

THE HOUSE BY SKINNER'S LOCK



Situated beside the tow-path of the Grantham Canal about four miles from the River Trent, the white house which stands a few yards from Lock No 4 has been the home of a succession of lock keepers and canal length-men for a surprising number of years.

The particulars of exactly when the house was built are probably stored in a filing cabinet maintained by the administrative staff of the British Waterways Board which still owns the property. The name Skinner's Lock House however gives one the impression that a family of that name was living there at the end of the nineteenth century. Eventually it became known as Mrs Skinner's Lock House which suggests, to me at least, that the lady lived alone there after her husband had died.

She most probably continued opening and closing the lock gates in accordance with the demands of the canal traffic and if she had been left a widow then Mrs Skinner would have received the sympathy of all the bargees and their families, for they were basically warm-hearted people, even if they did carry the reputation for being quick-tempered and verbally uncouth among themselves.

The Skinners tenancy ceased about 1902 and the lock-house was taken over by the Waltons, a Cotgrave family. Like his father and grandfather Mr Walton was a keen shooting man, but shot only for the pot. However game such as rabbits, hares, pheasants and partridge was abundant and during the nesting season not only were the eggs of game-birds collected for breakfast by the knowing countryman but also those of the moorhens and corncrakes that attempted to breed around the reedy pools and dykes.

The lock keeper's family were also allowed free fishing along the stretch of bank extending from the lock gate to the end of the garden. Perch, roach and tench were caught and, in the season, the occasional pike. Vegetables were grown in the garden or bought from the local farmers and market gardeners. In the lock-house garden today stands a grafted Bramley apple tree that still nurtures a healthy crop of fruit. This was grafted onto an existing tree by Mr Walton, who brought the graft home from Cotgrave by fastening it across his bicycle. In the autumn the family picked mushrooms and horse chestnuts. Garden fruits and blackberries and raspberries, the wild fruits of the hedgerow, were also gathered and bottled and stored in readiness for each coming winter.

The bargees transported coal to the Duke of Rutland's estate in the Vale of Belvoir and it would seem that the barges were moored briefly alongside the lock house before they were guided into the pound between the two lock gates.

Here, on the canal bank, the lock keeper or a member of the family were given some quite large lumps of coal. Over the years, one or two lumps were accidentally dropped into the water and when the canal was dragged in fairly recent times quite a stock of coal lumps was recovered from the canal bed.

Besides coal, the bargees also transported sewage and one can immediately sympathise with the lock keeper or canal length-man, when barges loaded with the stuff were steadied before the lock gates were reached and the water levels adjusted so that the bargees could continue their journey. The duties of the lock keeper are self-explanatory but those of the length-man were more varied. Each man was responsible for keeping his allocated stretch of the canal free from encroaching vegetation, and the banks, tow-path and bordering hedgerows in good repair.

The waterway had also to be checked for leaks which, if they occurred, had to be quickly puddled! This was achieved by first reporting the leak to the foreman, who in turn negotiated for the clay boat to be brought along the canal to the leakage point. Once the craft was moored, the length-man and the clay boat's crew would sink poles gently into the canal bed and when the source of the leak was discovered they waded into the depths and poured clay into the cracks. The men then stamped the clay in with the heels of their wading boots.



While doing this, the canal workers often stood with their backs to the clayboat, held onto the sides and stamped rhythmically until the foreman ascertained that the crack had been filled to his satisfaction. As the canal spanned a distance of thirty-three miles between Nottingham and Grantham, ten length-men were employed. Each was given 'three miles and a bit' of the canal to manage. Along certain sections of the canal tow-path small wooden huts were erected. These were designed to hold the length-men's tools such as scythes, dragnets, bill hooks, and in later years, grass cutting machinery. A grindstone fastened to a supporting frame was often placed nearby.

At the end of the summer the long grass growing beside the hedgerows was scythed and quantities given to the bargees as hay for their horses. However, under the foreman's watchful eye, the main crop of cut grass was raked up, piled beside the water, collected by two men guiding a horse and cart, then transported to the yards of the local farmers and landowners who had previously negotiated with the waterways company and accepted their price for an extra hay crop. This was stored in readiness to feed their cattle and horses in the lean months of winter.

When they couldn't work because of a heavy snowfall or unusually inclement weather several canal length-men would meet at their tool cabins where they cajoled while playing cards and dominoes. But no cabin was forgotten and the canal foreman visited each on his bicycle in turn and decided when the men should return to their duties.

