

“The Beach”: A Historical Record of Recreational Use on the River Wharfe at Collingham and Linton

By Philip Powell

The Physical Setting

The stretch of the River Wharfe between Collingham and Linton has a long informal history as a recreational river landscape. The key physical focal point was always the broad shingle and sand river margin near Linton Bridge and the former iron railway bridge immediately adjacent to it. Residents of Collingham and Wetherby now refer to it simply as “the pebbly beach”, despite it being an inland riverbank rather than a coastal site. The area naturally formed shallow pools, gravel bars and warmer slow-moving water during summer low flows, making it attractive for bathing and family recreation. Contemporary open-water swimming guides describe it as a pebble beach with shallow water, slow-moving current, and some small rapids, good fun for beginners.

Linton Bridge carries the minor road linking Collingham and Linton over the Wharfe near Wetherby. Built of rock-faced stone in the early to mid-19th century, it has three arches and two piers standing in the water, and is Grade II listed. The beach is accessed on foot via Church Lane and the bridge over the beck, following the footpath at the side of the beck down to the riverside, an idyllic picnic spot and swimming dip. Alternatively, it can be reached from Linton Road by an entrance that passes through the former Collingham Bridge station. The broad floodplain meadows known as Linton Ings, on the north bank (now Wetherby Golf Club), provided open accessible ground close to the river and formed part of the recreational geography from early on.

Collingham itself sits in the beautiful lower Wharfe valley, some two miles upstream from Wetherby. From the earliest of times, it was an important crossing point of the river, with a ford which continued in use until the arrival of the railway disrupted it and required the building of a road bridge, Linton Bridge between the two villages.

The Railway and the Opening of the Site: 1876 to 1964

The railway is the key to understanding the beach’s significance as a recreational destination beyond its immediate locality. The North Eastern Railway’s Cross Gates–Wetherby line opened on 1 May 1876, with Collingham Bridge station serving both Collingham and Linton. Contemporary village history records that the arrival of the railway “opened up travel to the wider area,” and the transformation was rapid. Lord Harewood, who owned the land needed for the railway, made four conditions: that a new road bridge replace the ford over the River Wharfe; that a new road be built between Collingham and Linton; that a large coal yard be constructed at the station to give a year’s supply of coal to Linton, Collingham and Harewood House (this coal yard now forms part of the parking area at Beck Wood); and that the line run two express trains a day between Collingham and Leeds, the nearest station to Harewood House.

By 1891 thirteen men in the village were working for the railway. By 1911 agricultural workers had fallen to just 20% of the workforce, and new work patterns were emerging: city workers relocating out of the grime of Leeds, commuters travelling in the opposite direction, and a growing suburban character, all drawn in part by the river and countryside the station put within reach.

In 1911 the station sold 18,156 tickets from a catchment population of 1,137. That is roughly fifty tickets per day from a village of barely eleven hundred people, indicating substantial through traffic, day trippers among them. The line was doubled to two tracks in 1901, allowing through running from Leeds to Harrogate via Wetherby, which further increased capacity and frequency. The station had a substantial goods yard on both sides of the line, a brick goods shed, a two-ton crane, a cattle dock, and a siding on the down side regularly used to stable race specials waiting to return passengers from Wetherby Racecourse at the end of the day. That race specials were stabled here confirms the line's leisure as well as commercial function.

The Cross Gates–Wetherby line also brought a new iron railway bridge across the Wharfe, built immediately adjacent to the older Linton Bridge. During the period of its construction, a temporary structure is recorded to have collapsed into the Wharfe in January 1875. It was reported that “the river Wharfe, which for some days has been frozen to the depth of five or six inches, was on Sunday a scene of great commotion. Owing to the rapid thaw, the ice broke, and large blocks of it were swept with terrific force down the river. At Collingham there was a bridge temporarily erected until the permanent one was built, which spanned the river on the new line of railway between Leeds and Wetherby. The ice became piled against this bridge until it fell and was swept away. There were thirty-six tons of metals on it at the time, and they now lie at the bottom of the river, where they will probably have to remain until summer, when the water is low. Several valuable pieces of timber were got out in different parts of the river, while immense pieces of ice were left on the banks, which were overflowed.” Once the railway bridge was successfully completed, the two structures, the older stone road bridge and the new iron rail bridge stood side by side. The bridge piers stood in the river through the entire railway era and for a year afterwards, creating scour pools and turbulent hydraulics precisely at the most attractive swimming point. The bridge was demolished in 1965, a year after closure, and its former piers altered the river bed in ways that persist in the hydrology today.

