

# THE STAFFORD BRANCH CANAL LOCK HOUSE AT BASWICH

by

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## Introduction

The Stafford Branch Canal / River Sow Navigation was a waterway that once linked the county town of Stafford with the National Waterways Network. Unlike most canals, this navigation was built without an Act of Parliament because Lord Stafford owned all the land. The Navigation opened in February 1816 and was used until the 1920s. Until recently this Waterway had almost been forgotten but now there are plans for restoration and a group of enthusiasts have formed *The Stafford Riverway Link*.

This Navigation was a branch of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. It left the main canal at Baswich, near St.Thomas' Bridge (Bridge 101), opposite the site of the former Baswich Salt Works (now the Baswich Industrial Estate) and there was an elegant Roving Bridge at the Junction. There was then a small pound (about 100 feet long and 20 feet wide) with sandstone walls, and a Lock House on the left. The channel led to a trough aqueduct over a drainage channel, before entering a lock, which was known as Baswich Lock or St.Thomas' Lock. The lock was built to the same dimensions as locks on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal and had a nominal fall of 6 feet 6 inches but the actual amount depended on the river level. Boats would leave the lock and turn left to enter the River Sow directly. After about a mile upstream, boats would enter a short channel that led to a wharf just before Green Bridge in the centre of Stafford. (Ordnance Survey Landranger Sheet 127: from SJ 945 228 to SJ 923 230).

The Navigation was leased initially by Messers Fereday & Company of Gornal Colliery and then by the Moat Colliery Company. In 1838 the Moat Colliery Company assigned their lease (from Lord Stafford) to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company for £50. The Canal Company did not renew the last lease from Lord Stafford when it expired on 25 March 1927.

In July 1816 Fereday was asked to build a house by the lock, and stop planks were stored there in case of accidents; someone was also needed to take care of the paddles. In all probability there was a resident Lock Keeper until the 1890s but after that it would appear that the Canal Company did not employ the inhabitants of the Lock House. At the time of the 1910 Finance Act, the Lock House formed part of the Estate of Captain William Levett of Milford Hall. The Lock House continued to be occupied until 1956.

Today, all that remains at the Branch Canal Heritage Site at Baswich are traces of the Roving Bridge abutments, some stonework indicating the outline of the Basin, some bricks where the Lock House was, and a hawthorn hedge indicating the boundary of the property. The Roving Bridge, Lock House, Aqueduct and Lock have long since gone.

Early in 2010 David Jones discovered that the last occupants of the Lock House were Leslie and Isabella Shaw. They lived in the Lock House from 1929 until 1956, and raised their Family there.

Next, David found and contacted one of their children, Olive Price (née Shaw), who still lives in the Stafford area. Olive has been very generous with her time and shared her memories and those of her sisters, Eileen and Marian. By doing so, Olive has ensured that these memories of the Lock House and surroundings in the 1940s and 1950s will not be lost but will be preserved for future generations.

### **The Stafford Branch Canal Heritage Site at Baswich**

Navigation into Stafford had probably stopped by 1925 – the River Sow was not navigable because of land drainage schemes. It would appear that Stafford Corporation purchased the River Sow and certain properties along its banks and had taken over the Lease between the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company and Lord Stafford just before the expiry of the Lease in 1927. And in 1932, when Stafford Corporation lowered a weir on the River, even pleasure boating on the River Sow came to an end; Edward Morgan, who hired-out boats from the landing-stage under the Royal Brine Baths in Stafford, was forced to sell all his boats, originally costing £40 each for £5 each.

By November 1929 the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Company had stopped up the “Gateway” or Junction with the main canal. And it would seem that the wooden Lock Gates at Baswich had already been removed by the time Olive’s parents moved to the Lock House in 1929.

Olive’s father had no connection with the waterways but worked at W H Dorman & Son, a company that built diesel engines. He tended to work long hours - from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm.

When the Family moved in, the **Basin** by the Lock House had also been filled in and was overgrown with weeds – there was a depression in the ground indicating where the channel had been.

