, in 1837 when the Holme Township Reservoirs Act,<sup>15</sup> an act of Parliament, granted permission to the Commissioners of the Holme Reservoirs to construct eight reservoirs for the purpose of supplying sufficient amounts of water to nearby mills. According to the preamble of the Act, recorded in *History of the Huddersfield Water Supplies*:

“Whereas there are many mills, factories and other premises situate near the line or course of the overflowing of the waters in the River Holme,” etc., “and of streams flowing into the said River Holme, using water wheels, engines, or other machines worked by water flowing along such streams and brooks ; and whereas the supply of water to such mills is very irregular and during the summer months is frequently insufficient for effectually working the wheels, engines, and machines in such mills, factories, and premises, which irregularity might be greatly remedied by making and maintaining an embankment and reservoir on the brook called Digley Brook, at Bilberry Mill,” etc.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Referenced as 7 Will. 4, ch. 54 (Royal Assent, June 8, 1837).

<sup>16</sup> T.W. Woodhead, *History of the Huddersfield Water Supplies* (Wheatley, Dyson, & Son, 1939), [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Huddersfield\\_Water\\_Supplies\\_\(1939\)\\_-\\_Chapter\\_4](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/History_of_the_Huddersfield_Water_Supplies_(1939)_-_Chapter_4).

The act appointed the commissioners of the reservoirs from among the mill owners and landowners associated with their construction and use. It also allowed the commissioners to borrow £40,000 to pay for the projects. This amount would prove to be inadequate, and only three reservoirs were built: the Holme Styes, the Boshaw, and the Bilberry reservoirs. Despite having only built three of the eight proposed reservoirs, the commissioners were ultimately required to borrow an extra £30,000 to complete the project.<sup>17</sup>

As it turns out, the passing of the Holme Reservoir Bill that led to the adoption of the Holme Township Reservoirs Act was divisive in the House of Commons, and petitions were presented both for and against the construction of any reservoir. On April 17, 1837, a petition was presented in the House of Commons against the proposed bill. The following day, Sir George Strickland presented a petition also in the House of Commons on behalf of the people of Huddersfield.<sup>18</sup> After the third reading of the bill that May, it was passed by the House of Commons.<sup>19</sup>

The commissioners submitted public notices to local newspapers searching for a labor force to construct the reservoirs. The notice was submitted to newspapers, such as the *Leeds Mercury*, on the order of the commissioners' clerk W.M. Stephenson and specifically requests the applications of "excavators, masons, and general contractors."<sup>20</sup> Variations of this ad were submitted on multiple occasions until they had satisfied the need for laborers.

The Bilberry Reservoir was subject to engineering mistakes and shortcomings from its very beginning. The Dewsbury contractors, Mr. Sharp and Sons, were initially hired for the

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<sup>17</sup> "The Terrible Catastrophe at Holmfirth."

<sup>18</sup> "IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT," *The York Herald, and General Advertiser*, April 22, 1837.

<sup>19</sup> "IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT," *The Morning Post*, May 6, 1837.

<sup>20</sup> "Leeds Mercury (29/Sep/1838) - Public Notices: Holme Reservoirs - Huddersfield Exposed: Exploring the History of the Huddersfield Area," accessed November 11, 2018, [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Leeds\\_Mercury\\_\(29/Sep/1838\)\\_-\\_Public\\_Notices:\\_Holme\\_Reservoirs](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Leeds_Mercury_(29/Sep/1838)_-_Public_Notices:_Holme_Reservoirs).

construction of the Bilberry reservoir at the cost of £9,324<sup>21</sup> but were removed due to the contractors “having performed part of their work up to the valve pit at the said Reservoir in an improper and unsatisfactory manner.”<sup>22</sup> During the construction of the foundation, a defect was discovered, which was caused by a “spring in the centre of the puddle-bank.”<sup>23</sup> This problem was not properly dealt with and ultimately contributed to the failure of the reservoir. They were replaced by David Porter and Brothers and worked under the direction of the Commissioners’ lead engineer, George Leather, from Leeds. From about 1839 until 1842 they worked to complete the project. It spent the next several years in a perpetual state of disrepair.