Most surviving documentation of the railway era discusses commuting and agricultural freight. Excursion and leisure traffic nonetheless formed a significant part of summer use patterns. The structure of the line made it so. A short return fare from Leeds placed the Wharfe bank within easy reach of working-class and lower-middle-class Leeds families on bank holidays and summer Sundays. The Victorian and Edwardian north of England had well-established patterns of this kind: Whit Monday and August Bank Monday were the principal occasions, and comparable Yorkshire river sites, Burnsall, Bolton Abbey, Ilkley were drawing Leeds day trippers throughout this period. Collingham, closer to Leeds than any of them and with a direct rail connection, occupied an analogous position.

King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra travelled by Royal Train to Collingham Bridge station in 1909, an indication of the line's wider connectivity and status. By the late

Victorian and Edwardian period the station was a polished facility. Its main building was a substantial NER structure of a type still found at Garforth, with frilly bargeboards, a bay window with matching gables, and a veranda stretched between the stationmaster's house and the office range. Annual wayside station competitions were introduced in 1895; nearby Thorner station won NER First Prize in 1912 and 1913.

The Francis Frith photographic archive records that in the 1920s Tom Richmond's West End Boating Stage at Wetherby offered rowing boats, Canadian-style skiffs and punts for hire, and that a motor boat plied between Wetherby and Collingham Bridge. The landing point at Collingham was below the Barleycorn public house (now Piccolinos Restaurant).

Recreational boating on this reach of the Wharfe was therefore an established commercial activity, not merely an occasional pastime. The stretch between the two settlements, flat, slow-moving in summer low flows, and accessible from both ends, was well suited to it. The same physical character that made the river attractive for swimming and picnicking made it navigable by small craft, and the two uses likely overlapped considerably during the interwar decades.

The line closed to passengers on 6 January 1964, famously the first line closed under the Beeching axe. At closure, BR had invested little for decades, and the station retained oil lanterns of NER vintage and LNER running-in nameboards, re-painted in BR tangerine. The station and goods yard were cleared for housing in the early 1970s. Wetherby Rural District Council took over the demolished station site and the trackbed down to the river, and at one stage proposed building a second coal yard on the old line, opposite the stepping stones (later a bridge) over the beck at the bottom of Church Lane. The scheme was abandoned and houses were built instead. The riverside car park that still serves the beach today was built on the old line, with a new access off Linton Road; together with the original coal-yard land at Beck Wood, it remains, even now, a recurring source of local controversy over maintenance, traffic management and summer overflow parking. What had been freight infrastructure became recreational infrastructure. The transition was seamless in function if not in form.

The Post-War Decades: The Beach in Living Memory

By the post-war decades — particularly the 1950s through 1970s — the Wharfe at Collingham had developed a well-established reputation locally as an unofficial summer bathing area. Oral accounts from residents across the wider Wetherby district commonly describe large groups of teenagers arriving by bicycle or bus; family picnics on warm bank holiday weekends; tents and overnight camping on the river meadows; fires and informal parties; rope swings and improvised diving points; and seasonal congregation during hot weather. This pattern closely resembles many unofficial river “holiday beaches” that emerged around northern English industrial towns before mass foreign travel made the Costa Brava accessible to ordinary families.

In the early 2000s, I attended a talk in the Memorial Hall by the late village historian Ken Jones, shortly before his death, in which he described the historical connection between Collingham Bridge Station and the long tradition of recreational use of “The Beach” on the

River Wharfe. Ken explained how, particularly during the post-war years, large numbers of visitors from inner-city Leeds would travel out by train to Collingham Bridge to picnic, swim and camp beside the river. On fine summer weekends day-trippers would arrive simply to enjoy the countryside and the water, while over Bank Holidays substantial crowds would camp in the meadow adjoining the Wharfe, transforming the area into a lively seasonal gathering place. Ken recalled that, as a young man, he and several others had effectively been deputised by the village constable to help maintain order amongst the influx of visitors. With characteristic humour he described how the constable would patrol the campsite at night with a torch, inspecting tents to ensure that unmarried couples were not sharing accommodation. It was a vivid reminder not only of the popularity of the riverside at that time, but also of how profoundly social attitudes and village life have changed since that era.

