

Boyhood Recollections of the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals

In response to your recent article in S&News, I have been prompted to jot down my childhood memories of the Shrewsbury and Newport Canal. I hope that they will provide a little interesting reading for fellow members. There may be some people still living in Newport who can remember some of the incidents which I recall.

My grandfather, Edwin George Hammett (1887-1961), came to Newport from Buxton, in the early 1920"s. For many years he earned his living as a barber and confectioner, operating from premises at 18 High Street, Newport. My mother Dorothy (1915-2001) remembered flour brought by narrow boat from Liverpool and unloaded at Newport Basin.

Grandfather introduced me to coarse fishing in the 1950"s, when I was about 8 years old. Our first trip was to the canal bridge at Forton next to Moss Pool. I can clearly remember seeing a small perch motionless in the water and getting excited at the prospect of catching it with the rod grandfather had given me. I was very quickly told by him to make less noise to avoid frightening the fish.

My mother told me that Moss Pool was used for skating during winters in the 1930"s, when motor cars would shine their headlights across the ice to illuminate the skaters.

I went fishing regularly at weekends with Grandfather. I would stay overnight on Fridays, sleeping in a huge double bed with a feather mattress. At 4.30am the next morning, he would wake me with a cup of real tea (no tea bags in those days!) and by 5am we would be on the canal towpath. We used to go to Sutton, where he had obtained permission from the farmer whose land adjoined the canal. I cannot remember his name after more than 50 years. Does anyone in Newport remember him? The fishing rights at that time were owned by the Why-Not Angling Club from Wolverhampton, so I do not think that the farmer had the authority to give us permission to fish. At the weekend Austins buses brought lots of anglers to Newport and many of them returned by the 5pm bus on Saturday evening. I was often a passenger and I can remember one angler showing me a Jack Pike which he had caught in the Canal.

At Meretown, the canal crosses the River Meese by way of an aqueduct which also carries a minor road. The river here was slow moving and held lots of fish, notably large bream. Anglers on the canal towpath could easily squeeze through the hedge onto the road and drop their lines over the sandstone parapet. On one occasion, my grandfather and I were doing just that, together with three or four more fishermen. Somebody must have reported us, because a police constable arrived on a motor scooter and took the names and addresses of all the adults who were fishing. Are any of these

anglers or the policeman still living? I was never told if grandfather was fined for fishing in private waters without a permit. Some years later, I obtained permission from the owner of Aqualate Hall, Mrs Green, to fish in the river for one day only. I can vividly recall being ushered into her study by the butler who had answered the front door and preceded me along seemingly endless corridors, the walls of which were hung with portraits of past owners of the Hall and numerous stag's heads with impressive sets of antlers.

By the mid 1950's my grandfather had given up fishing but I continued to go alone or with friends. One friend who used to accompany me was one John Binns, whose parents had owned Hanwood, a bungalow at Chetwynd Aston, which my parents had bought when they moved to Newport in 1955. We used to fish the canal between Newport and Forton, always riding our bicycles to the chosen spot with the rods tied to the crossbars. Once, when we were fishing next to the first bridge out of Newport towards Norbury, my line became tangled, a "bird's nest" as we used to call it, and I was becoming very frustrated at not being able to untangle it. There was a farm next to the bridge on the tow path side and a man was filling buckets with water from the canal for cleaning the cow shed. He encouraged me to be patient and to sort out the birds nest without resorting to cutting it out with a pen knife.

Once, Moss Pool suffered a temporary oxygen deficit in the water. At that time, there was an overflow pipe from the canal leading into the pool. A considerable number of fish, mainly large carp, were congregating around the outlet. Several men were standing in the shallows and catching the fish with their bare hands and throwing them into the canal. Does anyone remember this incident? It may have been reported in the local newspaper, the Newport and Market Drayton Advertiser. This incident probably introduced carp into the canal for the first time. Previously I had managed to catch only roach and perch, and occasionally, bream. Some time later, whilst fishing on the wide bend just beyond Moss Pool and before the Skew Bridge at Meretown, I hooked a carp, although it had not swallowed the bait. It may well have been one of those from the pool. Needless to say, I returned the fish, unharmed to the canal. During the 1950's the canal, although very weedy in places was in a fair condition, and in water all the way from Newport to Norbury Junction. At Sutton, most of the locks had had their top gates removed and replaced by concrete weirs. The gates themselves were left to rot by the lockside. At the time that my grandfather was fishing with me, I think that the Telford designed lock keepers cottage half way down the Sutton flight was still standing, but by the early 1960's it had been demolished.

The large amount of weed in the canal inevitably led to the loss of hooks and weights, and sometimes more expensive items such as floats, when lines were caught up in water lilies. I remember an incident probably in 1958, when I was pike fishing between Forton and Sutton, I was using an artificial line

called a "plug" which had belonged to my grandfather. These lines were expensive to a young boy whose weekly pocket money was about 2/- (10p), so when I cast out across the canal and line became entangled in water lilies on the other side, I was determined not to lose it. However, my frantic tuggings caused the line to break. There was no access to the land on the opposite bank, so the only option available was to swim across. I returned to the spot very early the next morning, when no one was about, and half waded half swam across a very muddy canal. I was cold and unpleasant, but I got the line back!

The canal beyond Edgmond was very overgrown with bulrushes, but I sometimes fished in Edgmond Lock, where shoals of quite large fish could often be seen in the clear water. I was accompanied on these trips by my lifelong friend David Williams, whose grandparents owned Newricks newsagent shop in Newport. We managed to catch several of the large fish which frequented the waters at Edgmond. I remember they were silver, but with very dark, almost black dorsal surfaces. We decided that they must be roach/rudd hybrids, although they did not have the red fins associated with rudd.

One of my last memories of the Shrewsbury and Newport canal is of paddling a wooden canoe from the basin to Meretown and, thence down the River Meese. I was a pupil at Adams' Grammar School at the time and had persuaded my father to buy the canoe for me from the woodwork department at the school. I think it must have been 1956, because that year Adams celebrated its tercentenary and parents were invited to tour the school to meet the masters and see samples of their sons work. How we got the craft back to our home at Chetwynd Aston, I cannot remember, but it was duly painted red and green, with several coats of clear varnish in preparation for a trip along the canal. At that time, my constant companion was Andrew Corbyn, whose family had moved from Chippenham to Yew Tree Manor at Chetwynd Aston. Andrew's younger brother is now an outspoken Labour M.P. I cannot now remember how we got the canoe from my home to the canal, but by the time we had launched it into the basin, we had attracted a small crowd of urchins who proceeded to shout abuse and throw sticks at us as we paddled up to the first lock. They eventually lost interest and we reached the aqueduct at Meretown without further incident. Here we launched the canoe into the Meese at the same spot where the policeman took names and addresses several years before. Progress downstream was rather slow, because the river was very shallow in places. We took on a lot of water as well, because with two boys sitting in a canoe designed for one person, the stern was often awash. By the time we reached Forton, we were soaked to the skin and abandoned the trip. We spent the afternoon under a large tree in a field by the river, trying to dry our clothes.

In the early 1960"s I ceased fishing in the canal. Much of my free time was taken up by School activities such as playing rugby football for Adams Grammar. However, a lifelong interest in canals remained and I have spent many holidays on board narrow boats with my family, travelling all over the Midlands Canal System. The failure of the Newport Canal Society to restore the canal in the 1960"s was a great disappointment to me, but with the formation of the present trust, I have high hopes that I will be able to bring a narrow boat along the stretch of canal that holds so many happy memories for me.

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