Weather, particularly rainfall, caused severe complications in the initial construction of the Bilberry reservoir. On Sunday, June 23, 1839, an hour’s worth of heavy rains quickly filled the Bilberry reservoir, which was only about ten or twelve feet tall at the time. The contractors had not yet built a fully functional means of releasing the water. The overflow of water washed the embankment away, reducing the reservoir to its foundation. The amount of water at this time was enough to wash away much of the building materials and tools while also causing between £150-£200 in damages. Very little damage was done to the Holme Styes reservoir and none whatsoever was done to the Boshaw reservoir. Despite these three reservoirs being approved and begun at about the same time, these two were much further along in terms of construction than the Bilberry reservoir was at the time of this storm.<sup>24</sup>

Conflict between labor groups also caused issues during the construction of the Bilberry reservoir. Construction on the reservoirs was delayed due to rain on a day in September 1839. Many of the laborers working on the Holme Styes reservoir gathered together and spent the

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<sup>21</sup> Woodhead, *History of the Huddersfield Water Supplies*.

<sup>22</sup> “The Holmfirth Catastrophe,” *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, February 21, 1852.

<sup>23</sup> Woodhead, *History of the Huddersfield Water Supplies*.

<sup>24</sup> “Holmfirth,” *The Leeds Mercury*, June 29, 1839, British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

afternoon drinking at a local bar. At some point during this outing, a fight broke out between the English workers and the Irish, which the English claim the Irish won. The next morning, the English workers forced the Irish from the job site before heading to the Boshaw reservoir to do the same. As they made their way from Boshaw reservoir toward the Bilberry reservoir, their mob gathered more workers from the reservoirs and other Englishmen. When they reached Bilberry reservoir, the Irish workers were nowhere to be found. They hunted them down and attempted to run them off. Mr. Tate, the reservoir inspector, attempted to encourage the Irish to return to work at Bilberry reservoir, at which point all of the English workers threw down their tools and refused to work alongside the Irish laborers. The behavior of the English workers at the reservoirs was seen as disgraceful and resulted not only in some Irish workers abandoning their positions but also many of the English laborers were fired and some were arrested.<sup>25</sup> This event significantly reduced the work force at the reservoirs for some time and slowed the construction process.

Even after the Bilberry reservoir was completed, financial burdens plagued the Commissioners of the Holme Reservoirs, due to the fact that they had problems collecting their debts. In 1845, Mr. Robinson, a Holmfirth manufacturer who operated a mill along the River Holme, filed a lawsuit against the commissioners and Mr. Sutcliffe, a magistrate of West Riding. Mr. Robinson felt that he was being unfairly charged by the commissioners for his use of the water which flowed from one of the reservoirs. He refused to make payments to the commissioners for his water use, and they, in turn, chose to enforce payment with the help of Mr. Sutcliffe. Mr. Robinson sued on the basis that he felt the payments being demanded by the commissioners was unfair, and the enforcement of those payments was illegal. According to the

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<sup>25</sup> "Disturbances at the Holme Reservoirs," *The Bradford Observer*, September 12, 1839, British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

news coverage, the parties agreed, “That a juror be withdrawn, that three former actions be not proceeded with, that a reference be made to a gentleman of the bar for the purpose of ascertaining the legal mode and principal of making the rate, (and) that the payment of the preceding rates be regulated by the report of the referee...”<sup>26</sup> Mr. Robinson was required to pay the commissioners, but the lawsuit led to further regulation of their ability to charge mill owners.

In addition to their struggles collecting debts, the Commissioners of the Holme Reservoirs also struggled to pay back their own debts to the mortgagees. In May 1850, the firm Fenton and Jones on behalf of its clients, John and Thomas Brook, requested that the courts appoint a receiver of the funds generated by the reservoirs that would be independent from the commissioners. Mr. Fenton’s request was an attempt to force the commissioners to begin paying back the money it had been loaned by John Brook several years prior. According to Mr. Fenton, it had been more than four years since the commissioners or the company had made a payment towards the debt. Based on the 78<sup>th</sup> clause of the parliamentary act that established the Commissioners of the Holme Reservoirs and the construction of the reservoirs, a receiver could be appointed if “the company did not pay the interest and £500 of the principal off annually.”<sup>27</sup> Although the company’s clerk, Mr. Jacomb, tried to argue against the appointment, the court selected George Tinker to serve as the receiver. Mr. Jacomb’s argument was largely based on the fact that the company owed money to so many individual parties, that it would be unfair to prioritize repayment to the Brook estate. Further, the need to maintain the reservoirs and make necessary repairs was cited as a potential hindrance to the repayment of debts. The

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<sup>26</sup> “NISI PRIUS COURT,” *The York Herald, and General Advertiser*, March 22, 1845.

