Ashridge Interchange

"The Ashridge Interchange Movement ('AIM') is a non-party organisation that exists to promote the best possible traffic solution for Wokingham for the least overall environmental impact."

History - The Reading Road and Winnersh

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The M4, A329(M) and IDR

The M4 bridge over the Reading Road at Winnersh was completed in late 1970, while the embankment either side took shape. What was then known as the Loddon Bridge Interchange was under construction during 1972, but tragedy struck in October that year:

From the 'Wokingham Times', 26th October 1972:

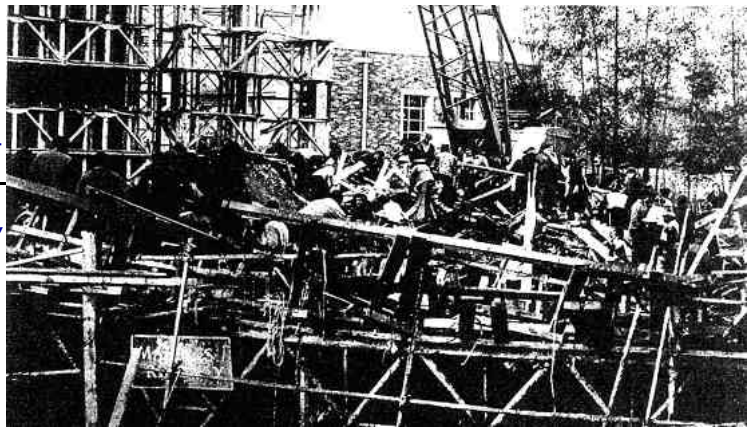
‘Digging for dear life . . .’

By Times News Team.

Reporters: Malcolm Deacon, Quentin Falk, Eileen Sheridan, Ian Soutar;

Photographers: Bob Bodman, Clive Postlethwaite.

Like so many ants, rescue workers swarm over the wreckage feverishly searching for survivors. Every now and then there is a pause as they listen for cries from the injured. But there is silence except for the drone of generators as fire engines pump out brown, murky water to reduce the level of the river. So the search continues.



This was the scene at the Loddon Bridge disaster on Tuesday when three men died and 10 were brought out injured after being trapped in the tangled mesh of girders, rods and splintered wooden frames. Hundreds of tons of concrete, wood and steel had crashed 40ft down when the span between two concrete pillars was on the point of being cemented.

The contractors, Marples Ridgway, say they do not know why it collapsed, and Berkshire County Council are to hold an inquiry. A 999 call by a 14-year-old Winnersh schoolboy seconds after the crash first alerted the police and set the massive emergency rescue operation in motion.

Meanwhile fellow-workers of the trapped men ran over and began clawing at the wreckage. As one of them, Mr. Tom Murphy of Finchampstead Road, Wokingham, whose brother Joe was slightly injured as he jumped clear, said: "Everyone helps – you do, don’t you, because they’re your mates".

From the window of his home in Loddonbridge Road, Roger Laitt, a Forest Grammar School pupil, saw the viaduct collapse. "I heard a noise like a terrible clap of thunder. It was indescribable", he said. "I saw the whole lot go down. There were about 20 men on top of the bridge and I saw them go down with it. My hand just reached for the ‘phone and I managed to dial for the police. I was shaking all over at the time. The whole site was covered in clouds of dust and I could hear people screaming. It was the workmen. Even they were screaming. After I rang the police, I rang my mother and she came home from work."

Roger, who was at home on half-term holiday, said" It seemed ages before they came. I thought they could have been much quicker, especially when there is a Fire Station just around the corner".

Roger’s next-door neighbour, Mrs. Alice Guntrip, also saw the bridge collapse. Her 21-year-old son, George, was working on the site at the time, and she has been dreading an accident like this. "As soon as I heard it I knew what had happened", she said, Mrs. Guntrip screamed for her husband Earnest, who was asleep upstairs.

"I just didn’t know what to do first. I ran down the garden yelling "Georgie, Georgie". I met some of his workmates and asked them "Have you seen Georgie?" They told me he was all right, but I wouldn’t stop until I had seen him for myself. He had only gone back to the site five minutes before the bridge fell. He

FOREST Grammar schoolboy Roger Lalit (14) at the scene of the disaster. Roger was the first person to raise the alarm after the bridge collapsed. He phoned for the police and rescue services from his home even though he was in a state of shock after seeing 20 men plunge to the ground from the bridge.
With Roger is Mrs Alice Guntrip whose 21-year-old son George had just returned to work on the site. He escaped uninjured.

stopped for a chat on the way back, and if he hadn't done that he would have been on the bridge. After I saw him he went back to the rubble and tried to help pull people clear".

