

Childhood by the Canal

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I was born in a canal company house, one of three that stand near the canal at Whitford Bridge, Stoke Pound. We lived with mother's parents until our bungalow was built in a field which my parents purchased when the John Corbett estate was sold. Even when we moved, I would spend a lot of time with my grandparents. My great grand dad was the lock keeper for the stretch of canal near to us. My grandfather was a bricklayer based at Tardebigge and my uncle was a carpenter there. So the canal played a very big part in my childhood. It still does as now I only live a few yards further away from it.

The long summer holidays from school meant freedom to play in the local fields and helping to pick the fruit in grand dad's large garden. There was every kind of soft fruit and later fruit from the apple and damson trees. There was so much fruit and no deep freeze so the fruit had to be eaten as it ripened or made into jam. Fruit was also stored in the cellar or in one of the sheds and some was taken to be sold in Bromsgrove market. Summer also meant playing near the canal, waiting for a ride on the canal boats, which some of them would give you.. Another treat was a bag full of chocolate crumb, the raw chocolate on its way up to Cadbury's to be made into chocolate, a treat when sweets were rationed. The bargees knew they could get vegetables and eggs from my grandparents. Most of us learned to swim in the canal.

The local youths met every sunny evening at the next bridge down from Whitford Bridge and spent hours swimming and jumping off the bridge into the canal, often until dusk. When double British Summer Time was introduced no one wanted to leave the water to go home to supper and bed when it was daylight until 11pm.

When the war began, boats went up and down long after dark to get whatever they could to where it was needed. With the blackout they only had a tiny lamp at the front. Often their mooring for the night was near the navigation pub where there were stables into which they could put the horses for the night and across the road a field where the horses could be turned out to graze on summer nights. Sometimes in the dark a horse would go too close to the edge of the canal and fall into the water which fortunately was not deep except near to the locks.

When the children on the boats became school age they were meant to attend school and I think they were left with grandparents who had left the 'cut' so that they got an education but I think it was difficult for the school inspectors to keep track of them.

We always seemed to have a very cold spell when the canal froze over. The menfolk would walk about on the ice and then say alright you can go on it now. So we made long slides on it which was great fun. Then it started to thaw and the ice breaking boat would come down from Tardebigge to open a path for the boats with their cargoes to go up and down once again. There was always something of interest to see. It was a good childhood.