<sup>27</sup> “HOLME RESERVOIR.—APPOINTMENT OF RECEIVER ON BEHALF OF A MORTGAGEE,” *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, May 4, 1850.

commissioners never seemed to make enough money off of the reservoirs to pay their debts or adequately service the reservoirs.

The Bilberry reservoir was never in fine enough working order to have been considered completely functional, let alone safe. In the days leading up to the 1852 Holmfirth Flood, there was an unusually high amount of rainfall, which caused the reservoir to overflow. Once the embankment crumbled, there was no way to protect against the force of the rushing waters, which amounted to just over 86 million gallons of water.<sup>28</sup> Eighty-one people died as a result of the flood. An innumerable amount of homes, mills, dye houses, cottages, and shops were damaged or destroyed by the powerful inundation. A.W.B. Simpson offers some modern calculations of the damages, claiming “a contemporary list of totally destroyed property included four mills, ten dye houses, ten drying stoves, twenty-seven cottages, seven tradesmen’s houses, and seven shops; some seventeen other mills and many other buildings were destroyed or damaged.”<sup>29</sup> In the days that followed in the aftermath of the flood, survivors, scholars, and spectators alike would offer up their thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and expertise in an attempt to comprehend the causes and effects of the disaster.

The introduction to the flood for the vast majority of the country was the media. Within a day several newspapers were reporting on the flood and the potential damage it had caused. Reports on the flood reached London by Friday, February 6.<sup>30</sup> By February 7, newspaper readers at least as far from Holmfirth as Dublin were reading about the tragedy that had taken place.<sup>31</sup> As

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<sup>28</sup> Sykes, *The History of Huddersfield and the Valleys of the Colne, the Holme and the Dearne*.

<sup>29</sup> Simpson, “Legal Liability for the Bursting of Reservoirs,” 221.

<sup>30</sup> “Great Floods in Yorkshire and Lancashire,” *The Morning Chronicle*, February 6, 1852.

<sup>31</sup> “GREAT FLOODS IN YORKSHIRE AND LANCASHIRE—SEVENTY LIVES LOST,” *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, February 7, 1852.

the news spread more and more people learned about the terrible catastrophe, and many of them wanted to experience it for themselves.

While Holmfirth and the surrounding area was home to approximately 6,000 people at the time of the flood, many more than that would descend upon the town within days to see the sights and experience the disaster for themselves. On Saturday, February 7, 1852, when the London *Daily News* reported on “The Terrible Catastrophe at Holmfirth”, tourists had already begun to descend upon the town. According to the report, “At the time our correspondent wrote last evening the town of Holmfirth was crowded by thousands of people from a distance poured in by railway, in pic nic parties, anxious to see the bodies of the sufferers and satisfy their curiosity.”<sup>32</sup> The morbidity of their curiosity was noted, and it was considered an inconvenience by the workers assisting with the relief effort. Within the same article, it was observed that “Though mostly such people conduct themselves with great propriety and feeling, yet their appearance altogether strangely contrasts with the air of sadness and gloom which has settled upon the inhabitants.”<sup>33</sup> Increasing the inconvenience of the situation was the fact that “special constables” were required to maintain the crowds and keep them off the streets. The flood had caused tremendous damage, and it was necessary for laborers to remove debris from the roads that managed to not be destroyed.

The influx of tourists to Holmfirth after the flood far exceeded the population of the town and caused certain trouble for the railway systems. In *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser* published on February 14, multiple travel warnings were written, including one concerning railway safety and a request to run trains as intended, instead of doubling engine

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<sup>32</sup> “The Terrible Catastrophe at Holmfirth.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and carriage numbers, as was becoming the practice to accommodate the mass of tourists.<sup>34</sup> In that same issue, it was recorded that “the total number of tickets issued by the Lancashire and Yorkshire Company alone on Sunday exceeded 9,000.”<sup>35</sup> An additional sum of about 4,000 was sold through Bradford. These ticket sales, not counting the arrival of tourists using other travel means suggest that people were gravitating to the location to experience some aspect of the flood for themselves.