Tragedy on the Wharfe

Documented and reported drownings associated with the River Wharfe at Collingham include the 1874 death of Thomas Hornshaw, who fell from the temporary structure erected during construction of the new railway bridge, immediately adjacent to the older Linton Bridge. Hornshaw was making his way back from the Windmill Inn on the evening of Good Friday with a friend when he fell from the bridge. His body was recovered the following day downstream.

There is also the recorded 1933 death of Cecil Oddy, an 18-year-old Leeds youth who drowned after falling from a horse into the river. He fell into a deep section of the Wharfe, and his two friends were unable to save him. In January 1937, it was reported that Robert Ogilvie of Micklethwaite had received an award from the Humane Society for rescuing two students from drowning in the Wharfe at Collingham.

The tragic drowning of eight-year-old David Prior on 31 October 1966, and the double drowning of nine-year-old Nigel Spate and his seven-year-old brother Richard in July 1971, were all linked to recreational use of the River Wharfe at Collingham.

In 1974, fifteen-year-old Chris Hall, son of Peter Hall, drowned in the River Wharfe at Linton Bridge, Collingham, near Wetherby, after falling into the river from a floating log during a summer outing; he was sucked underwater into a 25ft whirlpool and could not be saved.

On 19 June 1987, five-year-old David Lizeth, of Leeds, drowned at the same spot while on a family picnic with his mother, Michelle Melia. He had been paddling in the shallows wearing armbands which, at his complaint, his mother had loosened; moments later he had disappeared. He was found on the far bank, rushed to St James' Hospital, Leeds, and died the following morning; the inquest recorded a verdict of accidental death.

On 6 June 1993, eighteen-year-old Adam Walker drowned in a fishing accident below the Barleycorn in Collingham. He got into trouble while wading in the river and was swept under. His cousins James Walker and Lennie Lowther were unable to save him. It was not a niche or marginal use of the river: despite these tragedies, families brought children to the

river and spread out along the banks in summer, and people continued to swim, fish and boat on the Wharfe at Collingham.

These drownings gave rise to persistent local warnings about the river's hidden dangers at this specific point, warnings that, as the 1987 inquest into David Lizeth's death revealed, were not always heeded, or even in place. The adequacy of that signage was itself repeatedly contested. At the 1987 inquest, Peter Hall told the coroner that the Parish Council had written to him in July 1979 promising new and replacement warning signs "so visitors should be even more aware of the dangers"; eight years later, he said, none had appeared. The only sign then on site stood at the entrance to the car park, two feet off the ground, easily hidden behind a parked car or by nettles growing at its base, roughly 200 yards from the beach itself with nothing to warn parents once they had walked down to the water.

The investigating officer, PC Brian Schofield, recommended additional signs nearer the sand and shingle beach, at the gap in the boundary fence through which everyone had to pass, and on the concrete banking directly opposite the beach, "in eyesight of everyone." Coroner Philip Gill, recording a verdict of accidental death, said this was a notorious stretch of river with deep holes in the riverbed that shifted with the current, and wrote to the Parish Council urging new signage. David's mother, Michelle Melia, said that if the council failed to act she would use the £800 raised for the family by neighbours to put the signs up herself. The episode captures a pattern that recurs throughout the site's history: promises of better signage made in the aftermath of a death, and long gaps before, or without, anything changing on the ground.

Local Collingham folklore embedded those dangers in vivid terms: undercurrents, hidden whirlpools, and even tall tales of a horse and carriage said to have vanished in the river at the beauty spot. These claims surfaced when the Outdoor Swimming Society listed the site on their wild swim map circa 2014, drawing a campaign response from river safety advocates trying to dissuade swimming in the river. A police frogman recounted the 1987 tragedy to the Wetherby News in connection with this controversy. The references to dangerous undercurrents specifically "around Linton Bridge and the former railway bridge" are themselves indirect evidence of longstanding swimming activity at that precise point: hazards only become socially embedded where repeated recreational use exists over time. The bridge piers, standing in the river through the entire railway era, were focal points for jumping and diving — precisely where the most dangerous underwater hydraulics were.

