

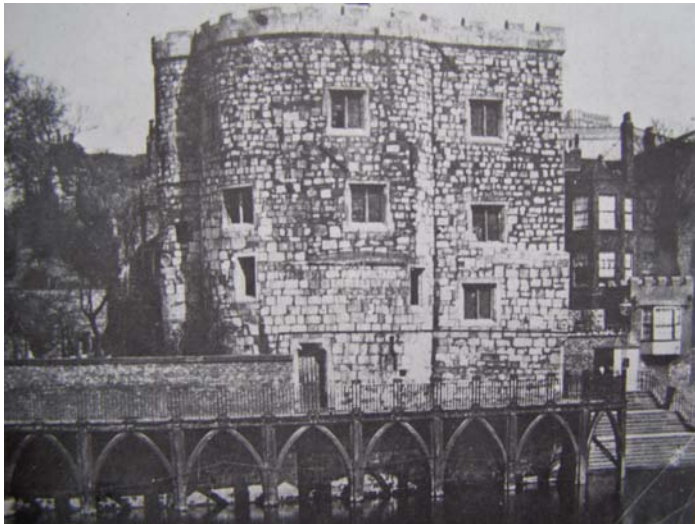
JOHN LEEMAN: AN ELUSIVE HERO

by Craig Barclay

Locally-won medals represent a tempting prize for many collectors and the appearance on the market recently of a Royal Humane Society bronze medal with a York provenance proved irresistibly enticing. The medal came accompanied by a copy of the Society's *Case Book* record which gave basic details of the incident and those involved.

Committee meeting: 19th January 1859
Held at: 3 Trafalgar Square, Charing Cross
Chairman: Benjamin Hawes Esq. HM
Case no.: 16,270
Salvor: John Leeming, Boatman, Lendal ferry, York.
Saved: George Rutland (77), 27 Bootham Row, York.
Time/Place: 28th December 1858, River Ouse, York.
Summary: Rutland accidentally fell into the water. Leeming jumped from his boat into the river and rescued him. SAVED taken to Lendal Tower, York.
Award: Bronze Medal
Case submitted by: A. Sanderson Esq., Lendal Tower, York

The location of the rescue was clearly identified, the reference to the Lendal Tower (a medieval edifice which housed the headquarters of the York New Waterworks Company) and reference to the rescuer's job as Lendal Ferryman tying the site down to a stretch of river in central York which flows between the city centre and the railway station.

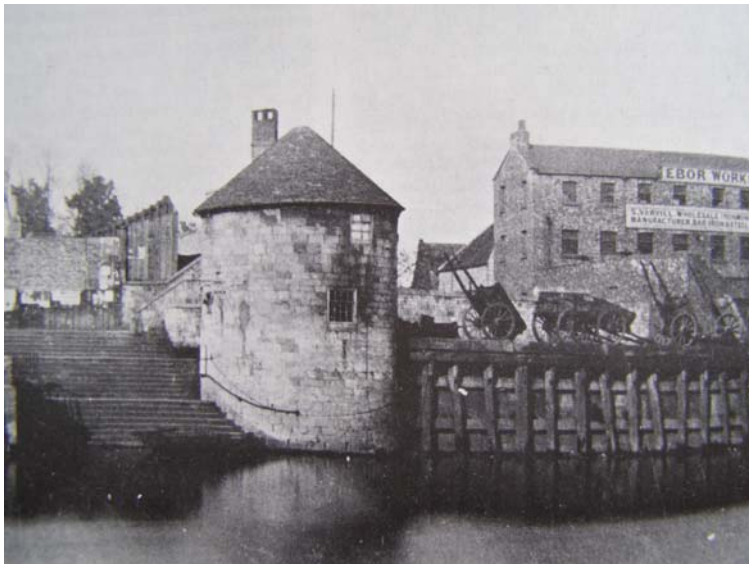


Lendal Tower

An initial search for any trace of the existence of the ferryman John Leeming unfortunately proved fruitless, and the incident for which he was rewarded passed unnoticed in the pages of the local press. All was not lost however. The name of Leeman is well known in York, the railway entrepreneur and politician George Leeman having served as both Lord Mayor and MP for the city. On a hunch, a search was made for the name John Leeman in York City Archives. This proved that 'Leeming' was a misspelling for Leeman and revealed many details of the brave ferryman's life.

John Leeman was born in York in about 1809 and married Dorothy (nee Littlewood) on 17 February 1830. Dorothy bore seven children who survived into adulthood: Mary (born 1831); Thomas (born 1833); William (born 1837); Henry (born 1841); Elizabeth (born c. 1844); James (born c. 1847); and James (born 1849). An eighth child, named Henry, had been born on 6 October 1835 but died a few months later. At the time of the 1861 census John Leeman was sharing his home, Ferry Boat House in North Street, with Dorothy, six of his children, a son-in-law and his eight-month old granddaughter.