For those who were unable to physically visit the site of the disaster, *The Illustrated London News* provided a means for people to see the aftermath of the flood in print from their homes. On February 14, the illustrated newspaper had published an article including several images related to the flood. Some of the images seemed to have been based on first-hand experiences of the wreckage, while others seem to be rooted purely in imagination. One of the largest photos included in the article is a depiction with the caption, “Bursting of the Reservoir Embankment.” It is a powerful image of water rushing down a valley.<sup>36</sup> Other images present with this article include an illustration of the ruins of the Holme Bridge and the wreckage throughout Holmfirth.

Religion played a significant role in the aftermath of the flood. References to the event are found in multiple sermons, some of which are written about in the newspapers alongside articles concerning the flood. In this respect, disaster and religion went hand in hand. Churches and the clergy, such as those at Wibsey Chapel in Bradford, aided in the relief efforts by taking up special collections at Sunday service.<sup>37</sup> In Huddersfield on February 8, Reverend Glendinning

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<sup>34</sup> “Safety on the Railway,” *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, February 14, 1852.

<sup>35</sup> “The Sunday Traffic,” *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, February 14, 1852.

<sup>36</sup> “The Fatal Inundation at Holmfirth.” *Illustrated London News*, February 14, 1852.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Fawcett, *The Flood Came and Took Them All Away - A Sermon* (London, England: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1852), [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The\\_Flood\\_Came\\_and\\_Took\\_Them\\_All\\_Away\\_\(1852\)\\_-\\_A\\_Sermon](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The_Flood_Came_and_Took_Them_All_Away_(1852)_-_A_Sermon).

preached at the Independent Chapel. His sermon resulted in a collection of £20 for the relief effort.<sup>38</sup> The clergymen were a source of financial relief early on in the relief effort but also served their primary function; they were working to save souls.

References to the biblical flood of Noah were used in sermons in relation to the Holmfirth Flood. On February 8, Joshua Fawcett, a local reverend, preached a sermon at Wibsey Chapel in Bradford that would later be printed for public consumption. The sermon was titled, “The Flood Came and Took Them All Away.” The title itself is a reference to a verse, which he quotes, “As the days of (Noah) were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that (Noah) entered into the ark; and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the comma of the Son of man be.”<sup>39</sup> He continues throughout the sermon supporting this metaphor regarding the Holmfirth Flood. This is somewhat problematic, though. The people, who died in the Genesis flood narrative are not innocent, unsuspecting people. They are the sinful humans, who God intends to wipe out.

The imagery of the flood and the ark served two purposes in this instance: it created imagery relatable to a recent event while promoting salvation in order to avoid a sudden, catastrophic end. Fawcett asserted in his sermon that God’s wrath comes with a long warning, a warning not unlike the people of Holmfirth had. Fawcett claimed that he was not attempting to absolutely parallel the two things, and it would be fair to trust that. However, his message was still one of salvation, which necessitated a catastrophic alternative.

A similar message was preached the following Sunday at St. Bartholomew’s Church in Salford, but it emphasized a New Testament message that better absolved the victims of the

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<sup>38</sup> “The Fatal Inundation at Holmfirth,” *The Illustrated London News*, February 14, 1852.

<sup>39</sup> Fawcett, *The Flood Came and Took Them All Away*.

flood of any sense of blame. On the evening of February 15, Reverend Moses Margoliouth preached a sermon based on a passage in the *Gospel of Luke*. According to Rev. Margoliouth, Luke 13:1-5 states:

‘There were present at that season some that told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.’<sup>40</sup>

His subsequent sermon is based on this message. The point he makes is clear. The victims of the Holmfirth Flood were not condemned by God because they were especially wicked. Rather, death is the fate of all people who do not repent and gain everlasting life as Christians. He goes on to claim that the catastrophe at Holmfirth is a warning sign to the nation and a call from God for self-examination.

It is safe to say that the public was looking for comfort from this sort of message of salvation regardless of denomination, and the local Methodist church was there to offer spiritual relief while spreading its message. Returning to the previously discussed work of Joel Mallinson, *History of Methodism in Huddersfield, Holmfirth, and Denby Dale*, he asserts that an increase in spiritual conversions and a subsequent increase in the spread of Methodism were direct results of the Holmfirth Flood and its aftermath. According to Reverend Mallinson, the people of Holmfirth and the surrounding area were seeking religious teachings and spiritual fulfillment after the flood. In response, the teachers and clergymen “with renewed consecration and increased earnestness they urged the importance of personal salvation and its immediate yielding

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<sup>40</sup> Moses Margoliouth, *Holmfirth's Solemn Voice: A Sermon* (Powlson and Son, 1852).

to the Spirit's striving."<sup>41</sup> With spiritual support, the people could invest time into providing for their physical needs as well.

