The 'Great Flood' 1872

The River Medlock rises in the hills above Oldham and empties into the River Irwell in central Manchester.

Throughout its history, the Medlock has been famous for bursting its banks and flooding parts of the city. During one event, 13th July 1872, it rose suddenly after two days of torrential rain to disastrous ends, as this contemporary account from a Manchester newspaper describes:

"It was about half past twelve when the floods came ... the banks of the Medlock were overflowed to such an alarming extent and the first intimation of the flood was the sweeping away of a footbridge near to Philips Park ... It must have been very strongly fixed, for it not only bore the rush of the flood for a considerable time, but it resisted it to such an extent that the water backed up for a considerable distance. The flood increased in depth and power, and at a length swept in a fierce torrent over a large portion of ground apportioned to the Roman Catholics at the Bradford Cemetery carrying away not only tombstones but actually washing out of their graves, a large number of dead bodies. Indeed from the first indication of danger, so far as works on the banks of the Medlock were concerned, dead bodies were observed floating down the river, and those watching could easily see that the bodies had been disinterred out of the Bradford cemetery. It is impossible to calculate how many had been swept out of their final resting place but the number is not short of fifty."  
(source: Manchester Courier, 15 July 1872)

Afterwards there were rumors that as many as five hundred bodies had been swept away, with large numbers lost at sea. At a Government Enquiry, Manchester's Town Clerk stated that the total number of bodies disinterred by was seventy six, and that all had been recovered - however the local Roman Catholic Ministers strongly refuted this claim.

In response to the flooding, work began on the red terracotta-brick channel, which has since carried the river between the park and adjoining cemetery.
A song written and published at the time, entitled 'The Great Flood', describes the event as "one of the most destructive floods ever known in this part out of the country". You can download a copy of the song in our downloads section.

**Song poster supplied by Manchester of Science and Industry.**

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**THE GREAT FLOOD**

**IN MANCHESTER AND SURROUNDING DISTRICTS.**

Which occurred on

**SATURDAY, JULY 13th, 1872,**

And said to be one of the most destructive Floods ever known in this part of the country.

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THE thunder rolled, the lightning flashed,
The rain came pouring down,
And soon the rivers all were swollen
In country and in town.

On, on the turbid water rushed,
Each moment gaining force,
Carrying everything along
Which lay within its course.

Men gazed in awe!
What could they do
To stop destruction's hand?
Alas, when God His power displays
Man cannot Him withstand.

Soon far and wide the water spread,
And houses were cast down;
Chairs, tables, beds, and other things
Into the stream were thrown.

Large mills were stopped, machines destroyed,
And goods of every sort,
Were by the water tossed about,
As though in savage sport.

Pigs, sheep, and cattle, in their turns,
Were quickly swept away;
And farmers saw the cruel stream
Destroy their new mown hay.

Sad, sad indeed must be the lot
Of those whose all have gone;
Today much riches they possess,
Tomorrow they have none.

Still on the mighty water came,
Where lay the silent dead,
And soon, alas! the suffers were
Uplifted from their bed.

And ghastly forms were now beheld
Huddling quickly by;
Brave men stood awe-struck at the sight,
And women missed a cry.

Soon every effort was put forth
To stop them in their course;
Men drew the bodies on the bank,
And then the scene was worse.

Ghastly forms of old and young
Lay open to our view;
God grant that such appalling sights
May never be seen by you!

Of all the bodies washed away
Some sixty have been found;
And now each one has been re-laid
Beneath the sacred ground.

Long as we live we'll ne'er forget
That awful Saturday,
When from the ground near Philips Park
Were bodies washed away.

Nor yet unmindful would we be
Of those who suffered loss,
But grateful that from harm we're free,
Help them to bear their cross.

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1872 13 July – The most disastrous flood which ever visited Manchester

- The rainfall of the previous week was enormous and the rain which fell on 12th & 13th was equal to the rainfall of an ordinary month
- The Irwell rose many yards above its ordinary level
- Parts of Peel Park and the racecourse were flooded
- The Medlock was most disastrous – water began to rise at 11am
- The fields were covered at Medlock Vale, 3 miles beyond Bradford-cum-Beswick and 2 bridges were washed away.
- At Taylor and Boyd’s calico printworks at Clayton Bridge the river rose 12 ft. above its normal
- A weir at Lord’s brook was washed down and roads were impassable.
- Several tons of earth was washed onto the Lancashire and Yorkshire railway near Clayton Bridge station.
- Wood and Wright’s Clayton Vale printworks were devastated – 2 bridges were destroyed, a weir partially washed away and goods and machinery were carried away with the water.
- When the flood reached Manchester City Cemetery near the Philips Park, Bradford it had grown in volume and power. At noon it broke through a stone wall and rushed towards the RC section of the graveyard. Coffins were washed out of the earth and broke up – the corpses were swept down the stream. It is not known how many bodies were disturbed but more than 50 bodies were recovered.
- The water reached Fairfield St. where it flooded the houses of the poorer people.
- In a densely populated area of Ancoats the water rose to the bedrooms and rafts had to be used to rescue the inhabitants.
- In some factories the water level rose to 15 ft.
- The water accumulated at the junction of the Medlock and Irwell. It passed over into the Bridgewater canal and flooded the wharves. Two barges laden with coal were lifted from the canal and when the water subsided they were left on the wharf near one of the goods warehouses.
- Only 1 life was lost.

Following the flood:
1889 Work started on Manchester’s first main drainage scheme.
1911 Work started on Manchester’s second main drainage scheme.