The Lock House was comparatively remote and isolated. Left from the Roving Bridge led to St Thomas’ Bridge (Bridge 101) and Baswich Lane using the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal towpath. Baswich Lane could also be accessed over the fields. Right from the Roving Bridge led to Radford Bank and the Trumpet Inn (now the Radford Bank Inn).

Olive remembers working boats using the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal each day – they were probably carrying coal. On occasions the boats were horse drawn. She also remembers boats at the Salt Works.

Olive recalls the Rivers Sow and Penk flooding periodically. One year was particularly bad but the water did not reach the Lock House even though the centre of Stafford was flooded.

After 1945, the Electoral Registers referred to the Lock House as “The Old Lock House”. The weekly Rent was 8/6 in the late 1940s and increased to 10/- in the 1950s. Olive mentioned that the landlord rarely carried out repairs and by the mid-1950s the Lock House was showing its age. It also lacked modern facilities – there was no piped water, electricity or gas. It was also damp.

The Lock House was condemned early in 1956 and the Family left in the September. The House was demolished soon after, probably sometime in 1957. The top was taken off the Roving Bridge at the Junction probably at the same time.

At the **Junction** it would appear that there wasn't a wooden “finger signpost” similar to those at Great Hayward or Autherley Junctions. If there had been one, then it would have read “Great Hayward, Stafford, Stourport”.

**The Roving Bridge** at the Junction to the Branch Canal was made of brick. It was similar to the roving bridge at Autherley Junction, at the entrance to the Shropshire Union Canal. It was not tarmacked but was of soil and turf. There was a single towpath on the left from the main canal. Olive doesn't recall the Roving Bridge having a metal plaque or a number attached to it. The Bridge was probably free of graffiti – had it not been, then Olive would have remembered any distinctive artwork!

Just through the **Roving Bridge** there was a wooden fence across the old channel and a wooden ‘wicket gate’ across the towpath. The gate was attached to a pole in the former channel in the bridge hole on the right (east) and opened away from the Bridge. The towpath was probably a public right of way. Olive remembers anglers coming this way on Sundays and her mother having water ready on the Range to make tea for them.

On the right and ahead was the **Basin**. It was stone edged at the left but the right edge was just grass/soil. The whole Basin was infilled and overgrown.

On the left was the wall of the **Pigsty**, and then came a wooden fence. Next, on the left, was a **Gate** that opened into the **Garden** where a path led to the front of the **Lock House**.

Looking back at the **Roving Bridge**, Olive remembers that at one time there was a lean-to corrugated ‘tin’ shed (in poor condition) with a sloping roof on the right, against the Bridge. Just a little further along, to the right of this ‘tin’ shed, was the **Overflow Weir**, with a ‘waterfall’, that discharged into the **Commission Drain**.

The **Garden Gate** was made of iron, with concrete posts either side, and about shoulder height. It was hinged on the right (looking towards the house), had a latch on the left, and opened towards the house.

From this gate, a hawthorn hedge followed the boundary and enclosed the **Garden**. The hedge was quite tall, tended to vary in height and provided good

screening. There was no back gate and when the hawthorn hedge reached the **Lock**, the hedge swung to the left and around until it reached the **Commission Drain**. Outside the Garden, in the field on the other side of the overflow weir stream, was a **sheep dip**. This was a square shaped structure dug into the field and lined with stone.

### The Lock House

**The Lock House** was essentially a typical two up, two down property made of red bricks. There were blue-black slates on the roof. The window frames were made of wood except for the Kitchen and Washhouse that had iron/steel window frames. There was a quarry stone floor on the ground level – the stones were arranged “square-on” to the door rather than set in a “diamond” pattern. There were two chimneys: one chimney served the kitchen range on the ground floor and the front bedroom on the first floor. The other chimney was for the copper boiler in the Washhouse. The Living Room wall was plastered and possibly the bedrooms, but the Kitchen and Pantry were probably not. The roof had guttering and there were two drainpipes – the one at the front led to a water butt. At one time the water butt was positioned just around the corner by the east wall. Olive remembers using water from the butt to wash her hair – it was soft water. There was no piped water, so the Family obtained water from a Well in the front garden and used a hand water pump. Neither was there any gas or electricity – the Family used candles, paraffin lamps and hurricane lamps with mantles for lighting. The radio was powered by a battery/accumulator. Olive remembers an aerial that was plugged into the radio but cannot recall if it went outside – certainly there was no pole outside which carried an aerial. None of the rooms had a picture rail or skirting board. None of the windows overlooked the Branch Canal Basin. There was no attic/loft. The Family had pets - Olive mentioned a dog that slept in one of the bedrooms. Other pets included cats and rabbits. There were also ducks.