While the tourists were flooding the area, and religious leaders offered spiritual guidance, the magistrates of Holmfirth acted quickly to create ideas for lessening the suffering of the immediate victims of the flood. Although a relatively small number of the local population died in the flood, the damages the water caused to property was catastrophic. A large number of the people of Holmfirth were without food, shelter, or even adequate clothing. Their immediate effort took the form of voluntary donation. With the massive numbers of people flooding into Holmfirth on a given day, they established multiple locations throughout Holmfirth where donations for relief could be accepted. As recorded in *The Huddersfield Chronicle* on February 7, 1852, these locations included "the Railway Station, at the Bank, at Mr. Crosland's, the bookseller, and with authorized collectors."<sup>42</sup> They also established a clothing drive with the help of the Huddersfield Constable.

Local women and local clergy were also a reliable source for aiding those suffering from the aftermath of the Holmfirth Flood. On the evening of Monday, February 9, 1852, the Holmfirth Ladies' Committee gathered to distribute clothing to those who had lost most of their belongings in the flood.

Another solution for raising money for the relief effort was the creation of keepsakes. These keepsakes were sold with all or most of the profits going directly to the relief effort. One of these not-for-profit creations was the publication of Rev. Joshua Fawcett's sermon, "The Flood Came and Took Them All Away." Published in 1852, its printed form included an account

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<sup>41</sup> Mallinson, *History of Methodism in Huddersfield, Holmfirth, and Denby Dale*, 122.

<sup>42</sup> "The Awful Calamity in Holmfirth Valley," *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, February 7, 1852.

of the Holmfirth Flood, a list of names honoring those who lost their lives in the flood, a copy of the Inquest, and a poem by J.F. Nicholls to name a few of the inclusions. In its preface, Fawcett acknowledges that it was never his intention to print or sell his sermon. According to Fawcett, “It is published at the request and risk of a gentleman, who desires to contribute any profits which may arise from the sale, to the Fund being raised for the Benefit of the Holmfirth Sufferers.”<sup>43</sup>

For more visual collectors, a map was commissioned with the title, “Bilberry Dam To Holmfirth: After the Bursting of the Reservoir Feb. 5<sup>th</sup> 1852, West Riding of Yorkshire.” According to the map, it was commissioned “By Special Authority of the Holmfirth & Huddersfield Committee in Conjunction with the Churchwardens of the Township.” The map was drawn by Mr. J. Curry, and the profits from its sale went “to the relief of the surviving sufferers.”<sup>44</sup>

Religious and political elites contributed directly to the relief effort of Holmfirth. In the “Appendices” section of Rev. Fawcett’s published sermon, there is an account of support given to the survivors of the Holmfirth Flood by Lord Bishop of Ripon. According to the section, titled “Sympathy and Support”, his Lordship provided spiritual and financial support for the people of Holmfirth. On the weekend of February 15, Lord Bishop of Ripon preached at multiple churches and schools while meeting with the survivors. Additionally, he is described as being “a very liberal contributor to the ‘Holmfirth Fund.’”<sup>45</sup> The most significant individual to offer aid to the relief effort was the queen herself. According to an article printed in the *Illustrated London News*

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<sup>43</sup> Fawcett, *The Flood Came and Took Them All Away (1852) - A Sermon*.

<sup>44</sup> J. Curry, *Bilberry Dam To Holmfirth: After the Bursting of the Reservoir Feb. 5th 1852, West Riding of Yorkshire, 1852*, Holmfirth Local History Group, <http://btckstorage.blob.core.windows.net/site16149/Sources/BilberryMap.jpg>.

<sup>45</sup> Fawcett, *The Flood Came and Took Them All Away (1852) - A Sermon*, 220–2.

on February 21, 1852, “her most gracious Majesty had contributed towards the wants of the sufferers the munificent sum of £150.”<sup>46</sup>

Other forms of multimedia, such as poetry and music, were used to appeal to the public’s senses and perceptions regarding the flood in order to promote a spirit of charitable giving and unity. In November 1852, an advertisement began to be printed in promotion of a new song. The song, “Holmfirth Flood,” was written A.B.N. Wildman and Joe Perkin. The original music has been lost, but the lyrical content is nonetheless significant.