After the bridge was pulled down in 1965, swimming access shifted to the downstream side of the road bridge, where the beach is shallowest. Increasing car ownership from the 1960s onward turned the site into a straightforward day-trip destination from Leeds, Wetherby and surrounding villages, replacing the train journey with a short drive and park.

The Broader Tradition: Yorkshire's Inland River Beaches

Inland river beaches were of genuine social importance in industrial Yorkshire before affordable overseas holidays transformed working-class leisure. The Wharfe, Aire, Nidd

and Ure all developed local bathing spots where working families sought relief during hot summers — often informal, occasionally controversial, always persistent. Collingham's beach fitted squarely within this tradition. Before stricter modern enforcement, much of the Wharfe corridor tolerated a semi-informal recreational culture: camping on riverside land during August Bank Holiday and hot summer weekends was common across Yorkshire river systems until increasing landownership control, litter concerns, anti-social behaviour pressure and environmental regulation progressively tightened from the late twentieth century onward.

Continuity to the Present

Modern evidence demonstrates continuity of this recreational culture rather than its reinvention. Contemporary open-water swimming sources describe the pebbly beach access via Beck Wood car park and note established swimming use along a 350-metre reach upstream to a natural weir and shallow rapids. Local authorities and the Parish Council issue periodic warnings about swimming activity precisely because significant numbers of people continue to use the river recreationally, warnings are issued where there is something to warn against. This is not a new concern: complaints about inadequate, obscured or simply absent warning signage go back at least to the 1970s, and the same tension between visitor numbers and visible warnings runs through the site's modern management. The recent granting of formal bathing water status to stretches of the Wharfe around Wetherby further reflects the river's longstanding recreational function, now receiving regulatory recognition after well over a century of informal use.

The most dramatic episode in the Linton bridge's recent history was caused by Storm Eva. Leeds City Council closed Linton Bridge on 27 December 2015 when flooding of the River Wharfe rendered it unsafe. The south pier had settled 200mm into the riverbed, causing the masonry arches on either side to distort and crack. Working with Historic England and the Environment Agency, the council developed an intricate repair programme, eventually costing £5.1 million, fully funded by the Department for Transport, to stabilise and restore the structure while retaining its original appearance as far as possible. Engineers constructed temporary platforms and causeways within the river to allow piling, installed a cradle to support the cracked southern arch, injected grout beneath the failed pier foundation, and stitched the cracked arches. The parapet was rebuilt stone by stone. The bridge reopened on 2 September 2017 after nearly two years of closure that had effectively severed the direct connection between Linton and Collingham.

What the engineers left behind, however unintentionally, has proven to be one of the more intriguing footnotes to the whole episode. To position the crane during the most complex phases of the repair, contractors built a stone working platform in the river immediately upstream of the bridge. When the works were complete and the platform was dismantled, the stone was not fully removed, or at least much of it was not. River hydraulics did the rest. Over the seasons following the reopening, that material has progressively migrated downstream onto the Beach, raising its level, widening its extent, and depositing a new layer of stone that is visibly different in character from the rounded water-worn pebbles laid down by the Wharfe over centuries. The beach, in short, has grown, fed in part by the repair of the very bridge that stands above it. This is not without irony given that certain

residents of Linton, whose elevated position on the north bank affords them a proprietorial view of the river, have viewed the beach's expanding popularity with something less than enthusiasm. The contractors, in solving one problem, inadvertently compounded another, depending, of course, on which side of that particular argument you happen to stand.

The enduring placename, “the beach” is perhaps the most eloquent evidence of all. It was never officially designated. It has no formal facilities and no lifeguards, and even its de facto car park at Beck Wood remains a recurring flashpoint, residents and the Parish Council have long clashed with visitors over its maintenance, traffic management and summer overflow parking. But the name persisted across generations, passed down through families in Collingham, Linton and Wetherby, maintaining a cultural continuity that no formal record could fully capture.

What the Evidence Establishes

The surviving documentary record is fragmentary, as it almost always is for informal working-class leisure. But when railway history, landscape evolution, population change, ticket sales data, local memory, drowning records, swimming warnings, modern recreation guides, and the enduring place-name are considered together, they strongly support a continuous tradition of recreational swimming, picnicking and seasonal informal camping at the Collingham–Linton reach of the River Wharfe extending from at least the late Victorian period, probably from the opening of Collingham Bridge station in 1876 through the full railway era and into the present day.

