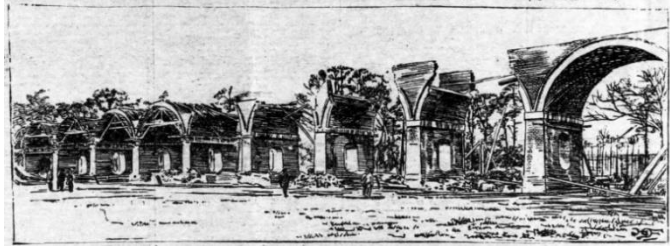


A Summary of the Circumstances of the Death of Albert William Edwards in 1903



a. GWSR viaduct Appeal



b. A Newspaper Graphic to illustrate the Disaster [Glouc. Journal 1903-11-21]

Summary

In 1903, the new Great Western Railway from Cheltenham to Broadway was being built but three arches of the railway viaduct collapsed, killing four workers. One was from Tewkesbury, a building labourer called **[Albert] William Edwards**, aged 49. He was buried in Tewkesbury Cemetery in an unmarked grave and the following inquest concluded that the accident was “*owing to an error of judgement on the part of the contractor*”, who promised “*to pay compensation*” – but did not pay for a headstone. His widow was **Emily Edwards of “Double Alley 1 High Street”** who said she had “*nine children; 6 of them dependent on her*”. She revealed that on the day “*he left home at 3 a.m. to proceed to walk to his work on the new railway at Stanway*”.

History Matters because without the formal inquest, we would find it difficult to understand the working conditions of such men and, even in the days of the formal 1901 Census and Burial Records, it is very difficult to track down precise information about the lives and deaths of the very poor.

The Article Published in *Tewkesbury Direct* Feb 2025 Edition.

HISTORY MATTERS by John Dixon of Tewkesbury Historical Society (THS)



In memory of a Tewkesbury labourer who was killed in an accident during the construction of the Stanway Viaduct in November 1903

(Albert) William Edwards aged 49

Born in Tewkesbury in 1854; married to Emily and father of 9 children. Afterwards, his widow said: “On Monday November 9th at 3 o’clock (3 a.m.) he then left home to walk to his work”

Tewkesbury Historical Society 2025

■ Stanway Viaduct today, and the proposed blue plaque



■ Stanway Viaduct in 1903

Tewkesbury Historical Society invest in a blue plaque at heritage railway’s Stanway Viaduct

The Gloucestershire Warwickshire Steam Railway has appealed for financial support to restore the Stanway Viaduct at an estimated cost of £1.5m, writes John Dixon.

THS became interested when it discovered that one of the four men who lost their lives in the disaster was a Tewkesbury Labourer. We feel that his life should be commemorated.

In 1903, the new Great Western Railway from Cheltenham to Broadway was being built, but three arches of the railway viaduct collapsed, killing four workers.

One was from Tewkesbury, a building labourer called (Albert) William Edwards, aged 49.

He was buried in Tewkesbury Cemetery in an unmarked grave and the following inquest concluded that accident was “owing to an error of judgement on the part of the contractor”, who promised “to pay compensation” – but did not pay for a headstone.

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A full history will be published in a future THS Bulletin



■ A newspaper graphic to illustrate the disaster [Gloucester Journal, 21st November 1903]

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07772 011795
jackglover63@gmail.com

The Use by GWSR of the Tewkesbury Historical Society's Plaque

As a result of this donation the **Committee of the Society** was invited by, **Ian Scholey, the part-time Manager of Infrastructure for the GWSR** to view the **Viaduct** and our plaque **in situ**. I was able to accept this invitation on the morning of **11 February 2025**.

Ian explained that he was a retired engineer from the HS2 project and is **head of the RailTrack** aspect of our local heritage railway. He is responsible for ascertaining all that is required for the railway to run for the benefit of Tourists.

It had been discovered recently that the 1903 Viaduct might expand along its length and fall down again as in 1903 unless works were undertaken to correct this serious problem. It had been known for some time that the waterproofing had failed on the viaduct and water penetration was damaging the brickwork. **GWSR**, therefore, removed all of the track and ballast in late 2023 to install a **waterproof concrete slab** across the whole length. They then discovered, however, that the parapet walls were leaning out and in danger of falling. A solution to prevent this happening was quickly developed and work was completed by the end of February 2024 by **using stainless steel restraining plates fixed by stainless steel cables to the slab**.