York City Archives record that in 1831 John Leeman (who also spent some time in the Royal Navy) was working as a waterman; but it was as the Lendal ferryman that he established himself as a vital member of the city's community, conveying its citizens across the river Ouse between Lendal Tower and Barker Tower.

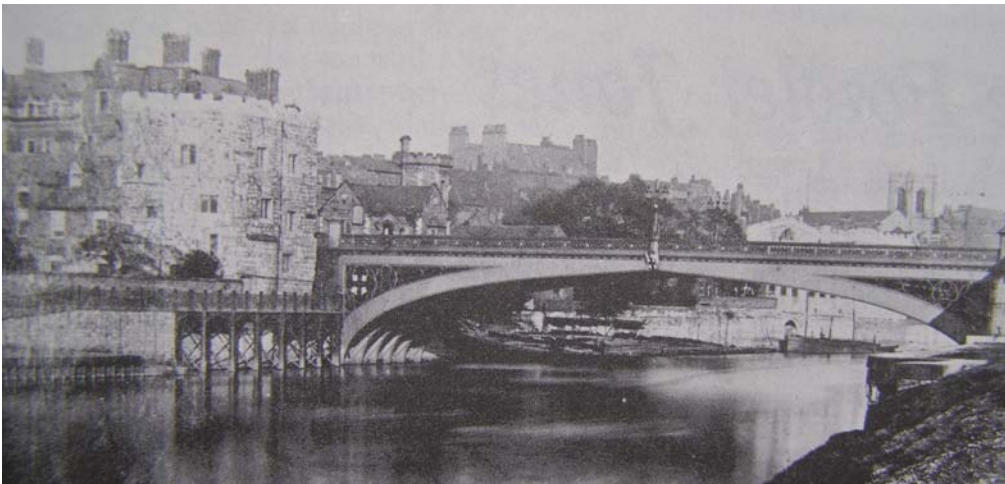


Barker Tower



The Lendal Ferry

In 1860 however his livelihood was placed at risk by the announcement of plans to build a new bridge across the river Ouse on the site of his ferry. Fortunately, he had clearly made a very positive impression on his passengers and when the plans for the new bridge were announced a subscription in his favour was started with the support of the *Yorkshire Gazette* and *York Herald*. The fundraising drive was announced in the *Gazette* on 6 October 1860, with a further report on 18 May 1861 announcing that the testimonial would be presented once work on the new bridge was completed.



The new bridge

Ultimately John Leeman was to receive a total of £40 13s 7d, a report published in the *Yorkshire Gazette* on 16 May 1863 recording:

“THE LEEMAN TESTIMONIAL

On Wednesday last at noon, several of the subscribers to the testimonial to be presented to John Leeman (who was engaged for many years as ferryman over the River Ouse at Lendal), met together in the Guildhall of this city for the purpose of discussing the form in which the testimonial should be presented...

The number of subscribers reached nearly 150, showing that Leeman bore the character of a well-conducted man, and was respected for his courtesy as a ferryman, and the courage he had several times displayed in saving lives... A conversation then ensued as to the best method of disposing of this money, when it was stated that when Leeman was thrown out of work in consequence of the new bridge being opened for traffic he had procured a horse and cart and had commenced coal dealing. That horse and cart was not yet paid for, and the meeting ultimately determined that the balance above mentioned should be applied to the liquidation of the debt, and the remainder set apart for his assistance in the carrying on of his trade.

Leeman was called into the room, and the chairman, in suitable terms, presented him in the name of the subscribers with the money. He... also trusted that the subscribers to the testimonial would still endeavour to assist Leeman by giving him employment in his new vocation. Leeman returned his thanks for the benefit he received from the testimonial and he at once made use of the money by paying for his horse and cart (£25) in the presence of the meeting. He agreed to show the receipts for the manner in which spent the remainder of the money to E. Swaine Esq., the treasurer.’

Leeman was to live on until 1888, dying at Toft Green in York at the age of 79 on 3 May 1888. Although he had spent his final years working as a labourer, he was sufficiently well remembered to earn a brief obituary in the *Yorkshire Gazette* of 12 May, being described as ‘late ferryman, Lendal Ferry.’

John Leeman was laid to rest in York Cemetery on 7 May 1888 (grave 11326).

His medal - misnamed though it may be - serves as a poignant additional memorial to the life and deeds of an 'everyday hero'.



Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his thanks to the staff of York City Archives and the Local History Section of York City Library.
