



The Riddle of the Tay Bridge Disaster

The history of the Tay Bridge

Dr. Peter Lewis

Like the Channel Tunnel in today's terms collapsing in the middle or being flooded by sea water. I mean, it was the longest bridge in the world.

Prof. Iain MacLeod

A failure is an unintentional full scale test. And that certainly was the case for the Tay Bridge.

Melissa Berry

The Tay Railway Bridge - built in 1889 - carries trains from Fife to Dundee. Next to it are the stumps of a slightly older bridge - the original Tay Bridge which collapsed in 1879, less than two years after it was opened.

Two miles from end to end - it was heralded as a triumph of Victorian engineering. When the central section of the bridge collapsed during a winter storm, a passenger train carrying 75 people fell into the freezing river below.

There were no survivors. Not just the local community but the whole engineering world was in shock. Over a hundred years have passed since the disaster but its cause is still a puzzle today.

Dave Bowman

Beautiful railway bridge of the silvery Tay.
Alas, I'm very sorry to say
That 90 lives have been taken away
On the last Sabbath day of 1879
Which will be remembered for a very long time.

Melissa Berry

Everyone in Dundee has grown up under the shadow of this disaster. One of the relatives of Bill Dow was at the Tay Bridge opening.

Bill Dow

Within Dundee this incredible legend that things last century either happened before the Tay Bridge disaster or they happened after the Tay Bridge disaster. Everything seemed to be marked from that. So it was a general talking point when I was a boy at school and subsequently when I was a student.

In those days, of course, just shortly after the Second World War, trains were absolutely crowded, so it was not unusual for me to stand in the corridors of the Flying Scotsman as it left Dundee about 8 o'clock in the morning – absolutely crowded to the gunnels.

There you had nothing else to do but to look out the side and you could see the old stumps and the old piers, particularly at low tide. I got more and more curious as time went on. When you don't get answers sometimes you get more curious and that's exactly what happened to me.

Melissa Berry

The makings of the disaster were there before it was built.

David Swinfen

The reason why the bridge was built was very involved with the rivalry developing between two major railway lines, the North British Railway and the Caledonian, both of which wished to dominate the railway network northwards from Edinburgh to Aberdeen.

The particular problem which the North British Railway faced in trying to establish an efficient railroad link from Edinburgh to Dundee was the existence of two major estuaries, the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Tay.

Melissa Berry

Engineer, Thomas Bouch was chosen to design the bridge to cross the Tay.

David Swinfen

Thomas Bouch had a long history of railway building and railway bridge building, or rather viaducts, and he'd made his reputation building relatively cheap and light railways and cast iron column viaducts in various valleys in the north of England. He was, therefore, I think, a natural choice for a programme which was to be as cost effective as possible.

Melissa Berry

After the bridge was opened Thomas Bouch was knighted, but within two years tragedy struck.