The song tells the story of the Holmfirth Flood with certain elements operating as reflections of the people’s perceptions as the disaster. It mixes elements of personification with demonstrations of raw, natural power. The song begins thusly:

*It rushed down the hill when people lay still,  
Rolling and roaring like thunder;  
It came in its might like a demon at night,  
And left the survivors in wonder.*

These four lines adequately demonstrate the conceptualization of the flood as a dark and powerful force that descended on the people of Holmfirth. The song continues by describing the death and destruction caused by the flood. The ending of the song, however, is anything but dark. Ending on a hopeful note, the final lines of the song entreat the listener to “Come forth with thy power, for now is the hour, To aid and assist with relief.”<sup>47</sup> It seems that the implementation of various artforms were used to capture the imagination of their viewers and trigger emotional responses.

The people of Holmfirth were fortunate for the massive range of projects implemented to raise money for the relief effort due to the fact that Parliament itself was not able to provide any

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<sup>46</sup> “Country News,” *Illustrated London News*, February 21, 1852.

<sup>47</sup> A.B.N. Wildman, “Holmfirth Flood,” Online Archive, Huddersfield Exposed, 1852, [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Holmfirth\\_Flood\\_\(Perkin\\_%26\\_Wildman\)](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Holmfirth_Flood_(Perkin_%26_Wildman)).

formal relief. In a discussion recorded in parliamentary record dated February 13<sup>th</sup>, Mr. George Sandars, a Member of Parliament for Wakefield, asked whether or not funds would be made available to provide relief for the victims of the Holmfirth Flood. Sir George Grey responded to Sandars' question about providing aid. According to the record, Sir Grey "could not hold out hopes of any assistance from the public money; and he trusted that the case would be amply met by public subscriptions."<sup>48</sup>

An inquest into the cause of the collapse of the reservoir and subsequent deaths of its victims was headed by the coroner, George Dyson. The question at the heart of the inquest would seem simple: Who is responsible for the failure of Bilberry reservoir and to what extent are they liable? As discussed in the research of both Simpson and Ewen, the answer would ultimately prove to be more complex than a traditional Whodunit. This complexity existed primarily do to the fact that all parties involved in the construction and management held enough guilt individually to shift blame back and forth and claim ignorance of the fact otherwise. Interestingly, Mr. Leather, the engineer behind the construction of the reservoir, was able to play the part of both expert and negligent professional in certain circumstances. When asked by the coroner what the minimal cost would have been to repair the dam and prevent the flood, his opinion was respected when he claimed that just over £12 would have prevented the catastrophe.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, he was able to deny any responsibility to the maintenance of the structure.

The final opinion of the inquest was indicative of the issues concerning expertise and the limitations of the law in relation to man-made disasters. The jury determined that the

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<sup>48</sup> *House of Commons*, vol. The Holmfirth Catastrophe, 119 vols., 1852.

<sup>49</sup> Joshua Fawcett, *The Flood Came and Took Them All Away (1852) - A Sermon*, accessed November 11, 2018, [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The\\_Flood\\_Came\\_and\\_Took\\_Them\\_All\\_Away\\_\(1852\)\\_-A\\_Sermon](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/The_Flood_Came_and_Took_Them_All_Away_(1852)_-A_Sermon).

commissioners, engineers, and site managers were all responsible for the failure of the Bilberry Reservoir. The jurors considered them all to be negligent and saw the entire construction project as a failure from start to finish. However, there was no legal action that could be taken. As written in their statement, “And we regret, that the reservoir being under the management of a corporation, prevents us bringing in a verdict of manslaughter, as we are convinced that the gross and culpable negligence of the Commissioners would have subjected them to such a verdict had they been in the position of a private individual or a firm.”<sup>50</sup>

In terms of the construction and maintenance of the Bilberry reservoir, it was clear that there was a lack of expertise applied in its design. According to Captain Moody, the government inspector requested to evaluate the reservoir at the beginning of the inquest, the foremost cause of the flood was a series of design flaws in the Bilberry reservoir. It was his opinion that the waste pit was positioned far too low in relation to the height of the embankment. More than that, Captain Moody stated that the materials used in the construction of the reservoir were subpar, and the suddenness of its collapse was due to this fact.<sup>51</sup> Essentially, the design of the Bilberry reservoir meant that the structure was doomed from the start.