Our **President**, on a cold day, inspecting the plaque, attached to **the restraining plate** preventing the parapet from moving any further



Before climbing to the top of the **50ft/15m** high Viaduct



The **President** flanked by the **restraining plates** and the plaques along the Viaduct

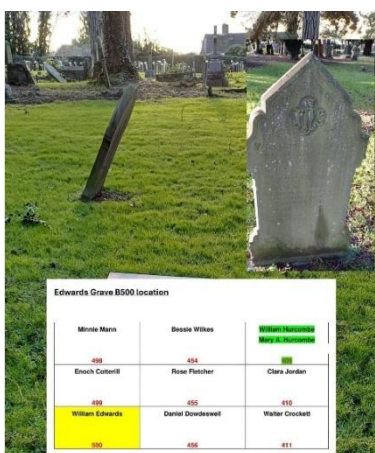
Photographs and Protective Jacket supplied by Ian Scholey [GWSR]

The Full History of the History behind the Plaque

“Cheltenham to Honeybourne railway, at Stanway Grounds, between Toddington and Broadway. Three arches of a viaduct upon which a travelling crane was working. Some eight or ten others were seriously injured some buried and two dead bodies of the injured were recovered.” The coroner concluded that 6 had been injured.

The Tewkesbury victim, of another four discovered, was officially known as **Albert William Edwards**, born locally in 1854. That much was certain but establishing the details of his life are difficult as he does not appear in census records possibly because he was an itinerant building labourer, also known by the name William alone.

The virtue of such disaster was that an official inquest was recorded in the press. *The Inspector was clearly of the opinion that the failure was brought about owing to an error of judgement on the part of the contractor in allowing the crane to be placed directly of the crown of arch 10 which was not supported backed up in the haunches and assisted by the mortar not being sufficiently set* followed by the failure of the arches to the north; others were saved by struts have been placed after the failure of another arch; others were saved. The inspector said that two of the lives were lost after the fall of arch no 9, *“the men presumably engaged in rescue work – the men should not have been allowed to pass under the arch.*



Edward's Unmarked Grave near Hurcombe [19-12-24]

His funeral took place on 21 Nov 1903. *“Hearses from Winchcombe were met by relatives and friends coffin polished oak with brass furniture; a breast plate with basic information and a beautiful wreath with deepest sympathy from Messrs Scott and Middleton, the contractors who announced at the inquests that “they intended to compensate all that had suffered by the accident.”* [The contractors actually paid for all the funerals of all the deceased. All were well attended, mainly by fellow labourers from the temporary railway hut villages at Didbrook and Toddington station yard as well as their respective families.]

At the funeral *“there was also a wreath from his widow and children.”* The funeral was presided over by Rev. Davies of Tewkesbury Congregational Church, Barton Street. **His grave today is unmarked** and just a grass space as there was evidently no money – from his poor family or from the contractor – to purchase a grave plot nor a headstone unlike that of the Hurcombe family nearby.

The newspaper also revealed details of his wife and family: she was **Emily Edwards of Double Alley 1 High Street** [not a precise address] who identified his body in body in the infirmary of *Winchcombe Workhouse* and was interviewed by the coroner. **She saw him alive on Monday November 9th at 3 o'clock [3 a.m.]; “he then left home to proceed to [walk to] his work on the new railway at Stanway in course of construction** [it is a distance of 18.1 miles by car]; he was healthy: *“he did not know his own strength”*; she was told of his death on the Saturday morning: *“he had gone”*, she confirmed. No further question was asked but she added that **she had “nine children; 6 of them dependent on her”**. I cannot corroborate this from census records before or afterwards – in addition births are recorded but not the mother’s names until 1911. According to burial records of the Borough Cemetery, he was buried alone, as **William Edwards, in Cemetery Section B grave no. 500.**

I wish we could learn of the fate of this family and whether compensation was paid
By John Dixon, President of THS assisted by Sam Edle, Chairman & Wendy Snarey

Sources

Funeral 21 Nov 1903 [*Tewkesbury Register*] & **Ian Crowder, publicity officer, GWSR**
 Inquest Gloucestershire Echo 07 January 1904 & Cheltenham
 We are indebted to **Phil Mayall**, Cemetery Sacristan for finding Mr. Edward’s unmarked grave

Ian Crowder adds:

So, in total, four died and six were injured. However, contemporary reports mention seven as being injured (other reports mention 8, 10 or 'several') but given there is no name for the seventh, presumably his injuries (and the injuries of others) were not sufficiently serious to be recorded.

