

Memories of Newport Canal **by Freeman Jones**

My name is Freeman Jones and I am the grandson of Charles and Annie Oakley of 9 Water Lane, Newport, Shropshire. 9 Water Lane was a tied canal side cottage where that side of my family lived until after my grandmothers' funeral in 1959.

Granddad, Charles Oakley was employed on the Newport Canal until his death in 1943. I therefore never met him having been born in 1945. However, I have family memories passed down to me via my grandmother and other members of the family.

Charles Oakley was employed as a 'Length man' between Norbury Junction and Edgmond and as lock keeper at Newport Basin. His duties as 'Length man' involved him in keeping the canal free of undergrowth and other obstructions and if working some length from home he would be away for several days at a time, having to walk there and back along the towpath. His duties as lock keeper involved him booking goods on/off barges and collecting tolls for the use of Newport lock. When Charles was away working his wife Annie had to take over his lock keeping duties.

The canal cottage (9 Water Lane, Newport) consisted of two up/two down. Downstairs there was a front room/dining room and a kitchen, fitted with a stone sink – cold water only and a range fire for cooking on. Upstairs there were two bedrooms – the front bedroom containing two iron framed double beds and a smaller rear bedroom containing a much smaller bed.. At the far end of the rear yard was a toilet, originally a 'thunder box' but later converted to a pull flush W.C.

In this cottage Charles and Annie reared thirteen children, two of whom died of drowning at an early age in the Newport Basin. I have often been told that grandmother reckoned that most of these children were 'got in drink'.

Sleeping arrangements were very cramped. One double bed was occupied by Charles and Annie and the other by several children sleeping 'heads to toes'. The remaining children either slept under these double beds or in the rear small bedroom for the older boys.

The family did their best to be self-sufficient in food in that Annie kept Ducks and Chickens and the family was expected to work the two huge gardens, equivalent to 'allotments' today, in which they grew vegetables for food all the year round. To supplement the household income Annie sold sweets through the sitting room window to passers-by in Water Lane, this window opening directly onto this roadway. In later years of her life Annie set up an evening newspaper business selling and with the help of her family delivering the 'Express and Star' and the 'Pink (a late edition of the Express

and Star, printed in pink on a Saturday, containing the football results) to all parts of Newport from Station Terrace to Forton Road.

Charles apparently had a vile temper and the family suffered physical abuse from his irrational discipline. On one occasion he had a storming disagreement with one of the older sons, Joe. Joe was fond of keeping pigeons, but the next day after this argument Joe found every one of his beloved pigeons with their necks broken. Joe was convinced it was his dad`s action and never spoke to his dad again, in fact very shortly afterwards at the tender age of 16 he emigrated to Canada(1926) and lived there for the rest of his life. Another member of the family, Alice was never able to have children of her own and often claimed that this was as the result of her farther knocking her about.

Annie Oakley nee Slaney was also a strong character. As a young lady she had left the family home near Ollington Staffordshire and walked to the Newport area, sleeping rough overnight under hedgerows. She was the eldest child of the family and had left home because none of the children could get on with a new step-mother. Her intention was to establish herself in the Newport Area and then send for the rest of her siblings. She met Charles Oakley of Adeney, near Edgmond and subsequently married him, although she often remarked that she should of married his brother Albert Oakley.

Annie was a `crack shot` with an air rifle and at shooting clay pipes at the annual May Fair, held in Newport, she enjoyed a pint of beer at her local `The Bridge Inn` situated next to the canal in Lower Bar Newport, and was the champion domino player of the Newport league. She also had strong views about the people who lived and work on the canal barges, instructing her children to have `nout to do with them boatie people`.

Behind the canal cottage was Newport Basin and Wharf. The wharf was used for storing goods coming in/going out by canal barge. There was also a large brick building which had been used in the days of horse drawn barges for stabling the horses. In front of this was a hand cranked crane similar but larger than the one at Norbury junction today), and used to help load/unload the barges.

My person earliest memory of this wharf area was at the age of about four when I was chased by a gaggle of geese all the way up the wharf to the cottage. I have always been wary of such creatures since. Another of my childhood memories was one day after I had been given my first two wheeled bicycle and I was having great difficulty getting the art of balance in order to ride it. All of a sudden, not sitting on the saddle but on the carrier over the rear wheel I got the balance right and cycled all the around the wharf.

Nothing remains today of 9 Water Lane, the building having been condemned after my grandmother`s death, were demolished and the wharf

area has been totally redeveloped. A large black warehouse with which Charles Oakley would have been very familiar has been moved from Water lane and rebuilt at the Blist Hill museum, where it is in use as a carpentry shop.



The Author alongside 9 Water Lane looking towards Newport Basin & Wharf c 1950



The Canal, Newport.
Charles Oakley near Meretown Bridge, Newport c 1927