**Downstairs** were the Living Room and the Kitchen with Pantry off. The Living Room was probably bigger than the Kitchen plus Pantry. The Pantry was probably one quarter the size of the Kitchen. However, some of the foundation walls were uncovered in 2014 and it would appear that the rooms on the ground floor had approximately the following dimensions:

Living Room: 16½ feet x 11 feet depth

Kitchen: 10½ feet x 9 feet depth

Pantry: 6 feet x 9 feet depth

From these measurements, it is probable that the Washhouse, as yet uncovered, was approximately 9 feet x 13½ feet depth.

**Upstairs** were two bedrooms: the Front Bedroom was used by Olive’s parents, while the smaller Back Bedroom was the children’s room.

The Living Room was the main room of the House where the Family spent most time. The Kitchen had a primus stove and cupboard.

Looking at the **Front of the House**: There was a wooden Front Door (with vertical planks) and a window on the right. There was no porch. A narrow step, possibly about 4 inches high, led to the door. The front door was hinged on the right and opened inwards using a latch. There was no letterbox – any mail was pushed under the door. The gap under the door meant that it could be somewhat draughty, particularly in winter – the Family used a draught excluder.

The Front door led into the **Living Room** that had a single window (3 panes high and 2 panes wide). The panes of glass were about 9 or 10 inches square. The quarry stone floor consisted mainly of dark red tiles with some dark blue-black tiles. The tiles were 6 inches square. There were two oak beams in the ceiling running parallel front to back. There was a Range for cooking on the right, complete with pothooks. The Range was cleaned with Black Lead Polish. The open **Stairs** were on the west wall, approached from the far end of the Living Room going up towards the front of the house. There was a door in the middle of the wall (opposite the front door) that was hinged on the left and which opened into the Kitchen.

Then down two steps into the **Kitchen** that had a window at the far end. The window was pivoted in the middle, and was 5 panes high and 4 panes wide. The quarry stone floor consisted of dark blue-black tiles that were about 4 inches square. The brick walls had not been plastered but had been painted. There were no tiles on the wall. On the right was a door into the **Pantry**, which also had a small window, probably 2 panes high and 2 panes wide. The window was probably fixed. The Pantry had a Cold Slab under the window. The quarry stone floor consisted of dark red tiles and dark blue-black tiles 6 inches square – the same as in the Living Room. Olive thinks that the Pantry was a single storey building with a sloping roof.

On the upper floor were two bedrooms.

**Staircase**: From the Living Room there were about 8 stairs against the side-wall, then a flat section before about 4 stairs on the front wall. This led to the **Front Bedroom**. There was a wooden rail in this bedroom, around the stairs. The wooden floorboards were covered with linoleum. There was a fireplace (with chimney) on the east wall, and a small window on the front (south) facing wall – above the front door to the house. The window was 3 panes high and 2 panes wide. On the opposite wall was a door and then down two steps into the **Back Bedroom**. The door was hinged at the left and opened inwards towards the front bedroom.

In the **Back Bedroom** was a window on the opposite (north) wall, above the window in the Kitchen, 2 panes high and 2 panes wide. The wooden floorboards ran parallel front to back.

It seems strange to have a two-step discontinuity on **both** the ground floor and first floor, between the front and back of the house. This might suggest that the house was originally a *one-up one-down* house, which at some point had been extended; however, Olive felt that the house would not have felt right if this had been the case.