Shocked as she was, Mrs. Guntrip still managed to make tea for helpers. "I'll never forget what I saw", she said.

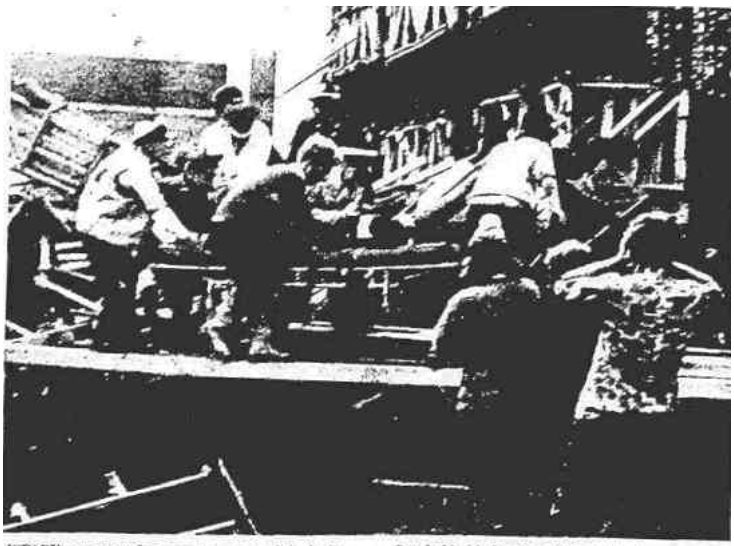
During the morning there were some 40 men working on the span, but it was lunch-time when the disaster struck and half of them were having their lunch-break. Mr. Tom Murphy of Finchampstead Road, Wokingham, was near the canteen 75 yards away. He heard the crash and turned round in time to see the span hit the water. His brother Joe was one of the men working in the other shift and was slightly injured as the scaffolding plummeted down.

Tom Murphy rushed over to the bridge and together with many other site workers clawed at the wreckage to try and free trapped men. He said, "Everyone helps – you do, don't you, because they're your mates." Both he and his brother had been working at the A329 Relief Road site for some weeks. "There was a terrible noise and I just saw the thing crumble into the river", he said.

WILLING hands pull out an injured workman. There were more willing hands ready to put the injured in ambulances and rush them off to hospital.

Mr. Murphy said that the span had been checked and that the men on top were pouring concrete into it. "We've finished several spans which are exactly the same. I've worked on hundreds of them before. I can't understand it".

Scaffolder Mr. Freddie Singh, 26, said that the span "crumbled like a pack of cards". He said that there had been two minutes' warning of the impending disaster. "There was a lot of creaking and groaning and some men on top jumped off. But there was so little time that the ones in the middle were not so lucky and had no room to move."



WEARY rescue workers carry out one of the badly injured on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance as some of the man's mates stand-by.

One holds his hands to his head in horror as he discovers the identity of the victim.

Workman John O'Connor was near the works canteen, about 75 yards from the bridge. "I did not see it, but I heard it – there was an almighty bang and a crash and all of us ran over to the bridge."

TWO of the shocked and injured men are helped to a waiting ambulance.

As the alarm was raised at 1:15, every available ambulance in Reading was ordered to the scene. They were soon joined by ambulances from Bracknell and Wokingham until over 20 were ready. At that stage, nobody knew how many men were trapped. Reports ranged from "under ten" to "about 20". Everywhere workers were asking each other "have you seen John?" or "has anyone seen Mick?"

In the canteen on the site, roll calls were taken. A group of men, covered in mud and grime, answered as their names were called. There were embarrassed coughs and nobody dared look at each other as the foreman called out a name and there was no reply. A cross was put by the name and the foreman read on.

The ambulance man were soon joined by firemen from Reading, Wokingham, Sonning and Pangbourne. Said one fireman, "God – it looks like a scaffolder's nightmare". Said another – if there's anyone down there he can't have much of a chance.

NURSES and doctors were quickly on the scene carrying boxes and bundles of life-saving equipment to tend to the injured men and exhausted rescuers.

They worked alongside the fire brigade and police in the feverish atmosphere of the disaster area, seeing the stretchers into the ambulances and doing on-the-spot treatment for bruised and cut workers who continued to claw at the wreckage.

