

Swansea canal barge at the Hafod in 1931

This is the title of the finest historic Swansea Canal barge image known, and in the year 2000 publication "Copperopolis" it is credited to the City and County of Swansea Museum Collection, but more of this later.

I assume the date 1931 was chosen because that was the date when the last **official toll** was charged for a barge travelling along the Swansea Canal with a chargeable cargo: carrying coal from Ynystawe to Clydach. Yet the photograph was posed at the Hafod Copperworks at Swansea not at Ynystawe or Clydach, as one would expect if that was the event photographed. Thereafter, after 1931, no commercial tolls were charged by the owners of the canal; at that time the Great Western Railway Company, because the cost of employing toll collectors, lock keepers and accountants was exceeding the cost of tolls charged due the little commercial traffic on the canal.

However, barges did carry cargoes along the Swansea Canal into the mid 1940's as the statements to me of Samuel Yateman Howard and Mrs Edwards relate. Sam Howard lived at Godre'r Graig and remembered the Swansea Canal working and carrying barge traffic along the canal from Pantyffynnon downwards to Pontardawe in the 1940's with cargoes of stone from local quarries. Mrs Edwards, living in Trebanos, and with whom I spoke in early 2000 also remembered canal barges passing along the canal at the bottom of her garden on several occasions in the early to mid 1940's, but they were sheeted over so she could not see the cargo carried. But the barges were fully laden.

We can surmise from these memories that the Swansea Canal did not carry its last commercial cargo in 1931. The mid section of the Swansea Canal, from the Hafod to Ystalyfera was still carrying barge traffic into the 1940's. The upper section north of Ystalyfera was no longer in use as a barge carrying waterway and the section south of the Hafod was officially abandoned in 1928, although the photograph shows the G.W.R. have carried out restoration/repair works to the Hafod Isaf Bridge on its lower down streamside. The upper side of the bridge is still in a ruinous condition so the bridge is undergoing restoration works. This would add to the date when the image was taken, to show that the canal was still operational northward beyond the abandoned section south of the Hafod. This latter year, 1928, would be the year for me when the G.W.R. took the photograph upon relinquishing their ownership of the canal to the south. But more of this later, I could be wrong in this assumption.

As for the photograph itself, the Swansea Canal Society also has a copy of this, donated to it when the society was formed in 1981; with the information this was the last barge to travel the Swansea Canal. The photographer had obviously printed more than one image from his negative. Unfortunately, the name of the photographer is not documented, nor the name of the donor. However, when I took on the responsibility for canals exhibitions in the mid 1980's I showed this photograph to a professional commercial photographer in Pontardawe, Mr William Booth, who confirmed to me that the paper was genuine 1920's type photographic paper.

One of the founding members of the Swansea Canal Society was Sam Howard Yateman. I often sat with Sam and his wife Doreen at the Café on the Square in Pontardawe to have lunch. They told me so many stories of the canal, coalmining, quarrying, tinplate works and of Sam's work as a fitter repairing machinery aboard ships at Port Talbot docks, at Plasmarl brickworks, Pontardawe steelworks and several

other industries. Sam was a very skilled machinist in addition to being a marine and mechanical fitter. He made several accurate working models of a number of the machines he worked on or observed working. I was given Sam's collection of live working models after he passed away. Two of those I later donated to the Waterfront Museum at Swansea. One was of a diesel driven stone crusher as used at Plasmarl brickworks, the other a twin cylinder horizontal steam engine similar to those at Pontardawe steelworks. They were all made by hand in his tiny kitchen at Godre'r Graig.

