

Memories of the Shrewsbury Canal

We have several Trustees involved in giving presentations to various audiences around Shropshire and further afield. One of the real joys of this work is the number of people we meet up with who have fond memories of the canal from their childhood, or who have accounts that their parents and grandparents have passed on to them, of times when the S&N was still very much a part of the lives of the local communities through which it passed. Such was the case when Vice-Chairman Brian Nelson met up with our member Jean Hammond when giving a talk for Shrewsbury Civic Society at the Bear Steps. Not only did this prompt a further presentation which Jean recently organised for the Shropshire Arts Society when they joined us as Corporate Members, but it also stirred her to put pen to paper with her own recollections of her childhood when she lived close to the canal in Shrewsbury.

Jean's story is reproduced below and we would urge any other members who have their own stories of bygone days of the S&N to get in touch so that we can record them before they are forgotten. You are welcome to post or email your thoughts to us or, if you prefer, get in touch with Brian Nelson (details on front cover) and he can arrange for someone to pop over and note down your thoughts with you.

Jean Hammond (nee Clift) writes:

"I always looked forward to Sundays. No school, no errands to the shop, just seemingly carefree summer walks to pick blackberries, gather buttercups, make daisy chains and attempt to pluck bullrushes from the canal.

As a child I lived very close to the end of the Shrewsbury canal, which in those days sixty years ago, terminated near the Canal Tavern at the top of the Gasworks Bank. I didn't realize then that the original terminus was further on at the Buttermarket.

The canal was our adventure playground and the towpath took us town kids out beyond the clusters of back-to-back houses and the gasworks, and into the sweet smell of the countryside with it's green hedges full of birds' nests. We joined the canal at the top of Gasworks Bank via a sloping cobbled path with horizontal raised cobbles at intervals – obviously designed as a foothold for the horses. Once on the towpath the adjacent water was black and still, with patches of oil shining on the surface. A huge gasometer was nearby and we always held our nose as we passed.

The towpath went behind the cottages in New Park Road and very soon we passed under the Factory Bridge and just ahead were the Maltings. Sometimes we would leave the path, cross the bridge and see what was happening at the Maltings. I recall there were soldiers on duty with guns. The

fact that there was a war on was of little concern to us innocents. Back on the path we head on towards the suburbs, passing under the Comet Bridge and then behind the houses on Sundome Road. Here the canal runs parallel to the River Severn and through a hole in the towpath hedge a track led to the Daisy Bank. We always stopped off here to eat any bread and jam sandwiches remaining from our picnic, and to drink the cool water that bubbled up from a fresh spring.

Back through the hole in the hedge and onto the towpath. Here the canal water was clearer and bullrushes and sedges were growing at the waters' edge. There were no boats apart from the odd abandoned flat boat looking still and neglected. We were in the country now and to us townies this was a great adventure. We were oblivious to the danger of falling in the cut (we always thought this a common word), and there were very few people to fish us out had we fallen in.

We were nearing Pimley now and could glimpse the chimneys of the Manor. Here we stopped to examine a "horseshoe" print on the coping stone of a bridge. I was told by my friends that this was the footprint of Dick Turpin's horse and the highwayman had leapt into the ravine below. I really believed it!

Very soon we would leave the canal at Uffington, passing under a steep road bridge and onto a track that leads to Haughmond Hill. On the days we came on bicycles we could leave them at a cottage at the base of the hill for tuppence. Our adventure wasn't over yet. Our mission in late spring was to collect bluebells from Haughmond Hill and we would return with armfuls of these delicate flowers with their white sticky stems. We returned home when we had collected enough flowers or when our inner clocks told us so. We had no watches and sometimes we would be away a whole day. Nobody worried and we always got home before dark.

When I read of the proposal to reinstate this canal I was eager to retrace my steps of sixty-odd years ago. It was a bit of a shock, especially at the beginning of my one-time magic walk. The cobbled horse ramp had gone and everywhere was swamped with that ubiquitous plague, Japanese Knotweed. But the Canal Tavern was still there and Haughmond Hill too. Hopefully, one day the old canal will be brought back to life again after major reconstructive surgery and a by-pass here and there. But do hurry up or I shall have to send my grandchildren to retrace my wonderland walk."

With Jean's artistic interests, she also drew our attention to a painting by P. Van Dyke Brown (1801-1868) of the canal at Uffington where she walked as a child (reproduced over). This shows what an idyllic rural scene this must have made for the many "townies" who took the walk along the towpath out into the countryside from among the gasworks and back streets of Shrewsbury.



S&N News Summer 2005 - article by Brian Nelson including memories of Jean Hammond