The viaduct is described as being constructed of 'blue brindled' red bricks and this was picked up in the inquest where various expert witnesses confirmed that this type of brick was commonly used for the construction of such structures. At 8.15 on the morning of Friday 13th November 1903, no.10 arch, which had been completed the previous week, collapsed without warning. The cause is described as one of the rings of the first arch beginning to 'slip' in the wet weather which was not noticed, the collapse happening as the timber false arch and other materials were being removed by the 14-ton steam crane positioned above the arch, previous ones having successfully been removed. Shortly afterwards, arch 9 then collapsed, burying the unfortunate crane driver (John Smith), followed 40 minutes later by Arch 8. The weather had been dreadful for some while, and the area was described as 'being like a swamp'. The number of casualties could have been much greater as several navvies slept overnight under the arches but had gone to work by 8am. Similarly, there was a usually a breakfast break at 8.30am, which was taken under shelter of the arches, but the collapse happened just before they assembled.

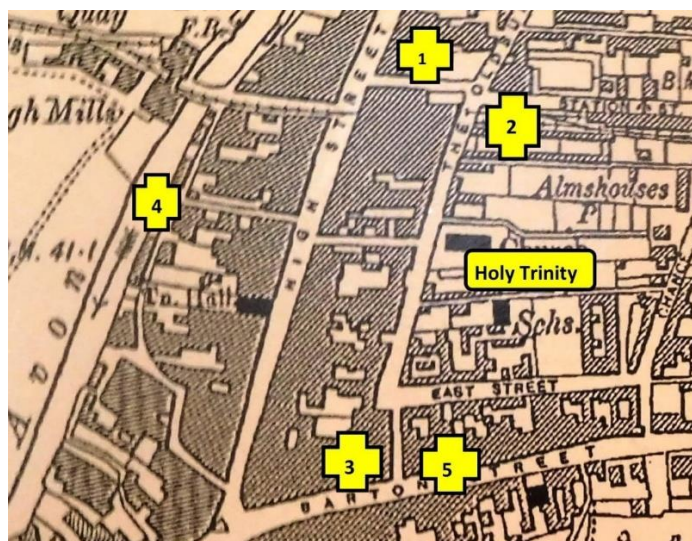
The next day a fourth arch collapsed but without injuring workers.

The collapse not unnaturally generated a lot of public interest and on the Saturday a large crowd gathered at the viaduct and the police were needed to constrain them, which was just as well, as while the crowd was watching, arch 7 collapsed without warning and arch 6 cracked (but was later demolished before being rebuilt). The piers were checked after the collapses and all remained sound and true, so they were not rebuilt.

Suffice to say, the viaduct had stood proudly and safely ever since the line fully opened in 1906, carrying ever heavier trains. After the recent repairs, doubtless it will remain for future generations to enjoy.

The Fate of the Family

name	rank	born	bap	place	died	1911	1921
George	1	1880	1880-12-19	Holy Trinity	not found [en 2]	not found	
Richard William	2	1882	1882-03-05		1949	Navy Registers	Coal Coke Lab.
Ellen Louisa	3	1883-Dec	1884-03-31	1] Double Alley	not found	not found	
Mary Marion	4	1884-Sept		Cheltenham?	not found	not found	
Emily Jane	5	1886	1886-10-23	2] Spring Gardens	dec 1887	not found	
Constance Amelia	6	1887-Sep		5] 1881 Hayes Ct	not found	not found	
Albert William	7	1889-Dec	x	aged 0	1889-dec	not found	
Emma Wright	8	1897 May		3] Alexandra Place	1897 Sept	not found	
Susan Jane	9	1897-June		Alexandra Place	1969	14 Tybridge Street	
[Henry] Joseph	10	1897-july-27	private Abbey	Alexandra Place	not found	not found	
Elizabeth Tyne	11	1900	not found	Aston, Warwick	1976	14 Tybridge Street	Labeller Wrapper boarder
Henry [Harry]	12	1902	Tewkes 6a/458	Tewkesbury	not found	14 Tybridge Street	



