

LANDSLIP AT NOTTINGHAM ROAD CEMETERY

If you have lived in Chaddesden for any length of time, it's almost certain that someone will have asked you the question: "When exactly did the wall of Nottingham Road Cemetery collapse?" Many people will tell you that this event took place in 1922, others are equally certain that it occurred sometime in 1923, or then again maybe 1924. Now, at long last here is the answer.

Had you been passing by the cemetery on your way to work in Derby early in the morning of Friday 14 March 1924, you might well have been expecting to see the familiar traffic chaos caused by an assortment of trams, lorries, horses and carts, cars and bicycles all trying to jostle their way along the narrow and inadequate road. What you most certainly would not have anticipated was the sight of a considerable landslip which had exposed coffins in the cemetery and carried others down to road level, scattering some bones about in the process!

This gruesome spectacle was an unforeseen consequence of Derby Corporation's latest road-improvement scheme, for in an effort to widen the road and provide a much-needed pavement on its south side (roughly between the Cemetery Gatehouse and Mason's Paint Works) workmen were systematically removing countless tons of soil from the cemetery perimeter and installing new banking. Unfortunately, just before 9:00 a.m. on this particular morning an area of ground in the cemetery became unstable and tons of earth slipped down into the road below. This must have been rather dangerous, for Nottingham Road cuts deeply into the surrounding land hereabouts and the variation between surface levels in the cemetery and the road is quite significant in places.

Commenting on the incident, that day's edition of the *Derby Daily Telegraph* noted that tarpaulin sheeting had been placed over the affected area by the afternoon. The paper's reporter interviewed someone thought to be the works foreman, who said that falls of this kind were fairly common, but then a correction was printed a few days later when Mr. W. Allsebrook, who was actually in charge of the men, wrote in denying he had made these comments since he was far too busy getting the site cleared, and added that "these things are quite unforeseen." At the next meeting of Derby Town Council in early April 1924, Councillor Frank Porter asked "If it was a fact that coffins and bones had been exposed to public view by a fall of earth on Nottingham Road at the cemetery?", and demanded to know what steps were being taken to rectify the situation. In reply, Alderman Fletcher confirmed that "this had unfortunately happened, but relatives had been consulted, and were satisfied that everything possible had been done under the circumstances."

It is worth emphasising that a landslip rather than a collapsed wall seemingly caused the problem. Today's users of Nottingham Road are, of course, familiar with the massive retaining wall on Cemetery Hill, but back in 1924 the boundary between cemetery and road was apparently marked by a steep (but not vertical) earthen slope terminating at a stone wall bordering the road. In passing, it is interesting to note that the Cemeteries & Garden Allotments Committee of Derby Town Council had previously given permission to tip material excavated in connection with the road widening onto land it had purchased for an extension of the Cemetery down by the Derby Canal.

Some further details about the unfortunate events of 14 March 1924 can be gleaned by examining the pages of the *Derby Evening Telegraph* between November 1983 and January 1984 and also just a few years ago in December 2008, when readers' enquiries prompted others to write in with their recollections. As regards the suggested dates, 1922 and 1923 were the most popular years, although one person thought the fall of earth took place as late as 1931 – in fairness this probably related to another, later incident. Two people confirmed that a landslip rather than the collapse of a wall had caused the problem, and one remembered the authorities placing naphtha flares around the site at night-time to warn approaching vehicles of the hazard. By far the most detailed correspondent, and the one who came closest to specifying the precise date, was a lady by the name of Miss Annie Benson Pollard, from Bournemouth, who once lived at Boundary House on the south side of Nottingham Road (Fig. 1).

The Pollards' family property, Boundary House, situated just across the road from the present number 335, was aptly named because it had been built astride the parish boundary – half in Chaddesden and half in St. Alkmund's, Derby – and fixed to the house wall alongside Nottingham Road was an iron plate recording this fact. Miss Pollard recalled that in 1924, Derby Corporation began to widen Nottingham Road and during the removal of countless thousands of tons of earth the collapse occurred, which “disturbed some coffins”. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I assume that the landslip was fairly near to her cottage, which stood some feet below the level of the adjacent cemetery. Judging by the census returns the Pollard family had resided hereabouts for many years. In 1901 they were apparently living on the north side of Nottingham Road but then moved into Boundary House some time prior to 1911. I always imagined this property as a tiny cottage, but thanks to a new question on the 1911 census form requiring householders to indicate the number of rooms (including the kitchen but excluding the bathroom) in their home, it seems that Boundary House was evidently a reasonable size for it possessed six rooms in total. Sadly, Miss Pollard said that the 1924 road improvement scheme also involved the demolition of Boundary House, so before long the family left their old home, which the workmen quickly reduced to nothing more than a heap of rubble.



Fig. 1: Looking down Nottingham Road towards Derby sometime around 1910, Boundary House is the first property on the left.

Boundary House on Nottingham Road not only marked the division between Chaddesden and St. Alkmund's parishes, but also represented the point at which county met town, since Chaddesden was then firmly rooted in the county whereas St. Alkmund's Parish was very much part of the borough and town of Derby. This subtle distinction was given especial prominence from time to time, such as in 1861 when the inhabitants of Boundary House were able to watch a colourful civic procession taking place right on their very doorstep.