Beneath the nostalgia and postcard beauty of “The Beach,” there has always been a quieter and rather more English undercurrent of tension about who, exactly, the riverside was really for. On one side stood the prosperous and well-connected families whose houses overlooked the Wharfe from the Linton bank, enjoying an enviable rural idyll within easy reach of Leeds. On the other came the seasonal influx of what some privately regarded as the “great unwashed” — ordinary working-class visitors from the inner city arriving by train and later by car or bus, trampling down the footpaths with picnic baskets, tents, beer crates and, horror of all horrors, disposable barbecues, with children in tow in search of water, freedom and a brief escape from terraced streets and summer heat. Objections to this invasion were rarely expressed in such blunt terms. Instead, they emerged dressed in the respectable language of environmental protection, public order and safety. There were, undeniably, genuine problems: litter after Bank Holiday weekends, broken bottles in the shallows, fires from disposable barbecues, public defecation in the woods, traffic chaos along the narrow bottleneck approaching Linton Bridge, and later allegations of drug use, petty crime and nocturnal activities in parked cars that would no doubt have horrified Ken Jones’s lantern-wielding village constable.

As Britain drifted deeper into the age of health-and-safety authoritarianism, warning signs multiplied, drowning hazards, unstable trees, dangerous currents, each carrying the not-so-subtle implication that perhaps people simply should not be there at all. Yet behind much of the indignation lurked an older and rarely acknowledged class discomfort: the irritation felt when large numbers of outsiders begin using spaces long regarded, however unofficially, as the preserve of the local and comfortable classes. In many ways the

arguments surrounding the Beach echoed the dinner-table disdain once directed at the crowds flocking to Bridlington, Scarborough or Blackpool, those who could not afford Centre Parcs or Mediterranean holidays but still insisted on seeking leisure, fresh air and enjoyment wherever they could find it. The debate continues today on local social media pages, where furious residents, former councillors and self-appointed guardians of village civilisation denounce the annual Bank Holiday “invasion” as though the Wharfe itself were under siege. It is a fascinating microcosm of English social geography: the uneasy collision between rural exclusivity and mass recreation, between the desire to preserve tranquillity and the equally human desire simply to belong, however briefly, beside a river on a hot summer afternoon.

The Fishing Divide

The fishing rights and informal social geography of the Wharfe around Collingham and Linton reveal another layer of class, access and competing visions of the countryside. The principal organised angling presence on the stretch is the Wetherby & District Angling Club together with associated reciprocal arrangements involving clubs such as Ilkley Angling Association and Leeds & District ASA. These organisations control or lease various lengths of the River Wharfe around Collingham, Linton and Wetherby, with formalised access rules, membership systems, requirements for angling licences and parking restrictions.

Angling itself contains its own internal class distinctions that mirror the wider social tensions surrounding “The Beach.” Historically, coarse fishing, the world of maggots, keepnets, barbel, chub and riverside flasks of tea was overwhelmingly associated with the industrial working and lower-middle classes of northern England. It emerged as a mass participation pastime for miners, factory workers, railwaymen and urban tradesmen escaping cities like Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield. Fly fishing and game fishing, by contrast, retained a more overtly middle and upper-middle class culture tied to landed estates, country sports traditions and exclusivity. Even today, stretches of the Wharfe reflect this subtle divide, with some reaches managed as lightly fished trout water with restricted membership, while others cater for broader coarse fishing participation.

The irony is that many of the anglers sitting quietly along the banks of the Wharfe are themselves part of the same historical stream of “outsiders” who arrive from urban Yorkshire in search of access to countryside and river. Organised angling clubs often became, over time, another mechanism for regulating and controlling access to stretches of water that had once been used far more freely by swimmers, picnickers and campers. There is a sharp contrast between the affluent socio-economic profile of modern Collingham and Linton, prosperous commuter villages with high property values, professional residents and riverside homes overlooking the Wharfe and the traditional demographic base of northern coarse angling clubs, which historically drew heavily from Leeds’ industrial districts. The result is an intriguing overlap of rural exclusivity and working-class recreational tradition occupying the same riverbanks. It is still not uncommon to see a heavily laden coarse fisherman arriving at the bus stop with all his gear and heading for a night on the Wharfe.