When the Waltons needed a brace of pheasants or partridge for the pot they had only to walk down the road to the plot of land on which the Stragglethorpe Nurseries are now based. Here in a cottage built beside three pine trees that are standing to this day lived Mr Coleman one of the gamekeepers employed by the Earl Manvers estate. While it was acceptable for the lock keepers to shoot some rabbits and hares for the pot, game-birds were reared for the shooting parties that set off from Holme Pierrepont Hall and the gamekeepers were held responsible for providing a good crop of birds. Therefore, if a family required a brace they would have needed the gamekeeper's approval and an extra shilling or two with which to buy them.

Sport was also provided for the hunting fraternity. Across the canal and over the field directly opposite the lock keeper's house stands Cotgrave Place. This was the home of the James family who employed a sizeable staff both at the Hall and in the grounds. Most members of the family were particularly interested in field sports. Due to the high regard the titled folk held for the landowner who bred foxes on his land specifically with the hunt in mind, it became fashionable for the estate management team to maintain coverts which were intended to provide harbour for a number of foxes throughout the daylight hours. Once these were established the vixens were induced to breed in artificial earths which were dug out and lined with bricks in the same way as a drain, but with two exits. A circular breeding chamber was constructed at the end in which each vixen reared her annual litter of cubs.

The canal length-men who were employed around Skinner's Lock were eventually informed that if work needed doing along the banks of the Polser Brook it was expected to be undertaken as quickly and quietly as possible for artificial fox earths had also been constructed in the hedge-banks between the brook and the estate steward's house.

The four families of farmworkers who lived at Shepherds Cottages (now Shepherds Restaurant) were also informed and asked to keep away from the coverts at all times. In fact the entire area was regarded to have been out of bounds to everyone except the gamekeeper and his assistant. One young man who was employed as a hedger and general handyman on the Earl Manvers estate was Wilfred Bemrose who eventually married his childhood sweetheart Dolly and applied for the position of canal length-man when Mr Walton retired after having lived at the lock house for thirty-seven years. Both Wilfred and Dolly were delighted when he was offered the position and moved in almost as soon as the house was vacated.

The couple had known each other almost from the day they could walk. Dolly was the youngest child of a family of fourteen. In the days that she best recalled, her father delivered coal on a horse-drawn dray to houses in Cotgrave and Radcliffe-on-Trent as well as the surrounding farms and keepers' cottages. Sometimes one or two of the children were allowed to ride with their father on the dray and Dolly chuckled quietly when she described herself as having a mass of gingery red curly hair and added that she was always made to wear a white starched apron over her dress despite the fact that on the dray behind her were stacked innumerable bags of coal and slack.

School-days were never the happiest days of her life she said, for class distinction was exercised in the classroom to some noticeable degree. It was felt that the children of the village notables were taken aside and encouraged while those whose father happened to be a ploughman or coal deliveryman were not given quite the same attention. Nevertheless, before they left school all the children had been taught how to read, write and tackle a mathematical problem and this was considered to have been a satisfactory achievement both from the parents and school teacher's point of view.



When they left their new home at Skinner's Lock each morning, Wilfred cycled along the canal tow-path to wherever he was working or reported to the maintenance gang's cabin based in the canal-side outbuildings at Cropwell Bishop. Here all the materials were stored for repairing lock-gates and maintaining the bridges to a satisfactory standard. The company's horses were also stabled here for they were still needed to pull the maintenance barges along the canal to their destination. In those days the canal workers were employed by the L.N.E.R. (London North Eastern Railway) the company which also owned the canal. Every Friday afternoon all the men cycled from Cropwell Bishop to the station at Radcliffe-on-Trent to collect their pay packets.

Dolly, meanwhile, had found employment with the Braid Company Ltd situated on Aberdeen Street, Nottingham. Five mornings a week she walked the canal tow-path to Tollerton Lane Bridge and caught the five minutes to seven bus into the city. She made many friends during her fourteen years spent with this company and in her lunch hour frequently shopped along Arkwright Street which extended from the Nottingham Midland Station to Trent Bridge. Among the main shops on and around this street Dolly found Frank Farrands, a large grocery concern with outlets throughout the city. Each of these branches was known as 'The Stores' to its regular stream of customers. Here Dolly wrote out her grocery order in a small book, handed it over the counter and the goods were delivered by van to Skinner's Lock every other week.

To get to the house the deliveryman had to park his vehicle at Peashill Farm then walk across two or three fields carrying a large box of groceries and often with the curious cattle hurrying in his wake. Some household items Dolly brought home with her on the bus, but if they ran out of such items of food or wash powder, both she and her husband cycled out on Saturday mornings to a shop near the Cotgrave-Tollerton crossroads. They would set off with bags dangling from the handlebars of their 'bone-shaker bicycles' and ride very carefully along the canal tow-path which was then only a handlebar's width between the water's edge and the hedgerow.