Also at the front of the Lock House, on the left, was the **Washhouse**. It was single storey, made of red brick and had a sloping roof with slates. There were smaller dark blue quarry stone tiles on the floor, just like the Kitchen. There was a door at the front and a window on the left (west) wall. The door was hinged at the right and opened inwards. The window was possibly 6 or 7 panes high and 4 or 5 panes across. Towards the top of the front wall, there appeared to be a purpose built hole, as though a brick or two were missing – presumably this was for ventilation. Olive felt that the Washhouse was probably built at the same time as the house, rather than added later – although it was possible to see light where the roof touched the wall of the house in some places – Olive suggested that this may have been due to the state of repair! Inside was an open fireplace with a grate, a brown sink and a Dutch Oven. Olive cannot recall any outlet for this grate and it was never used. There was an old copper boiler by the right (east) wall by the chimney - the mangle was kept in the garden. Olive thought that any gardening or household equipment (spades / forks / brushes etc) was kept in the Washhouse. There was a clothes line, fixed to the end of the Washhouse wall, which went straight out and the other end was tied to the plum tree in the garden - between the **Toilet** and the Water Pump, but set further back.

Beyond the Washhouse was an area used for storing coal and wood. Olive thought that her father may have built a “wooden shed structure” here at one time but is not sure.

The Lock House was surrounded by a **Garden**.

There was a grey-blue brick path in the yard at the front of the house, which changed to a red brick path round the corner. The grey-blue bricks were 9 inches long x 4½ inches wide. The path stopped by the Washhouse door. There was a rough ‘garden path’ down the east side of the house and the hawthorn hedge consisting of small stones, gravel and rough material – nothing properly laid out – it just merged into the garden at the back of the House. The grass was cut using a scythe rather than a lawnmower. There were flowerbeds but no vegetable patch as such. There were gooseberry bushes, red currant bushes, damson trees and a plum tree. There was rhubarb by the back wall of the house and a greengage tree in the garden at the back.

At the front of the house in the garden, opposite the Washhouse door, was a **Well** with a **hand water pump**. The well was about 6 feet deep. The pump was mounted on smoky-blue brickwork (arranged in the shape of a 50p coin – a regular curve heptagon). In cold winters the water froze in the pipe and Olive’s father poured salt water down to melt the ice and “prime the pump”. In summer, if the water level was low, the pump needed to be primed by pouring water in at the top. Olive remembers her father ‘servicing’ the pump from time to time and attending to the clack valve.

Also at the front of the house were a **Toilet** (to the left) (west) and a **Pigsty** (to the right). There was also a chicken run by the toilet.

The **Toilet** was built of red brick and probably had a slate roof. The roof slanted down from front to back. The wooden door was hinged on the right and opened inwards. The toilet consisted of a wooden plank bench seat and was emptied weekly.

The **Pigsty** consisted of two areas. There was a brick enclosure, which had a covered area with a slate roof where the pigs would go at night, and an open area. Olive remembers her parents having 2 pigs but slaughter time was emotional. Later, the pigsty was used for pet rabbits.

### **Acknowledgements**

David Jones would like to thank Olive Price and her friend Peggy Payne for giving such a unique insight into what the Lock House and surroundings were like in the 1940s and 1950s.

David Jones would also like to acknowledge the key role that Mary and Ray Picking (members of Stafford Boat Club) played in finding Olive Price. It was serendipitous that their friends Tony and Peggy Payne knew Olive Price – they had kept in touch with her since school days.

The article has also used various references from the *Staffordshire Advertiser* and *Staffordshire Newsletter*.

### **Note**

Further information about the Stafford Branch Canal / River Sow Navigation can be seen on the Stafford Riverway Link website: [www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk](http://www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk) , including photographs and plans of the Baswich Heritage Site.

### **Other Reading**

*The Stafford Riverway Link (SRL)*: D.J.Jones 2005 at the SRL website: [www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk](http://www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk) .

*Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal*: J.Ian Langford 1974 (Goose & Sons Publishers Ltd., Cambridge): pages 39-46. ISBN 0 900404 22 1.

*The Canals of the West Midlands: (Vol.5)*: Charles Hadfield 1966 (David & Charles Publishers Ltd, Newton Abbot): pages 130 & 280. ISBN 7153 4660 1.

*Communication with Canals in the Stafford Area*: S.R and E.Broadbridge (1970), Journal of the Staffordshire Industrial Archaeological Society (Silver Jubilee Edition no 15 1994 pages 27-39). ISSN 0264 7346.

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