The catastrophe of the Holmfirth Flood was studied not only from an engineering perspective but also a geological and geographical one. In “On Some of the Effects of the Holmfirth Flood”, Joseph Prestwich, a prominent geologist and recipient of the Wollaston Medal, addressed the geological and geographical issues concerning the flood through an examination of the history of the Bilberry reservoir’s construction. Published in April of 1852, this work was written just over two months after the flood. Considering the dimensions of both the reservoir and the valley, Prestwich explains how and why the destruction was caused after

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “The Fatal Inundation at Holmfirth,” *Illustrated London News*, February 21, 1852.

the failure of the reservoir. The details of his research beyond this are not important for our purpose, but the work is no less useful. While considering the construction of the Bilberry reservoir, he looks at nothing beyond the facts. He does not question the details of its construction or maintenance, nor does his research suggest any means of prevention or retrospective lessons learned.<sup>52</sup> The flood is simply treated as a tragedy without an assigned cause or implied blame.

Although reports of the excessive tourism and religious messages began to fade in the weeks after the inquest, reports concerning the relief effort maintained its prevalence. By late May, the central committee for the relief fund, which was comprised primarily of magistrates and constables, was beginning the process of providing relief for the purposes of replacing and repairing property. According to an article in *The Leeds Mercury*, the committee had spent several weeks divided into subcommittees for the purposes of providing immediate medical aid, food, and clothing, while others were tasked with increasing the number of subscriptions for aid. At the time of the report, the committee had raised approximately £68,000.<sup>53</sup> With most of the donations having come from outside of the area surrounding Holmfirth, it is fair to say that the burden of rebuilding Holmfirth was felt throughout the country.

While Holmfirth was being rebuilt, a decision had to be made about whether to rebuild the Bilberry reservoir, and the decision was far from unanimous. Members of the Commissioners of the Holme Reservoirs requested that the Bilberry reservoir be rebuilt and requested £7,000 from the relief committee for that purpose. In August 1852, the committee discussed the option in order to determine what the best option would be. There were some who thought it would be

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Prestwich, "On Some of the Effects of the Holmfirth Flood," *Proceedings of the Geological Society*, April 7, 1852, 225–30.

<sup>53</sup> "The Holmfirth Catastrophe," *The Leeds Mercury*, May 22, 1852.

better to keep the money for future repairs of the Holme Styes reservoir, while others wanted to be sure that they helped all remaining victims of the flood first and foremost. Ultimately the relief committee agreed to give the money for the rebuilding of the Bilberry reservoir.

Regardless of the decisions of the committee and the commissioners, rebuilding would need to be approved through a parliamentary act.

The discussion held in Parliament concerning the rebuilding of the Bilberry reservoir shows the division between the desires of the authorities and the survivors of the flood. On June 23, 1853, the House of Commons met for the third hearing of the proposed bill to rebuild the Bilberry reservoir. Mr. Cobden presented several petitions against the reconstruction of the Bilberry reservoir, at least one of which was made by the inhabitants of Holmfirth. Citing the number of deaths and property damage caused by the failure of the Bilberry reservoir, the people of Holmfirth expressed their fear of another potential flooding taking place. It was their opinion that the best means of avoiding a future calamity was by avoiding creating a potential cause. According to the report, the relief committee that agreed to give the commissioners the funds to rebuild was comprised almost entirely of people who were not inhabitants of Holmfirth.<sup>54</sup> Their perceived needs for the people did not coincide with the wishes of the people they intended to support. Despite Mr. Cobden's efforts and the stack of petitions, the bill was passed with the provision that the reservoirs would be required to be inspected by a third party regularly.