On reaching Tollerton Lane Bridge they dismounted, wheeled the bicycles up the steep slope onto the road, turned right and rode again down to the crossroads. Here stood three farmworkers' cottages and the traditional corner shop. Dolly recalls this shop being so small that only one person could enter and be served at a time. So if you arrived on a morning of grey teeming rain you took shelter under the nearby elms if it was summer and got soaked in the autumn and winter when the trees were bereft of their foliage.

Wilfred and Dolly began to grow their own vegetables or bought them from the surrounding farms. The Bramley apple was a good source of fruit supply. Pears, plums, redcurrants and gooseberries could be bought at the one-person shop or from one of the larger corner shops in Cotgrave or Radcliffe-on-Trent. Eggs were plentiful and almost every holding maintained a number of free range hens. In the season the eggs of moor-hen and mallard were taken from the willow breaks in the Polser Brook and one egg removed from the nest of a green plover or lapwing when it was found. Wilfred also walked over the fields to Peashill Farm to collect two or three pints of milk each week. These he carried in the rucksack slung over his shoulder and occasionally he would buy a few grocery items from a shop when he cycled home from the length-men's headquarters at Cropwell Bishop.

While he was hedging and ditching Wilfred also studied the rabbit runs and set his home-made snares accordingly. The surrounding countryside abounded in rabbits and at the weekends Dolly made pies and stews from the several rabbits her husband managed to snare each week. The skins would probably be sold to a local furrier. When he wasn't gardening, skinning rabbits or making snares Wilfred fished the stretch of canal close to the house. He caught perch, tench, bream and eels which, like most countrymen, he regarded as a rich delicacy although Dolly did not share his taste for these denizens of the canal bed and usually cooked something different for herself whenever her husband decided to have fried eel for his dinner or tea.

Summer evenings at the lock house were busy but seldom lonely; particularly at the weekends for on Friday evenings the local anglers would come up the tow-path to fish overnight.

"Anglers would clamour around our back door on Friday and Saturday nights and I was kept busy filling their flasks with tea; at least until they settled down along the bank after dark." Dolly said when I was sitting on a bench outside the house wish her during a recent visit. After a few seconds' pause she continued: "In the morning they were there again, queueing up for breakfast. I used to cook them bacon, eggs and fried bread, give them a good strong mug of tea to go with it and charge them two or three pence each. Oh, aye. I had a nice little business going in those days."

Because road and rail were becoming more popular modes of transport, the canal routes began to attract fewer barges and the Grantham Canal hosted its last barge in 1937. The L.N.E.R. then withdrew from managing the waterways and the Trent River. Board took over the repair, maintenance and conservation contracts. Fortunately the length-men were still employed in the same capacity and anglers continued to flank the tow-path on warm summer evenings. Then nature began to take over. The weed carpets thickened beneath the surface and fringes of reed, sedge and osier expanded into quite sizeable beds that attracted moorhens, coot and mallard in to feed, roost and breed. Smaller birds such as reed warblers and reed buntings were to be seen and much to Dolly's delight the kingfisher and heron. Occasionally a pair of mute swans would settle on the long pounds of water each side of Lock 4, so there was always something of interest to be seen or expected within a short walk of the lock-house.

Asked if she could recall her experiences during the last war Dolly spoke of the horrors, bereavements and sadness caused by the bombings. "We seemed to have had food rationing books and blackout curtains for years. Nor were we forgotten when it came to air raid shelters because all the length-men's houses along the thirty-three mile route were installed with these and although we didn't go running into them every night it was still comforting to know they were there." said Dolly.

She then mentioned one evening in particular. She was alone at the house and enjoying the peace and solitude of the surrounding countryside when suddenly an enemy aircraft appeared and began circling above the nearby Tollerton airfield which was an operational station during the war. Dolly moving from room to room looked from the windows as the aircraft continued circling. Suddenly the pilot released a bomb which exploded across a tract of scrub land known as Thomtons Gorse. A second bomb was released over Cotgrave village before the pilot steered his machine onto a higher course and rejoined his squadron which was releasing bombs over Nottingham. "It was terrifying, and very, very saddening. Because sixty-three souls lost their lives that evening," Dolly murmured sadly.

After the war, Wilfred continued his full-time task of canal length-man while Dolly gave up working when she became pregnant. Just after the first baby was born, the water supply to the cottage was improved from the outlet that is piped beneath the lock-house garden and empties into the Thurlbeck Dyke.

