

## SRL HERITAGE REPORT (JANUARY 2024)

### Background

When the group which founded what was to become the Stafford Riverway Link CIC in February 1997 there was very little information about the Stafford Branch Canal / River Sow Navigation in the public domain.

In those days, even waterways guide books either made no mention of the Branch Canal or just made a passing reference, usually a sentence or two to the effect that Stafford was “formerly connected with the main line of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal by a mile-long branch entered via Baswich Lock” and that the “branch consisted of a canalised section of the River Sow and became derelict during the early 1920s.” Most passing boaters on the main line would fail to notice the overflow weir where the Junction had been and those that did notice would know no more than the brief observation in the guide book.

Local people too, were largely unaware of Stafford's waterways heritage.

Several books about the local history of Stafford did mention the River Sow. Some had pictures of the Royal Brine Baths and there were postcards showing pleasure boating on the river during the early part of the twentieth century. However, there were no pictures of the Coal Wharf in Stafford or working boats plying their trade. And neither were any features of the Branch Canal at Baswich mentioned; no mention of the Lock House, the Basin, the Aqueduct, the Lock or the Roving Bridge at the Junction. All these had been demolished and swept away years before, all had gone by the mid-1970s except for two very small sections of abutment wall of the Roving Bridge and some unassuming brickwork of the Basin wall leading to where the Aqueduct would have been.

### First steps

The founding group established clear aims and objectives and recognised the importance of the waterway's history as one of the key elements to stimulate public interest in this aspect of Stafford's industrial heritage. It would also guide us as the project developed.

In addition to searching for past records relating to the Branch Canal (including pictures, plans and maps), the route of the Branch Canal was photographed and relevant features that were extant were recorded. We were mindful that what we were doing was for posterity, an onerous responsibility.

David Jones began researching the history of the Branch Canal and was assisted by others in the early years. The aim was to find primary and secondary sources of information and then create new resources based on that research - for example, finding out about the various Lock Keepers and the families who had lived in the Lock House, the story of ordinary people whose lives have often been neglected in the past.

In the beginning, four books were invaluable in finding out about the history of the Branch Canal.

- *Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales* (1904).
- *The Canals of the West Midlands* by Charles Hadfield (1966).
- *Communication with Canals in the Stafford Area* by S.R. and E. Broadbridge (1970).
- *Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal* by J. Ian Langford (1974).

Over the years, there were many visits to various archives and record offices, libraries, museums and numerous organisations to uncover any information relating to Stafford's waterway heritage. These included:

- Staffordshire Record Office (Stafford).
- William Salt Library (Stafford).
- Stafford Library.
- Wolverhampton City Archives.
- Shropshire Archives (Shrewsbury).
- National Archive (Kew, London).
- The British Library (London).
- National Waterways Museum (Gloucester).

Contact was also made with various organisations and people including:

- Black Country Living Museum.
- Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society.
- Staffordshire Industrial Archaeology Society.
- Stafford Historical and Civic Society.
- Berkswich History Society.
- Stafford Boat Club.
- Wolverhampton Boat Club.
- National Waterways Museum (Ellesmere Port).
- Environment Agency.
- Inland Waterways Association.
- British Waterways (now Canal and River Trust).
- Olive Price (née Shaw): she was born and grew up in the Lock House.
- Eunice Finney and her late husband, Bill: the owners of the Baswich site land.
- Roy Lewis: he has written many local history books including the *Stafford Street Series* and *Radford to Stafford: A Transport Saga*, and has postcards of Stafford and the surrounding area.

Various records were consulted including:

- Leases relating to the Stafford Branch Canal and the Coal Wharf in Stafford.
- Trade Directories such as Kelly's.
- Census Records 1841-1911.
- The 1939 National Register.
- Electoral Registers.
- BMD Indexes, used to order some Birth, Marriage and Death Certificates (GRO).
- Parish Registers (Baptism, Marriage and Burial Records).
- The National Probate Calendar (Wills and Probate Records).
- Stafford Town Council Records.
- Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Company Committee Meeting Minutes.
- Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society Records (Minutes and *Broadsheets*).
- Staffordshire Past Track Collection (photographs, pictures, paintings and maps).
- The National Library of Scotland (Ordnance Survey historical maps).
- Valuation Books (Domesday Books) Under Finance Act 1910.
- Newspapers such as the *Staffordshire Advertiser* and *Staffordshire Newsletter*.
- The Aerofilms Photographic Collection (*Britain from Above* Project).

