

Recollections of the canals

I have been looking at a number of sources and thought readers might enjoy a selection of some of the materials I've found .

Waterways World in January 2001 included a piece by Brian Vaughton. In it he reflects on meeting Joe and Rose Skinner, Number Ones, last of the traditional owner/boat people as part of his collection of material travelling the Midlands for a radio-documentary 'to mark the passing of a way of life on the waterways' in 1961(Waterways World January 2001 : 41)

As part of this piece Rose Skinner recalls life aboard with an interesting insight into the very specific differences between the lives of women and men working on the canals.

'My mother, of course, was like other boat ladies. She used to work going along and then, when you was stopped, you'd got to do the working, and she used to have to do the cooking going along. Well, they worked really harder than what the men do boating, you know; 'cause the women have got a certain amount of work to do when they tie up. Of course, the man used to go off and look after the horses and then be off and have him a pint! (cited in Vaughton 2001 :42).

In South Wales we did not have the culture of families who lived aboard like the Skinners but we have some interesting insights over the years about how the canals were seen and used. Often the canals provided spectacle and Mary Powell's memories of the canal quoted in Memories of the Glamorgan canal by Elis Owen and cited on page 36 in Evans D (1996) Wales in Industrial Britain c1760-1914, Hodder and Stoughton provide a good example.

We used to sit on the bridge and watch the barges pass pulled by horses...The most exciting time was when there was a storm and the lock-keeper had to put planks across the canal to avoid a flood. One section....near Hawthorn was very prone to flooding.

In the same book by Evans (1996) I found 2 verses from a ballad written about the Neath Junction canal, by Elizabeth Davies who ran a lollipop shop in Swansea (Evans 1996 :37) and obviously saw the canals as part of local culture.

*O! Could I make verses with humour
and wit,
George Tennant, Esquire's great genius
to fit;
From morn until even, I would sit down
and tell,
And sing the praise of the Neath
Junction Canal.*

*Now this will improve the trade of the
place,
I hope that the business will daily*

*increase;
All sorts of provisions we shall have to
sell,
Convey'd us in boats by Neath Junction
Canal.*

My research at the West Glamorgan Archive allowed an opportunity to hear a number of interviews. A favourite tape was that of George Saunders recollections of the Tennant Canal when he would walk to Jersey marine and watch the barges. He also remembered Sunday School trips out in the open on the horse drawn barges. He referred to the area '*as paradise because of the wildlife in evidence- he would see otters, and collect plover's eggs*'. He particularly recalled an incident when he saw a swan and otter fighting, in around 1929 when he was 13 years old. (TH05 Peter Davis interviewer.)

Another strongly visual recollection is that of David John Nathaniel born in 1894 in Swansea worked on the Swansea canal remembers the canal freezing so hard, that 3 horses were sent to try and break the ice. (TH23 recorded on 30/10 and 23/12/1975).

DJ Dixon recalls the church as the focus for all social life. There were regular fetes and trips along the canal, when old wooden boats were cleaned and dressed with bunting. The horses pulled the barges and often 'fell in the cut' with 40-60 people on board each of the 3-4 boats.. Often men would accompany their children by walking alongside the canal on the towpath and children would be dragging their hats along the top of the water (West Glamorgan Archive Interview TH25 conducted on 11/3/76).

When asked about Sunday school outings, David John Nathaniel recalls one Whitsun Monday when 22 barges travelled from Ynystawe and Clydach and everyone cleaned the boats. Lots of waddings were bought to the boats from the churches and chapels to be used as seating. Everything had to be clean and there was sawdust on the bottom of the boats.5 boats were from Hafod, St John's, with a red and blue covering all round the boat, 4 from St Paul's and 2-3 from the Wesleyan in Wempit Road and also from Eaton road. Men driving the horse had 2 pounds £2, and the boys doing the steering would have a half pound (ten shillings) the children would have little fishing nets, these were thin canes with a net on the end and these were just held in the water as the horses pulled the boat along. There were plenty of fish to be caught in the canal and the water near Ystalyfera was quite clear. Another Whitsun trip only went as far as Midland Terrace, Morriston (Tape TH23 West Glamorgan archive).

David and Cicely Arnold both remember the canal bank as popular for walking. David Arnold recollects 'one of the most picturesque parts was between Gurnos and Ystradgynlais, with the Gough estate on your right and farmland and woodland on your left . They also remember the canal as dump for unwanted pets, and that the water near Ystalyfera Tin-plate works was not only used for the cooling down of machinery, but for people too, and consequently they were filthy (Oral transcript of interview undertaken by L Jenkins in January 1994 in Clive Reed's archive).

More recent memories are of activities on/in the canal and Les Gibbon remembers the Glamorganshire canal in (Forest Farm and Glamorganshire Canal Newsletter September 2005:6).

...my friends and I thought it was about time we learned to swim. So, down to the canal by the works entrance we went, the canal was called the Basin by here, as it was wide. The boats could be turned if they were just bringing goods to the Works. There was also a horse slip where you could walk into the Canal. When we tried to go in, the silt was coming up to our knees, so we went to the lock by Oak Cottage, where the water wheel is, and in we went with our rubber rings and arm inflators.

Many of you may be familiar with Don Thomas because of his role in the IWA and his dedication to canal restoration. Here he reflects on his early years of canal enthusiasm in the newsletter of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canals Trust.

I often used the canal for walking, fishing, skating in winter and for my first inexpert attempts at boating on a home-made raft. I remember my parents telling me that in the early years of the twentieth century when they were children and when money was scarce it was common for lots of people from Cwmbran to walk along the canal bank the 5 miles to Newport and back to do their shopping. (The Reed Warbler May 2005 : 16)

I hope you have enjoyed this short collection from a number of canal publications and tapes. If you have anything you would like to comment upon please do not hesitate to contact me on sean@fallon4.freeserve.co.uk or via The Swansea Canal Society.