If one looks over the white picket fence as the dyke passes through the garden today he or she will see a flight of steps leading down to the water level. In years gone by a gate was affixed to the top of these steps to enable the length-men to go down to the water and clear any floating debris from its surface. He could also walk up to the sluice gates which he operated according to the water levels and amount of rainfall.

The water surging down the Thurlbeck Dyke is that which is drained off from the surrounding farmland. To the right of the open channel water still pours from the pipe, and this Wilfred and Dolly were told, was pure drinking water.

The Skinners and the Waltons had always used this source for drinking but when Dolly gave birth to their son, Ernest, the Cotgrave lady who worked both as a nurse and voluntary midwife was doubtful as to its purity and also concerned because each time a jug or saucepan of water was needed either Wilfred or Dolly had to go out into rain, hail and snow and fill the vessel from the outlet opposite the steps. When she was certain that mother and baby were otherwise comfortable in their waterside home the midwife approached a member of the Bingham Parish Council who had samples of this 'drinking water' sent to Boots' laboratories for analysis. Within a matter of days, the Council received a report stating emphatically that the water was totally unfit for drinking. The appropriate section of the Trent River Board was approached and there followed several visits by both River Board and Council officials until eventually the house was connected to a full supply of usable water and the plumbings and fittings installed under the heading of 'modernisation'. No one is certain when the electricity mains were laid on at Skinner's Lock but for quite some years, and particularly during the Skinners and Waltons residency the rooms were lit by paraffin lamps.

In the summers to follow the lock-house again resounded to the voices of two young children. The family also had a dog, cat and outdoor aviaries in which budgerigars and canaries were kept. Being a more-or-less self-sufficient countryman, Wilfred's gift for making use of everything around him extended to collecting pieces of wood in all shapes and sizes and he became adept in the art of woodcarving. With his young family in mind he made little tables, chairs and toys. But, Dolly added, the family seemed to derive their greatest enjoyment from the set of skittles he carved and the perfectly rounded ball that was of course an essential part of the same unit.

Meanwhile, times were changing in the fields. The plough horse was facing redundancy as more and more farmers were investing in the new grey Fordson tractors. Cattle breeds were also losing favour and the traditional Shorthorns, Ayrshires and Lincolnshire Red Polls were being replaced by large herds of dual purpose Friesians. The disused canal however continued to attract more waterfowl and both Wilfred and Dolly welcomed in their new neighbours; a fine pair of mute swans. Fifty or sixty years ago there was only a single breeding pair holding a territory between Lady Bay Bridge and Gamston. But the newcomers to the stretch of canal between Bassingfield and Skinner's Lock were encouraged to stay by all four members of the Bemrose family who fed bread and grain to the swans whenever they appeared within sight of the house.

Early one April morning the male or 'cob' began to build a nest at the foot of a sturdy elm rising from the bank opposite the lock house. The female or 'pen' eventually accepted this site and during the next fourteen days laid a clutch of seven eggs. This became an annual event and, after incubating the eggs for a further thirty five days, the swans usually hatched off five or six cygnets. One season, Wilfred took a newly-laid egg from the nest and decided to have it for his tea. The contents apparently filled the bottom of a large frying pan. A ploughman also had the same idea but instead of taking a single egg he made off with the entire clutch. When Wilfred came home at lunchtime he noticed that the pen was off the nest and went over the lock gate to find that the down lined hollow in which the eggs had been laid was empty. He then caught sight of a man ploughing the fields between the canal and Cotgrave Place and apprehended him. The ploughman admitted to having stowed the eggs carefully into his rucksack but at Wilfred's request he returned all six to the nest.

To the Bemrose family's delight the swans took to the water one morning with a brood of six fawnish grey cygnets bobbing buoyantly between them and Wilfred conceded that it was better to have six cygnets on a canal than six swan eggs resting on the cold slab of a ploughman's larder. The swans became so tame that the cob frequently led his mate and cygnets into the lock-house garden where they were continually fed on bread and grain. The cob also got the habit of tapping at the back door with the tip of his bill if none of his human benefactors were to be found in the garden. When the swan pair was beginning to nest for the ninth successive season the pen was shot by a lout. The cob eventually flew towards the Trent but did not return until the autumn. With him was a young pen. However, she did not take to the site as readily as his first mate and preferred the Bassingfield stretch of the canal although the pair failed to breed there.

Wilfred by this time had carved a life-sized mute swan out of wood. He painted it white, daubed its bill with dark red and the knob or berry at the base of the bill with black. One morning he set his model beside the lock house and the resident cob came surging down with his wings fully arched over his back in readiness for battle. Even though the 'interloper' failed to move, the cob regarded its shape and colourations as a threat and after splashing up over the bank proceeded to thrash it with his wings until Wilfred gently urged him aside and carried the model into the garden.