Edward's Family Homes 1880-1903
 [4= Back of Avon in 1891]

The widow was born **Emily Amelia Griffiths in Twynning in 1880**, daughter of a labourer. Interestingly, she could not sign her name but her husband, a labourer, could when they married in the village on 5 Dec. 1880.

The widow at the inquest stated that they had “*nine children; 6 of them dependent on her*”. I have followed this up and can record that they may have had 12 children but two had officially died but they are unrecorded in the cemetery. In the 1921 census one daughter was living with her second husband but she had been born to the correctly recorded mother in **Aston, Birmingham [Warwickshire]** in 1898.[en1]

The family according to the censuses lived a peripatetic life in Tewkesbury [but may have sought work in other places in the gaps]. [en3] Their first son was born promptly after marriage in Twynning but baptised *at Holy Trinity* when, according to the 1881 census, they were living in **Hayes Court**, 33 Barton Street. The second son **Richard Willam** of 1882 has a life that can be followed until his death in 1949. The next child was born in **Double Alley** in 1883 followed by the 4th born in **Spring Gardens** in 1884, but she died aged less than 2 in 1886: she may have been buried but the data is unreliable. Another daughter followed in 1887, then a son in 1889 named after the father but died quickly. [en4]

Their procreation then took an interesting pause until 1897 when Emily may have given birth to triplets: a daughter was born in **Alexandra Court** but died and was buried in the cemetery; **Susan Jane** was baptized with her and her life can be followed until her death in 1969 and **Joseph** which received a **Private Baptism in the Abbey** on 27 July [en5] – and then vanished from the records.

The mystery daughter, **Elizabeth Tyne**, born in Aston in 1898 followed: was she fostered and lived there until she was found with her mother in 1911? I did manage to follow her life to her death in 1976.

The 12th and last child, **Henry**, arrived in 1902 and he was living with his widowed mother in 1911.

According to his mother at the inquest, they were living in 1903 in Double Alley, but exhausted checks cannot confirm that. [en6]

It was stated that the family provided an apparently “*lavish wreath and coffin*”, but this was actually provided by the contractors. The victim’s grave could not be found in the cemetery with a headstone provided by the ‘generosity’ of the Contractors - and we know nothing about the effect of any compensation paid.

Wendy managed to find that Emily the widow remarried in 1907 to **John Stephens Clarke**. In 1911 he was a local man and a general labourer born in 1858 and, as he had been married before, he brought 2 children to the composite family who were living at **2, Court 2 House 14 Tybridge Street Worcester**. **Emily** brought with her three children: **Susan** aged 14, a Domestic servant, **Harry** aged 9 – and the surprise in **Elizabeth Tyne** who was aged 13 and born in Aston, Birmingham.

In 1921 they inhabited the same home: Emily still had no occupation, but John was a labourer *for Ward & Co Broad St Hot Cold-Water Engineers*; **Susan and Elizabeth** had moved out, the latter being a *boarder* in the same city, working as a *Labeller Wrapper*. One of Emily’s stepsons interested me as **Albert**, aged 20 and

living in Worcester was a “**Labourer Fisherman Trawler for Grimsby Fish Co, - Out of Work**”. Grimsby was my hometown, and the docks suffered hardship in the Great Depression, as did my own grandfather, a dock labourer, who only gained temporary work from 1926-1939 when the *butter boat* from Denmark arrived.

Emily died in 1928, aged 68, still in Worcester – I could find no record of a will.