Mr. Chipper said that one man was pinned by a steel bar. "It had to be cut away before he could be freed", he said. Chain gangs of rescue workers were formed to cart away the debris. Over 300 workmen,

police and ambulance men clambered over the scaffolding while behind them cranes were being started up to help lift the large pieces away.

Among the confusion nurses and Red Cross workers stood ready with supplies of plasma. Men started cutting away the metal with oxy-acetylene cutters, sending showers of sparks in all directions and a policeman stood by with a fire extinguisher. Much of the wreckage was in the water – four feet of fast-running brown muck churned up by all the rescue work. Fireman worked frantically to get their pumps going in a desperate attempt to lower the level. Everywhere was a maze of hoses and equipment. Police and firemen directed operations with walkie-talkie radios.

LIKE angels of mercy, women living nearby kept up an endless supply of strong, sweet tea for rescue workers.

Nearby, women neighbours valiantly started making cup after cup of strong, sweet tea and weary rescue workers snatched time off for quick breathers. The whole area around the bridge had been churned up by the hundreds of pairs of feet trampling around and soon became a sea of mud.

A GENERAL view of the tons of crumbled scaffolding which crashed forty feet into the River Loddon.

'Disaster Toll'

Three Wokingham men were among the injured workers.

Bill Cumming (40) of 11 Firs Close, Nine Mile Ride, Wokingham, was detained in Battle Hospital, Reading, with injuries to his legs and arms.

Thomas Ford (20) of the Caravan Site, Loddon Stud Farm, Winnersh, was detained in Battle Hospital with a back injury.

The third local man, Angus Macdonald (26) of The Farm, Watmore Lane, Winnersh, was discharged from Battle Hospital after receiving treatment.

One of the three men killed was a Berkshire County Council inspector who was on top of the bridge supervising the pouring of liquid concrete into the mould. He was 50-year-old Mr. Derek Thomas of Burbage, near Swindon, in Wiltshire.

Another man who died in the bridge collapse was Mr. Derek Cooper (40) of Fleet in Hampshire.

The other inured were: Jim Bugner (20) of Chiswick, and David Clifton (30), Thomas Connoran (21), Francis Cox (36), Richard Matthews (20), Joseph Murphy (29) and John Noble (31), all of Reading.

The name of the third man had not been released at the time of going to press.

'It is all a complete mystery'

Berkshire County Surveyor, Mr. Edward Davies, said yesterday morning that the cause of the tragedy was "A complete mystery".

RESCUE workers, police and firemen are sternfaced as the task of pulling away wreckage above the trapped men goes grimly on. A crew with oxy-acetylene burning equipment is seen moving in.

"We are mystified", he said at a Press conference at Marples-Ridgway site headquarters. "The number of things which could leas to the collapse is infinite", said Mr. M. Simpson, the county council's resident engineer on the site. Both, however, strenuously denied that the design of the bridge, or its method of construction, was in any way to blame. "This has been done since the 1850s", said Mr. Davies. "There is no reason at all to suggest that the design was in any way inadequate".

The collapse happened when tons of liquid concrete was being poured into the bridge "false work" – a temporary bridge of steel piles and girders. After the concrete has set, the falsework is taken away and a bridge of concrete is left.

This falsework had previously been used on the west-bound bridge at the beginning of August and was due to be moved along the river to help construct the lower slip road. "We had no other problems with it at all", said Mr. Simpson. Altogether there will be 33 spans in the viaduct and the one which was being constructed was the eighth.

Reconstruction work started immediately, but Mr. Davies said that work could be delayed by anything

up to several months. The viaduct was due to be completed in January, at a cost of over £1½ million.

Most of the 500 tons of concrete – a completed span has 1,000 tons – is now lying in the river. Mr. Davies admitted that there might well be problems in one already drained area, and added that the contractors might resort to blasting to get it out.

He again repeated that the cause of the tragedy was a mystery but said: "We all want to find out. The engineers will want to find out, the department will want to find out and the contractors certainly will".

28th February 1974:

'Long-awaited five-year plan for Winnersh':

By Denise Murphy.

A community centre, a health clinic, a new primary school and a library have all been included in the long-awaited Draft Plan, published by Berkshire County Council this week, which outlines the council's proposals for Winnersh for the next five years.

The plan has been based on the Shankland-Cox partnership's study of Winnersh which was commissioned by Wokingham RDC, and it contains, among other things, detailed information and statistics on the village's population and growth trends, as well as housing, employment, education, sewage and accident figures.

