

## FAST TRACK JUSTICE FOR A HIGH FLIER.

BY JOHN LYES

Fast track justice is to be introduced in the near future but our twenty-first century administrators would find it difficult to match the speed with which their Edwardian predecessors brought offenders before the Bristol justices.

An example occurred in 1902 in the case of 'Professor' William Finney, a noted high diver, whose brother and sister were well known tank performers and had appeared at the Bristol Music Halls. During the weekend proceeding Monday 15 September it was rumoured in the city that Finney was planning to launch himself from the Suspension Bridge into the River Avon, a height of some 250 feet. High tide was due at 5.24 am at which time the depth of the river was said to be 27 feet. Consequently a couple of hundred people had assembled on the roadways on either side of the river and a small boat was manoeuvring underneath the bridge, no doubt intending to fish the professor out of the river after he had completed his feat.

The rumours had also reached the ears of the constabulary and the *Bristol Mercury*, whose intrepid reporter had left his bed at an early hour and was lurking in the vicinity of the bridge; this account is based on his report. At 5.45 Finney, who was wearing a chest protector, was standing on the bridge with three companions, and a few minutes later he climbed on to the chains in the middle of the bridge intending to spring over the footpath and the parapet in one leap. No sooner had he started to climb however than Detective Slade appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and the following conversation ensued:

**Detective:** 'Hullo! What are you going to do, Mr. Finney?'

**Finney:** 'Nothing. I wish you'd leave me alone for ten minutes.'

**Detective:** 'Well you had better come with me.'

And so Finney went along with the constable and left the bridge, but not without an objection from the toll taker; Finney had not thought it necessary to take a return ticket and the official took the view that he should purchase another one. He was taken to Brandon Hill Police Station and informed by Inspector Robertson that he would be charged with attempting to commit suicide. He did not appear too troubled by this development, his main concern being for his 'pals' who had turned out of their beds at an untimely hour only to be disappointed.

Later the same morning the professor appeared in the Police Court before Messrs. Howell Davies and E.B. Colthurst. On the sheet the charge had originally been 'attempting to commit suicide' but the clerk had amended it and when read over it was found to be one of 'wandering about on the Suspension Bridge and being there for an unlawful purpose'. The defendant made no audible reply and the detective gave his account of the morning's activities, adding that the professor smelt strongly of whisky. Finney denied being intoxicated although he did admit that he had taken a drop of brandy before going on to the bridge. He told the bench that he was a

professional high diver and had dived from Tower Bridge into the Thames but conceded that he would not repeat his attempt to dive from the Suspension Bridge.

The magistrates decided to bind him over on his own undertaking but Superintendent Croker requested an additional surety in the sum of £10 to ensure that he would be of good behaviour for six months. He told the bench that in all his experience no man who had jumped from the bridge had survived and that he had no doubt that some betting men had had something to do with the affair. Later in the day a person willing to act as surety was found and Finney was liberated.