Not knowing Worcester at all, I was curious about the family home **Tybridge Street, WR2 5BA**. On line I found a photo of the area in 1931 with a *description: Rear of Houses in No.5 Court off Tybridge Street. This row of 7 houses may have faced onto School Walk. St Clements church in the background. Photo facing NW*



*from Tybridge Street. Part of school (or possibly) Parish Hall is also visible House Numbers L to R: Nos. 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 & 1. The building on the immediate left is the **Cock Inn**. Their house no. 14 was not mentioned. Today it is believed to be the site of a public Car Park.*

Their daughter, **Susan**, had a productive marriage to a Pershore Basket maker, with six children before war broke out, she died in 1969 still in Worcester.

The mystery daughter, **Elizabeth Tyne**, married in 1931 and had possibly two children by 1939. Her husband was a *Lime Yard Jobber - Leather Factory*, while she was a *charwoman*. She died in 1976 but the official record either deepens - or lessens - her surprise as it stated she was still known as **Tyne**, but had been born, not in 1897 but on **18 December 1900** and was, thus, nearly 3 when her father had been killed.

One other child of Albert and Emily has been traced – but there is a bit of uncertainty about him - **Richard William**, born in 1882. In 1911 he was serving in the *Navy* but, in World War I, he may have transferred to the *Army* [as many sailors did]. If so, he had risen to be a **Battery Quarter Master Sergeant, in the Royal Field Artillery** and was awarded these honours: **Mentioned in Despatches, Meritorious Service Medals and Territorial Force Efficiency Medals**. In 1921 we find him married to a Nottinghamshire girl with one child living in Birmingham as a **Coal Coke & Iron Leader, J C Abbott Lloyds Bank Chambers**. He had been married in Nottinghamshire in 1910, which is strange if he served in the Navy in 1911, but he could have still served in the Army in the War. In 1939, still living in Nottinghamshire with his wife, his occupation *was Sweep Retired Disabled* – was that a result of the war? He then died there in 1949 aged 67.

Thus ends the history of **Albert William Edwards**, our locally born victim of the **Stanway Railway Disaster**. His life as an unskilled labourer seems to have been precarious with so many moves around rented homes in the poor alleys of Tewkesbury. The absence of children in the 1890s suggests that he might have been travelling elsewhere – he did have a daughter born in Aston Birmingham but who had returned to live with her mother by 1911 after her second marriage in 1907 in Worcester. She had been christened with the name **Tyne** with the rumour that he, at least, had moved to Newcastle in the years before his tragic death. At the inquest his wife confirmed that they had a large family of children whom we have traced but we have no proof that they were living in the infamous **Double Alley** at the time of his death. His wife’s testimony is valuable in that it shows that, at least on that one day, **he had walked to Stanway for his work leaving at 3 a.m.** His family was promised compensation, but we did not know if it was fulfilled - and we know that his family could not afford to bury him in our Cemetery with a headstone.

His widow did marry again in Worcester in 1907 and brought up a composite family including some of Albert's children. His widow had no more children with her second husband. They stayed in the house until at least 1921 - but it seems to have been of a similar standard to the houses they had inhabited in Tewkesbury.

We have been able to follow the fortune of some of his children into the post-WWII period and we know he had several grandchildren to keep on his name and memory. **Except for the tragic reason of his tragic death, we would not have taken much interest in his life.**

Sources

En1: The birth certificate will need checking

En 2: **"Not found"**: I have most diligently tried to check the deaths online via *FREEBMD, FindMyPast, Cemetery Burial Records and those of Holy Trinity and the Congregational Church to no avail.*

En3: the Aston daughter had a second Name *Tyne*. I first tackled this topic in Covid Lockdown but lost the reference in which I did read that they had lived in Newcastle-upon-Tyne for a short time seeking work – but I cannot now verify that.

En4: **Burial**: Stillborn babies were typically buried in a communal grave with other babies or with an adult female. Shared graves are not usually marked, but they do have a plot number and can be found on a cemetery plan. Stillbirths were not registered because the stillborn child was not considered to have a legal existence.

En 5: discovered by **Wendy Snarey**. Abbey Archivist, **Pat Webley**, has confirmed the baptism from Abbey Records: *"The usual reason for a private baptism was that the baby was expected to die very shortly"*. However, I can find no official record of his death – or his ensuing life.

En 6: Wendy had done a study of *Double Alley*, and I checked each original record in the 1901 census for the Alley on *FindmyPast* and cannot find them in 1901.