Of the many stories Sam related to me, one has a bearing on the canal barge that appears in this narrative. He said the barge was named "Grace Darling". Sam was born in Godre'r Graig and had attended Godre'r Graig primary school until 1921 and after that at a junior school. In the Godre'r Graig primary school log book Sam Yateman Howard is recorded as being born on 10th May 1909 and living near Cilmaengwyn Shop. His father's occupation is given as a boat maker. He worked at the Godre'r Graig boat building and boat repair yard, where he assisted Mr Thomas S. White, the Swansea Canal engineer, in building the Grace Darling. Sam used to take his dad's lunch or sandwiches down to the yard and watch the men building the barge. After completion of the barge she was used in the Ystalyfera area as a maintenance boat. With so little barge traffic on the canal I do not understand why Thomas S White decided to construct a barge at all. However, he did do so and we are all very fortunate for that and for Sam's memory of her name and the date of her construction; **1918**.

The first question that comes to my mind is why did he name the barge Grace Darling. This was just an ordinary canal boat, no bright decoration or cabin, just a plain canal barge. The answer to this question lies in the ancestors of Mr Thomas S. White. His father, Mr Thomas Richardson White was born at Morpeth in the county of Northumberland. He was offered the position of canal engineer on the Swansea Canal. He spoke no Welsh, even though the region was mostly Welsh speaking at that time. A Swansea Canal Company advert placed in the Cambrian newspaper on 20th August 1858 said, "*Wanted, a person to superintend the works on the line of the above canal – 16 miles. Experience of the nature of the employment is essential and a knowledge of the Welsh language is desirable*". He got the job. Mr Thomas Richardson White was canal superintendent from 1858 to 1905, when his son Thomas S. White succeeded him. The White family would have been very much aware of the exploits and bravery of the local Northumbrian hero who saved the lives of a number of sailors shipwrecked on the nearby Farne Islands that were only about fifteen miles from Morpeth. Thomas S. White was probably remembering the birthplace of his father and added a little frivolity to an otherwise plain old workboat.

The story could have ended at this point but for another coincidence. I had put on display at Morryston library in 1992 a Swansea Canal exhibition. I received a telephone call from a lady who had seen the exhibition and she asked me if she could have a copy of one of the photographs displayed. I asked her which one and why? She wanted the one of the canal barge with the man and his horse. I asked her why? She told me it was her father in the photograph. I arranged to visit the good lady the following week with a copy of the image as requested. I will omit the lady's name for personal reasons. The story she told me was fascinating.

Her father was William Henry Barnes. He lived at Morfydd Street in Morryston and was an ostler working at "White Man's Grave". This turned out to be the local name for the Morryston Spelter Works and it had that notoriety because of the relatively high death rate at the factory due to the very large volumes of zinc dust in the atmosphere inside the works. I asked her why was he working on the canal? She said her father loved working with horses. He normally worked at the zinc works for five days and on weekends he worked for a Morryston coal haulier delivering coal to factories along the canal. The barge in the photograph was the coal barge he used. She said without any prompting that the horse's name was Zoe. I asked her if she knew the name of the barge? She replied no. The canal bridge I knew was the Hafod Isaf Bridge (Hafod lower Bridge), and I informed the lady of this and that the canal society knew the name of very few canal barges. One of those we knew was the "Grace Darling". At that point in time she said to me "That is that barge" "It is Grace Darling". I asked her how could she be sure of that? Her reply was honest and a relief to her that she had found out a part of her own family history.

It transpired that William Henry Barnes often told his wife that he was taking Grace out again on the weekend. His daughter (The lady I interviewed) thought for the rest of her life her father was having an affair with a woman named Grace. It came as a relief to her to know it was only a canal barge and not another woman. I asked her if she knew the date the photograph was taken? She told me she could not

remember the exact date of the photograph being taken, but it was posed because that was the last day of the canal ferryboat working, possibly in the early 1920's.

A coal barge used as a ferryboat was new to me and of great historical interest. Mr Barnes used the coal barge on weekends ferrying workmen and women to factories along the route of the canal between Maliphant Street and Morriston. That was the section without any locks. The lady said that trams were now working out of Swansea to Morriston, and it was a better way of travelling than on the coal barge. I was given a photograph of William Henry Barnes in addition to the wonderful story related above.

