THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article 7 : A BRIDGE TOO NEAR
By Robin Bowling

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In about 1982 when I was master of the coasting vessel 'Subro Valour' we had just discharged soya bean meal (used for cattle feed) at Riverside in Norwich; we swung the ship round and called Carrow bridge on the VHS radio and proceeded down the river towards the bridge. The bridge lifted and we sailed through, as we approached Trowse railway bridge we called the signal box to ask when they could open the bridge. They called back and told us there would be a twenty minute wait to allow the London train to pass over the bridge before it could be swung.

It is difficult to tie the ship up between Carrow and Trowse bridges as there is no river bank and there was a lot of land water running down the river; this caused the ship to drop down onto the bridge. Dropping the anchor was not an option as there are electricity cables and gas pipes crossing the river or to turn round as the river is too narrow at this point but the bridge had wooden piling to protect and guide the vessel into the bridge hole as it is known. I called the mate to throw a rope over one of the wooden piles to hold the ship until the bridge was ready to swing open to get a rope out and gently stop the ship. We had a cup of tea while we waited for the bridge to open. We were only going through the bridge and then tying up on the Deal Ground overnight before continuing on

to Great Yarmouth in the morning.

When the railway bridge was about to swing, I called to the mate to let go of the rope from the pile but unfortunately for Joe the mate, it had become jammed on the pile so Joe stepped onto the cross timbers to release the rope but as he was about to step back aboard the ship, the cross timber which measured approximately 14" by 14" proved to be rotten 'as a pear'; it collapsed causing Joe to fall into the river. The ship's side was too steep and too high out of the water for him to get back aboard or for the rest of the crew to pull him back on board. He swam to the bank which sloped at this point and scrambled onto the north shore.

We carried on through the bridge and tied up at the Deal Ground. Joe waited for the railway bridge to close and walked back to the ship; he ran below and had a hot shower and was none the worse for his dip in the river. The next day we sailed down to Great Yarmouth and loaded our next cargo, not giving the railway bridge another thought. Roughly two weeks later the ship's owner spoke to me and asked about the railway bridge incident, so I gave him the story chapter and verse, he then told me Railtrack had put in an insurance claim for the repair of the timber cross beam that had collapsed when Joe stood on it. I pointed out that the wood was so rotten it had collapsed under Joe's weight, approximately eleven stones, and I thought Railtrack were 'trying it on'. I wrote a full report of the incident, posted it to the office with a first class stamp and that was the last we heard of the Trowse bridge incident.