One sees echoes of this tension in modern complaints surrounding parking, noise and “undesirable behaviour.” Anglers are generally tolerated because they embody a quieter, regulated and semi-traditional use of the river. The family barbecue crowd, groups of teenagers swimming from the pebbled shallows, or Bank Holiday campers spilling out from inner Leeds are viewed rather differently. Both groups are technically “using” the countryside, yet one fits more comfortably into accepted notions of respectable rural recreation than the other. The riverbank becomes socially zoned without anyone openly admitting it. Rod licences, club books, guest permits and carefully worded access arrangements carry an aura of legitimacy and stewardship, while informal bathing culture is more often framed through the language of nuisance, risk and disorder.

The social media disputes that now erupt every summer about “hordes” descending on the Wharfe are therefore not really about litter or congestion alone, however genuine those problems may be. They are also about competing assumptions regarding who has the right to occupy desirable rural space. The same undercurrents can be traced historically through seaside resorts, rambling disputes, access to moorland, and even Victorian anxieties about excursion trains carrying industrial populations into supposedly tranquil countryside. The debate about recreational use of the Wharfe at Collingham and Linton is simply a very Yorkshire version of a much older English argument.

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Oral Sources

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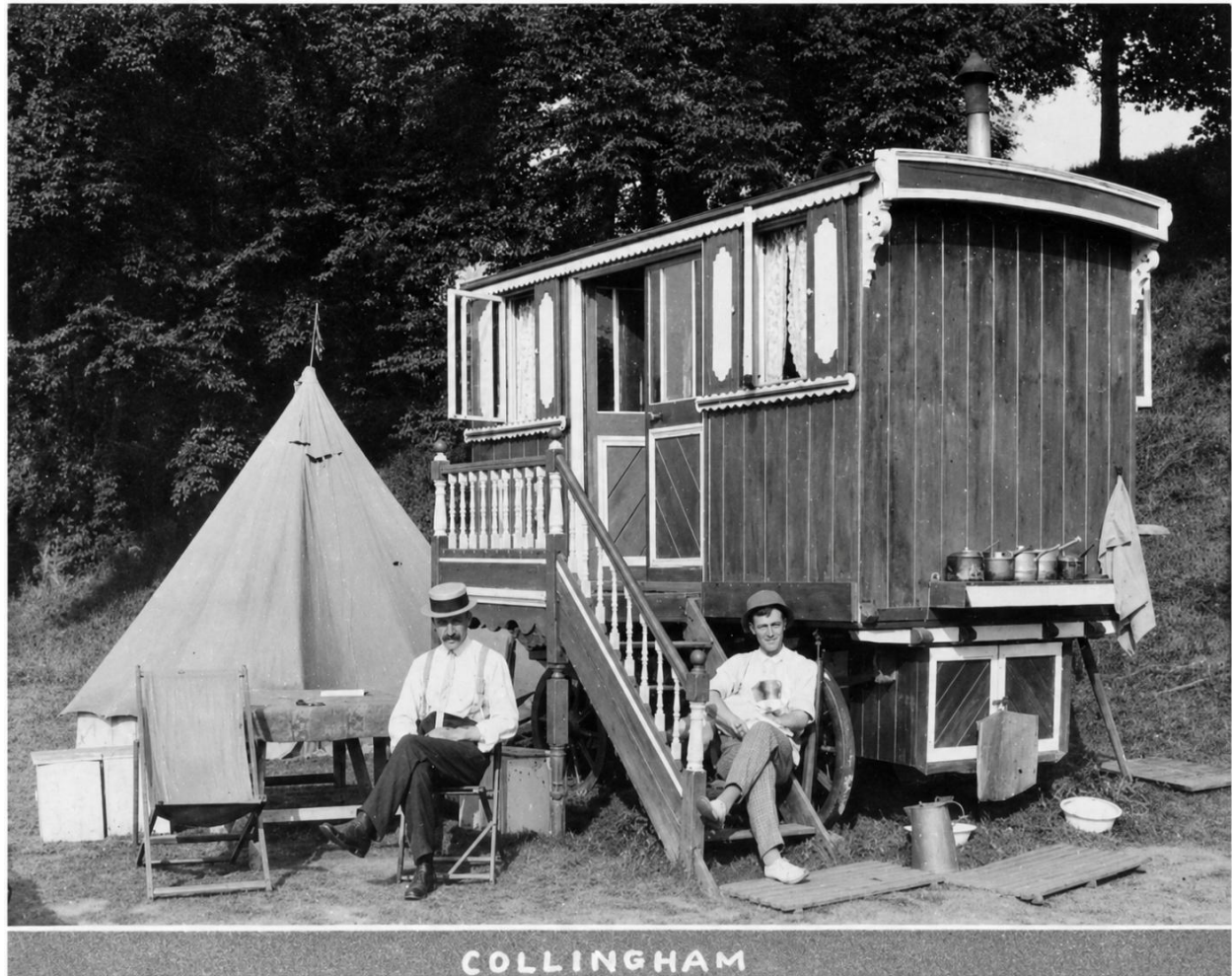