By 1854, a new committee was formed from members of the original relief committee and tasked with memorializing the victims of the 1852 Holmfirth Flood and the charitable spirit, which came to the aid of the people of Holmfirth. According to a quote found in *On the Trail of the Holmfirth Flood 1852*, the goal of its members was "to perpetuate the remembrance of the

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<sup>54</sup> *House of Commons*, vol. Holme Reservoirs (No 2) Bill, 128 vols., 1853.

unparalleled munificence of the public.” They ultimately decided to build a series of almshouses on Station Road. Construction began in April 1856. The ladies of Holmfirth held a three day bazaar in order to earn enough money to add a plaque inscribed with the details of the flood and the purpose of the construction of the almshouses.<sup>55</sup>

Decades after the Holmfirth Flood, Daniel Frederick Edward Sykes would use it as the backdrop for his novel to be read by a generation too young to remember the flood, let alone experience it. Sykes himself was born in 1856 in Highfields and attended Huddersfield College. The book in question, *Tom Pinder, Foundling: A Story of the Holmfirth Flood* was published in 1906 before subsequently being published under the title, *Dorothy’s Choice: A Rushing of Mighty Waters* in 1910. The story’s protagonist is Tom Pinder, and it chronicles his experiences in Holmfirth before, during, and after the 1852 Holmfirth Flood. Unlike the actual reports of the disaster, Syke’s book is romantic, undermining the destruction that the flood causes.<sup>56</sup> While Tom Pinder’s experience is undoubtedly intense, there is little mention of the death and destruction that dominated the newspapers as well as the imagination of the nation.

In the summer of 1889, the Holmfirth Flood was used as a means for the people of England to relate to another, more catastrophic flood, the Johnstown Flood. On June 6, 1889, after a detailed account of the Johnstown Flood in *The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, an article detailing the causes and events of the Holmfirth Flood and Sheffield Flood was printed.<sup>57</sup> The difference between this account of the Holmfirth Flood and the news reports from 1852 is striking. While the reports from the time detail the tragic nature of the event, the article from 1889 approaches the event in a much more ordered, detached way.

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<sup>55</sup> Minter and Minter, *On the Trail of the Holmfirth Flood 1852*, 41–2.

<sup>56</sup> D. F. E. Sykes, *Tom Pinder, Foundling: A Story of the Holmfirth Flood*, 1906, [http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/54121?msg=welcome\\_stranger](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/54121?msg=welcome_stranger).

<sup>57</sup> “The Holmfirth and Sheffield Floods,” *The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, June 6, 1889.

Potentially more interesting than the way Johnstown was related to Holmfirth is the shift that occurred in that relationship, and the shift in priority that occurred in the national memory. In an article written by Professor Allen Haddock, a native of Holmfirth, he recounts his return to Holmfirth after many years working in the United States. While describing the devastating nature of the Holmfirth Flood, he refers to it as “a veritable ‘Johnstown Flood.’”<sup>58</sup> Keeping in mind that this particular article is written for readers both in England and the United States, his decision to reference the much older event to the younger, albeit arguably more catastrophic one is significant. The ability to reference Johnstown in either country and provoke a similar mental picture or frame of reference suggests that the collective memory of the country concerning the Holmfirth Flood was becoming increasingly secondary, almost foreign, when compared to “more significant” events.

Through multimedia sources, books, and public inquiry, the facts and opinions concerning the Holmfirth Flood, its causes, and effects were experienced in the public sphere and were a subject of social discourse. For the survivors, the flood was an absolute catastrophe. For its spectators, it was a thing to be experienced through media and personal interaction. Both groups contributed to the shaping of the public memory. As time progresses, public memory distorts. Information is misremembered or lost altogether. In 1852 Abraham Wildman and Joe Perkin wrote the song, “Holmfirth Flood.” The century-and-a-half since its writing, the original music for the song was lost and only the words remain. However, in 1909 a stone mason and sculptor from Holmfirth, named George Wadsworth, wrote his own arrangement to the song.<sup>59</sup> The sheet music associated with his arrangement is the only frame of reference we have for how

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<sup>58</sup> “A Yankee’s Visit to Huddersfield,” *The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, December 24, 1900.

<sup>59</sup> A.B.N. Wildman, “Holmfirth Flood,” Online Archive, Huddersfield Exposed, 1852, [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Holmfirth\\_Flood\\_\(Perkin\\_%26\\_Wildman\)](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Holmfirth_Flood_(Perkin_%26_Wildman)).

the song might have sounded originally. It seems to me that this is not unlike the shifting nature of public memory. It is shaped by the experiences of others and, in turn, shapes their understanding. Information is omitted and forgotten, but the essence of the event remains and is understood from a different perspective. In the case of the 1852 Holmfirth Flood, the memory of the event is literally carved in stone at some places, while in others it has been all but forgotten.

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