In addition, the internet proved to be an invaluable tool, particularly when searching Archives' online catalogues.

Over the years all this built up an extensive body of knowledge. The results of much of this research are now in the public domain and freely available on the History Pages of SRL Website: <https://www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk/History.html> .

In 2010 careful detective work led to Olive Price (née Shaw) being traced. She was one of the last residents of the Lock House. She was born in the Lock House and lived there until 1956, just before the house was demolished. Olive provided us with the first pictures we had of the Lock House and the Roving Bridge. She also gave very detailed information about many of the features of the whole Baswich Site, including the layout of the Lock House, complete with a description of fittings and furnishings. She described her memories and experiences growing up there and has provided a unique insight into everyday life there during the 1940s and 1950s. Without her tremendous input, our knowledge and understanding would be that much poorer.

In 2014 *Britain from Above* uploaded twenty images of the former Baswich Salt Works taken in 1951 on their Website. Although the focus of these aerial photographs was the Salt Works, they fortuitously included the surrounding area. Twelve of these photographs are very relevant to the Stafford Branch Canal; zooming into each photograph revealed the Baswich Site. The importance of these images cannot be underestimated, they give us a better understanding of the whole Site as it was in 1951 and showed many important features including:

- the approaches to the Junction along the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal,
- the entrance to the former Stafford Branch Canal,
- the Roving Bridge at the Junction,
- the former Basin,
- the former towing path,
- the Lock House, including garden, pigsty, outside toilet, well, paths, hedges, the sheep dip,
- the Overflow Weir,
- the approximate position of the Lock,
- the course of the channel of the former Branch Canal, from below the Lock to where it met the River Sow,
- the Rivers Sow and Penk (before realignment), including the Ladder Bridge,
- other general features, including other bridges and watercourses, and pipes transporting brine to the Salt Works, and
- the Salt Works Canal Arm.

The images of the Lock House also clarified the arrangement of the upper floor of the building and have allowed the remains of the ground floor, unearthed by Work Parties in 2014 and 2015, to be interpreted with greater certainty.

### **Recovery of artifacts and items relating to the Baswich Site**

It was recognised that the site at Baswich had been compromised by various initiatives over the years, including the realignment of the Rivers Sow and Penk in the 1970s and the use of part of the site as a through route for contractor's vehicles during modifications to Baswich Railway Bridge (101A) in the early 2000s.

Having said that, any items found in the course of excavations were put to one side, they were a link to the past. And original building material such as bricks and stonework in the rubble were collected and recycled, and, whenever possible conserved, cleaned and dressed for reuse.

In 2004 Channel 4 Television was asked whether the Stafford Branch and the Baswich site might be a suitable subject for a *Time Team* programme; it would allow us to learn more and at the same time raise the profile of Stafford's waterway heritage. Oliver Twinch, then *Time Team's* Assistant Producer, replied but wanted specific information about the "Lock House, Basin and Pound Lock", information that we did not have at that time, and the opportunity passed. It was several years before we had sufficient information and be in a position to consider excavating the site.

The owners of the Baswich site land were identified in 2009 and have been very supportive and encouraging. With their permission, the first "dig" at the Baswich site was in September 2009 and Work Parties began in 2012. The site of the Lock House and garden has been cleared of rubble and the footings of the Lock House walls uncovered and stabilised. The rubble was mainly demolition debris from the House, bricks and stonework, and included roof tiles, pieces of the cast iron cooking range, various domestic items, jars and bottles, broken pottery, pieces of clay pipes and an 1861 penny. Excavating the Basin revealed more debris, bricks and stonework, broken pottery and a number of beer / soft drink bottles in excellent condition; there were bottles from Lockett & Sons (Cannock & Stafford), W.D.Batkin Ltd (Stafford), Bamford, Price & Co (Market Street, Stafford) and Lichfield Brewery Co Ltd (Lichfield). There was also a stoneware bottle (Great Haywood Brewery) dating from the 1850s.