The occasion was the ceremonial opening of the commission for the Derbyshire Summer Assizes – a major judicial event but one with definite society overtones. Mr. W. T. Cox was the newly-appointed High Sheriff of Derbyshire and after he and a “numerous and influential company of ladies and gentlemen” had breakfasted at his home, Spondon Hall, on 25 July 1861, he boarded his carriage and at 11 o'clock began to proceed along Nottingham Road towards Derby, accompanied by a long line of horsemen and private carriages. At about the same time, members of Derby Corporation and various officials set out from the Town Hall to meet him. The order of their procession was: The Corporation Banner – The Head Constable of the Borough – The Deputy Chief Constable of the County – Members of the Police – The Mayor's Banner – Two Trumpeters – The Town Crier – Six Halberdiers – Sergeants at Mace – Members of the Corporation, Town Clerk and other officers in their carriages – The High Sheriff's Banner.

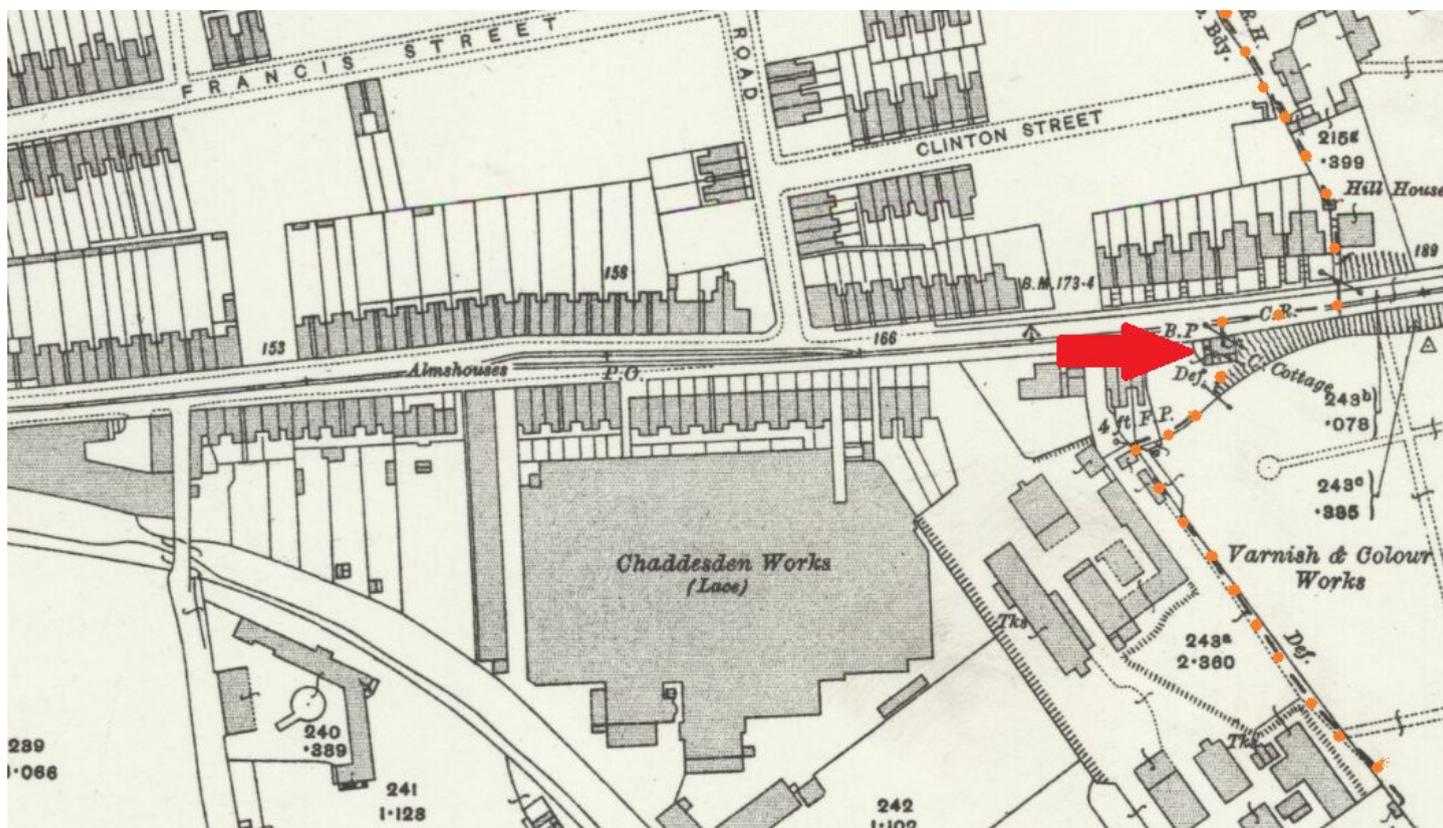


Fig. 2: Ordnance Survey map of Nottingham Road in 1914. The parish boundary of Chaddesden (marked by orange dots) passed right through the middle of Boundary House (arrowed). The landslip took place somewhere to the right of the house. Map reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

By arrangement, both processions met at Boundary House on Nottingham Road (Fig. 2), where the Borough convoy adroitly performed an elaborate about-turn before escorting the High Sheriff's carriage back into Derby and then up to the Railway Station in order to meet Mr. Justice Willes, one of the Assize Judges. Shortly before 1:00 p.m. the Judge arrived on the train from Lincoln, whereupon he took his place in the High Sheriff's carriage and the procession, now swollen by even more people both mounted and on foot, headed off to County Hall in St. Mary's Gate, passing crowds of people who had turned out to watch this colourful spectacle. Once at County Hall, the Judge formally opened the Assize commission, after which he first attended a service at All Saints' Church and then the High Sheriff's grand dinner at the Royal Hotel. While all these official ceremonies were taking place we can be sure that back in the neighbourhood of Boundary House people were still talking about the grand turn-out they had witnessed earlier in the day. Nowadays, of course, Boundary House is just a distant memory and all that remains to mark its site is a small patch of grass adjacent to a car-park inside Mason's Place Business Park.