When I was a teenager in the 'fifties' I photographed a large cob swan with a young pen in tow at Bassingfield. As this cob was exceptionally tame I would say that, in all probability, he had been Wilfred and Dolly's immediate neighbour. Both swans left during that summer but since then various pairs have settled on the canal and attempted to breed. Some pairs have been very successful while others have suffered the cruelties administered by certain unbalanced members of the human race. When the weather turned exceptionally cold and the canal surface was frozen from bank to bank, the swans flew toward the open waters of the Trent and most probably found a ready supply of food along its course.

The canal however was never totally deserted for the length-men still tramped through the snow checking for leaks and weak links in the lock-gates and at the week-ends people came from Cotgrave and Radcliffe carrying their ice skates. Sunday afternoon was the most favoured time and I believe both Wilfred and Dolly skated alongside their children quite some distance along the waterway.

During such memorable snowfalls as those in 1947 and 1962/63 it was difficult for Wilfred and Dolly to trudge along the tow-path or across the fields to the shops. But together they managed once or twice to walk to the small corner shop and struggle forcefully through the snow drifts carrying enough shopping to last them for a week or more. Later, friends ice skated up to the house where they received a warm welcome and in the summer a few families walked down the tow-path from Cotgrave for the garden with its ornaments, flowing water, small bridges, apple trees and aviaries served as an attraction to young children whose visits were further highlighted when they discovered the cockatiels, romped around the garden or along the tow-path with the dog or cat and fed the swans and cygnets that came up to the lock-gate for that precise purpose.

When Wilfred eventually retired, the British Waterways allowed the couple to remain at the house where they continued their rustic pursuits. By this time their children were married and bringing their own children to the house. Both Wilfred and Dolly found themselves with a little more free time on their hands. But the sights and sounds of the surrounding countryside still pleasantly dominated their lives. If Dolly happened to see a kingfisher flashing swiftly by and colourful as a thrown sapphire, she mentioned it to Wilfred. If Wilfred heard the tawny owls hooting through the frost darkened stillness of a winter night he mentioned it to Dolly.

Wishing to record something of the scene around his home Wilfred bought a single lens reflex camera and among the photographs he took were two really splendid shots of a mute swan pen standing over her eggs and turning them with the tip of her bill.

When he reached seventy-five however Wilfred's health began to deteriorate and there were days, Dolly told me, when he wanted to do little else but stay in bed. He began eating less and eventually accepted the advice of a lady doctor who suggested that he spend some time in hospital. Sadly, it was here that he died quietly in his sleep and although Dolly lives at the cottage today (1994) it is still very much the way it was when her husband was alive, although the Thurlbeck Brook is now cut off from the natural bankings of the garden by a deep wall and a hard-core surface has been laid over the tow-path so that Dolly's son and daughter can drive carefully beside the waterway when they take their children to visit their grandmother.

There are still canaries and cockatiels in the garden aviaries and Ben, the friendly dog and Fluff the reclusive cat. Wrens sing from the briars. Robins and blackbirds visit the garden and summer migrants like whinchats and yellow wagtails frequent the tow-path and bordering hedgerows. Tawny owls can still be heard calling in the darkness and most years a pair of mute swans tenant the waterway and rear a brood of cygnets. Mallard also rear their ducklings in the reed-beds.

Dolly has a word for everyone who walks the tow-path and enjoyable have been the times when Tony Stevenson and I have joined her on the bench beside the white picket fence where she has usually enthused about a heron, kestrel or kingfisher that came within sight of the house a few days before our visit or chosen to quietly reminisce about her life spent with Wilfred at their home by Skinner's Lock.

This article, sent to me by Brian Skinner, as being of social and family history interest particularly as this is the cottage where our Skinner/Heighton forebears lived including my great grandmother Mary Tyler and grandmother Annie Mary (Skinner) Heighton. It may be that you have already read this but if not I think you will find it a very touching reminiscence.

The text is a chapter of a book called "Old Nottinghamshire Remembered", published in 1994. It's all about the lock house that our Skinner ancestors occupied for a lot of the 19th century. There's not much new here about our immediate family history, but it gives a lot of interesting background on life by the canal in rural Notts. The book says that the Skinners left the cottage in 1902. I wonder if Mrs Skinner (Mary Tyler) left at the time of her daughter and my grandmother Annie's marriage NB in 1891 Mary (Tyler) Skinner was living in Cotgrave and 1901 in Shepherds Cottage but it may be that the term Cotgrave covered the cottage area
- Shirley (Heighton) Mare.

The Skinners family tree can be found on the 'People' page