The barge in the photograph has a refinement not recorded on any other Swansea Canal barge. A rubbing strake has been added to the outside of the barge at mid section. This is probably because of the many times the barge rubbed against the canal masonry towpath when delivering coal to numerous factories. The lower strake of the barge appears to have been renewed or replaced. It is white in colour. The upper strakes have been painted with creosote or tar. There is no nameplate evident in the photograph.

There is no coal on the wharf alongside the canal to show that coal has been carried or unloaded, there are no wheelbarrows in sight to suggest that coal unloading has recently taken place, and the doors into the copperworks are closed, again showing us the viewer that no coal has been barrowed into the copperworks and the canal barge has not recently carried coal to this destination. So this brings me to the original question of when and why was the photograph taken. Was it 1923, 1928 or 1931? I would rule out 1931 and possibly 1928 although I have proposed this date due to the fact that the G.W.R. might have been present to capture the last days of their ownership of the section of canal below the copperworks. So we are back to the original date I was offered of the last day of working of the canal ferryboat due to trams now operating out of Swansea and up to Morriston.

Why, when and by who was the photograph taken are fundamental questions to deciding the exact date of when the image was taken and possibly by who? The why and who has been proposed above. The "when" has also been touched upon slightly.

The date of the image is open to discussion. I have used the date 1923 during my talks on the Swansea Canal because of a suggestion by William Henry Barnes daughter that might be the date when the ferryboat ceased working. However, a Swansea tramways researcher, Mr David Beynon, informed me during a discussion on this photograph that it had to be after 1928. In the image appearing in "Copperopolis" there is a name painted on the door at the right that gave entry to the Hafod Copperworks. The letters read as British Copper Manufacturers Limited. They took over the Hafod Copperworks that year. So the image could be any time after 1928. Where the Royal Institution obtained their date of 1931 is not recorded. I preferred the date then as 1928, not 1923.

I gave a copy of this information to the Royal Institution in 1993 and a copy of the photograph to Gareth Mills who was a good friend of mine a little later. I worked at Swansea Dry Docks and Gareth was shipping correspondent to the South Wales Evening Post and we both had an interest in Swansea bay shipping. On Gareth's passing sometime later, his collection of photographs including those donated by colleagues was given to The Retired Swansea and Port Talbot Dockers Association. I note that on their website Gareth's collection was donated to Swansea Museum with the information that the collection was copyright of the above Association. I wish to correct this. Gareth would not have claimed copyright for a photograph he had not taken. Let it rest there.

To conclude this article on barge building at Godre'r Graig, another good friend, Mr Tom Williams of Pontardawe obtained an interesting photograph c1980 of the Godre'r Graig barge-building yard. This shows a canal barge down stream of the yard and lock number 17. It has been estimated to be the early 1920 period.

All in all, this is a rather confusing conundrum to resolve. We know the name of the barge, the bargee, his horse, the location, why the barge was so named, why she operated as a canal ferryboat, the last days of various sections of the Swansea Canal operating as a commercial waterway, but as to the exact date of this intriguing photograph a question mark exists. The photographer is unknown, although we know he made multiple images from his negative, yet they appear in no local publications of that year. So we are back to the last unanswered question. What is the date of the photograph? Is it 1923 as originally proffered, or 1928 because of the name on the doorway into the copperworks, or 1931 as claimed on the Swansea Museum copy of this photograph? Personally I reject 1931 as the date because of

the incorrect location of the last days of coal carrying which was at Clydach and not Swansea. So we have a decision to make on 1923 or 1928. I would prefer 1923 because of the ferryboat connection, but David Beynon threw a spanner into the works with his observation of the British Copper Manufacturers Limited sign on the copperworks doorway.

I welcome any suggestions from the membership of the S.W.W.I.A.S. Swansea Canal Society, Swansea Museums Service, National Museum of Wales and the R.C.H.M.W.

Clive Reed, 11 September 2017