The Plan also covers the need for releasing further land in the area for residential development as has been recommended for Planning Area 8, the section of the county which contains Winnersh. One of the brightest aspects of the Winnersh Plan from the point of view of residents will be the recognition by the local planning authority of the need for all the community and amenity facilities for which they have been campaigning for many years.

'Complaints'

With only a few church halls providing premises for sporting or social activities, and one or two more being available in neighbouring Sindlesham to cater for a population of well over 5,500 (census figures for 1971 showed a population of 4,864), the need for a community centre has been one of the chief complaints of residents.

Other needs have included a library, an additional primary school, a surgery and health clinic, and play school facilities, and these have led to residents accusing Wokingham Rural Council of "not caring about Winnersh". In the Plan the county council suggests that a community centre could be sited alongside Forest School, where school facilities could be used and the corresponding cost kept to a minimum.

'Variety'

"Such a centre", states the Plan, "if appropriately sited and adequately financed, could provide for a wide variety of uses and enable many of the existing deficiencies in respect of accommodation and facilities for local organisations, clubs, societies, etc., to be remedied".

At present the only library facilities at Winnersh consist of the mobile library which visits the village at set times each week, and the permanent branch library and car park could be sited in the centre of Winnersh. This could operate on a part time basis initially, until a more intensive service was warranted.

The provision of health and welfare services, which the Plan admits is "poor", could be improved by establishing a small health clinic in the village.

'Surgery'

This could provide consulting and examination rooms for two or three doctors (at present two doctors run a part-time surgery at Winnersh), as well as a surgery waiting room and interview rooms for midwives and health visitors. The site for this, urges the Plan, which was compiled jointly by the county planning and surveying officers and based on the Shankland Cox findings, should be situated as centrally as possible, and have convenient access to a main road, as well as being close to bus routes.

One of the other more important demands put forward by local people – the need for more primary school education – has also been recognised by the council. The Plan reveals what the Merryhill Green Primary School, which at present houses 250 pupils, is to be enlarged to cater for a total of 560 children.

In addition to this, another primary school for 280 children will be provided on land to the south of the A329 Reading Road. It is anticipated that the proposed library and health clinic be sited with this school.

'Enlarged'

It is intended that under the county council's current policy for changing to comprehensive education, the Forest School, at present accommodating 750 boys, will be enlarged to accept a further 1,100 boys. The Holt will remain a girls' school, and the other secondary school covering Winnersh, Emmbrook School, is already co-educational.

'In-filling'

In addition to its role of providing for improved community, health, education and recreational facilities in Winnersh, the Plan provides for the release of land for additional residential development, "to ensure the proper development of Winnersh" during the next five years. This is to be done by the eventual development of three sites: 3.7 acres of land off Watmore Lane; approximately five acres south of Allnatt Avenue; and 3.5 acres at the junction of Arbor Lane with Robin Hood Lane.

Any other development, states the Plan, should be in the form of infilling, i.e. building in gaps where residential development is already established.

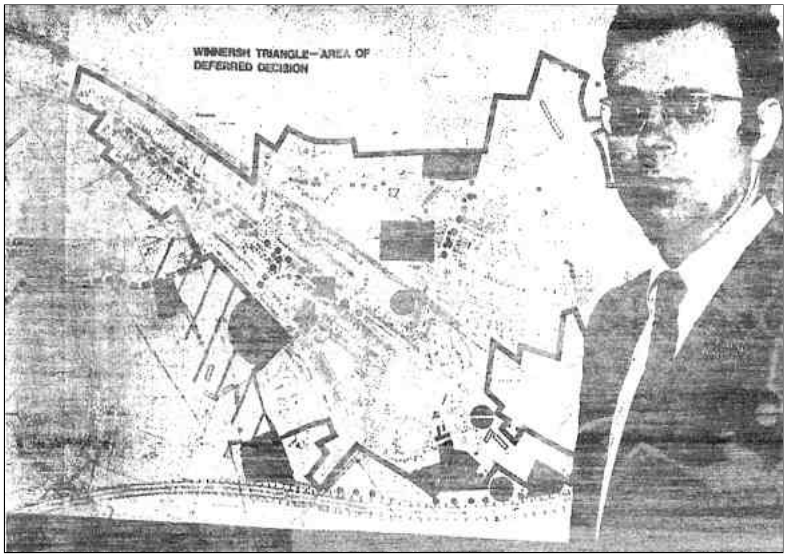


Photo: Mr. J. A. Blacklock, from the county planning office, beside one of the maps showing an area of deferred growth in Winnersh. [This area of deferred growth eventually became Winnersh Triangle]

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