Figure 1 The Lido on the Wharfe



Figure 2 Fisherman on the Wharfe



Figure 3 Crossing the Beck near the Bridge



Figure 4 During the year when the approach to the bridge was left standing



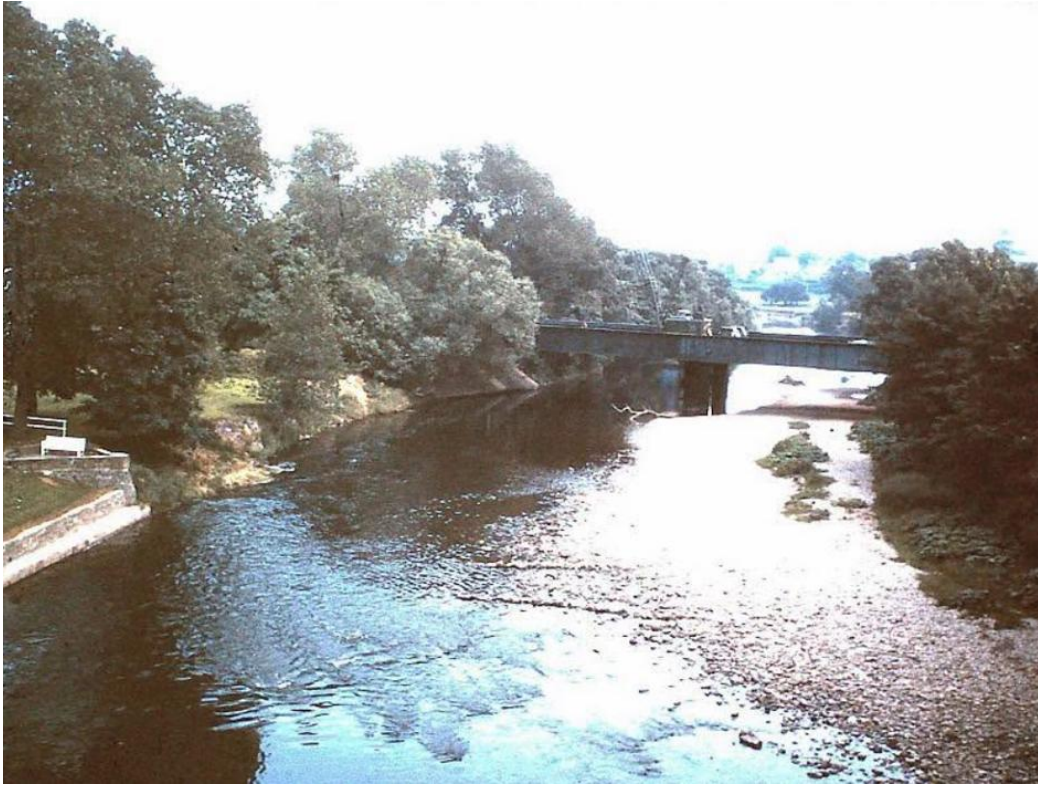


Figure 5 The railway bridge and the Beach



Figure 6 The bridge prior to its repair



Figure 7 Recreation on the Beach



Figure 8 The Beach from Linton Bridge



Figure 9 Construction platform for bridge repairs



Figure 10 Boating on the Wharfe



Figure 11 Dismantling the railway bridge