The area where the rubble had been has been re-established as a garden, with a lawn, flowers and plants including lavender and Solomon's seal. The aim is to reinstate it as a typical cottage garden. The hawthorn and holly hedge around the perimeter has been restored and the *Woodland Trust* provided saplings.

### **Raising Public Awareness of Stafford's Waterway Heritage**

The SRL is continually attempting to raise public awareness of Stafford's Waterways Heritage by encouraging members of the public to know more about the project.

This is being done in a variety of ways including:

- Having a dedicated SRL Website, operational since 2009, thanks to Paul Bryan.
- Having an SRL Facebook page which has about 600 followers including a number of local community groups.
- From time to time the SRL receives publicity in local newspapers (*Express & Star* and *Staffordshire Newsletter*) and articles have been published in national waterways magazines and newspapers such as *Canal Boat*, *Waterways World* and *Towpath Talk*.
- Articles have been written for various magazines including articles in the *Railway & Canal Historical Society Journal* in November 2018 and March 2022.
- Having permanent displays of SRL historic pictures at *Sun Inn* (Bridge Street, Stafford) and *The Bod* (Bodmin Avenue, Baswich), both *Titanic Brewery* establishments.

- Having regular social evenings either at the *Sun Inn* in Stafford or Stafford Boat Club, and usually with a guest speaker.
- Presentations promoting the SRL have been given to community groups, canal societies and boat clubs by Ivor Hind, John Potter and David Jones.
- Having “stands” at waterways events (e.g. IWA Festivals and local waterways festivals such as at Norbury) and at Stafford Tourist Board promotional events (e.g. at Stafford Castle).
- Being involved with Baswich Canal Group activities.
- SRL members have been interviewed on *BBC Radio Stoke* about the progress of the project.
- The SRL featured on the local *BBC Midlands Today* television programme.
- Working with Staffordshire County Council's Archive & Heritage Department, and with Staffordshire Library and Arts Service, a display is being planned to exhibit some artifacts recovered from the Lock House site and the Basin. Originally arranged to start in May 2020 but postponed due to Covid, the aim is to have a display at Stafford Library (12 February – 16 March 2024) and Stone Library (25 March – 27 April 2024) in the first instance. Then there could be a second round of displays with a completely different set of items. All this will raise the profile of the SRL and will bring the waterways heritage of Stafford to the attention of a wider audience, and hopefully encourage many more people to want to know more.

And at the Baswich Site:

- A traditional wooden Fingerpost sign (English Oak), pointing the way to Stafford (and Great Haywood, Wolverhampton and River Canal Rescue), was erected in 2015 and unveiled by Olive Price. It is in a highly visible position for members of the public (walkers, cyclists and anglers) and passing boaters to see. We have the late John Mountfort and Alan Gossage to thank for making the 15 feet tall Fingerpost.
- A Large Notice Board, also in a prominent position by the Basin, informs people about the project.
- The very fact that people can see that there is activity at the site is encouraging them to stop, look, ask and find out more. We have Brian Hales and John Potter to thank for coordinating Work Parties at the site, and Geoff Hales for consolidating the Lock House footings; we are fortunate in having so many enthusiastic volunteers who are making such valuable contributions in advancing the project.
- There have been several organised guided walks for members of the public following the route of the River Sow and Branch Canal from Stafford town centre to the junction with the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.
- There have been several “Open Days” there over the years.
- The first “Open Weekend” (September 2019) was very well attended by local people, many of whom were finding out about the project for the first time.
- The 25th anniversary of the SRL’s founding was celebrated with a very successful and popular “Open Weekend” (28 and 29 May 2022) at the Baswich Site; this Event was also timed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the opening of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

We feel that the SRL is contributing much to Stafford's cultural, social, historical and industrial heritage, and has rescued this part of Stafford's history from being lost. Gradually, Stafford's waterway heritage is beginning to reveal its secrets. There is still much to be done.

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