

THE STAFFORD BRANCH CANAL LOCK HOUSE AT BASWICH

by

David Jones

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. The Lock House continued to be occupied until 1956.

Today, all that remains at the Stafford 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 stopped by 1927 when the last Lease expired.

It seems that the wooden Lock Gates at Baswich had already been removed by the time Olive's parents, Leslie and Isabella Shaw, moved to the Lock House in 1929.

Her father had no connection with the waterways but worked at W H Dorman & Son – a company that built diesel engines.

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 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.

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.

Just through the Roving Bridge there was a wooden fence across the old channel and a metal 'wicket gate' across the towpath. The towpath was probably a public right of way.

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 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. From this gate, a hawthorn hedge followed the boundary and enclosed the **Garden**. 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**.

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. There were two chimneys: one chimney served the range on the ground floor and the front bedroom on the first floor. The other chimney was for the copper boiler in the Washhouse. 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.

Downstairs were the Living Room and Kitchen with Pantry off.

Upstairs were two bedrooms. The Front Bedroom was used by Olive's parents, while the Back Bedroom was the children's room.

Looking at the **Front of the House**: There was a wooden Front Door and a window on the right. A narrow step, possibly about 4 inches high, led to the door. There was no letterbox – any mail was pushed under the door.

The Front door led into the **Living Room*** that had a single window. The quarry stone floor consisted mainly of dark red tiles with some dark blue-black tiles. There were two oak beams in the ceiling. There was a Range for cooking on the right. 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 opened into the Kitchen.

Then down two steps into the **Kitchen*** that had a window at the far end. The quarry stone floor consisted of dark blue-black tiles. On the right was a door into the **Pantry**, which also had a small window. Olive thinks that the Pantry was a single storey building with a sloping roof.

[* Olive said that the Living Room was known as the *Front Kitchen*, while the Kitchen was called the *Back Kitchen*.]

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. There was a fireplace (with chimney) on the east wall, and a small window on the front (south) facing wall. On the opposite wall was a door and then down two steps into the **Back Bedroom**.

In the **Back Bedroom** was a window on the opposite (north) wall, above the window in the Kitchen.

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 was a door at the front and a window on the left (west) wall. There were dark blue quarry stone tiles on the floor. Inside was an open fireplace with a grate, a brown sink and a Dutch Oven. There was an old copper boiler by the right (east) wall by the chimney.

Beyond the Washhouse was an area used for storing coal and wood.

At the front of the house in the garden, opposite the Washhouse door, was a **Well** with a **hand water pump**.

Also at the front of the house were a **Toilet** (to the left)(west) and a **Pigsty** to the right.

The **Toilet** was built of red brick and probably had a slate roof. The toilet consisted of a wooden plank bench seat and was emptied weekly.

There were two parts to the **Pigsty**. 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.

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 path stopped by the Washhouse door.

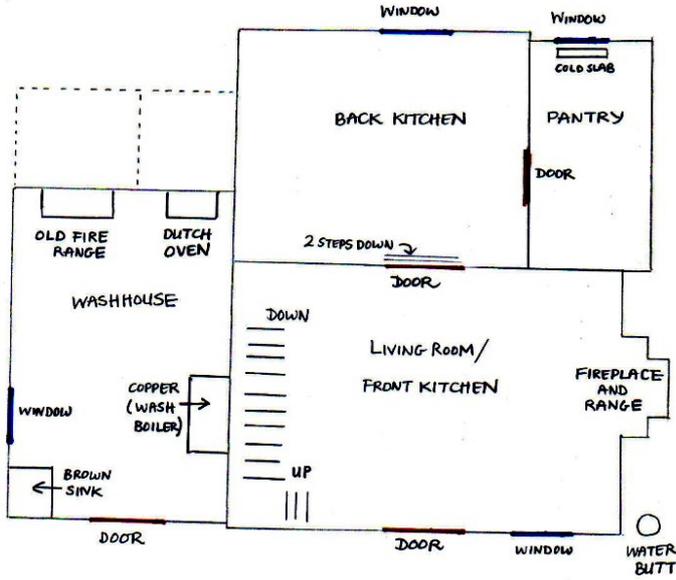
Acknowledgements

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.

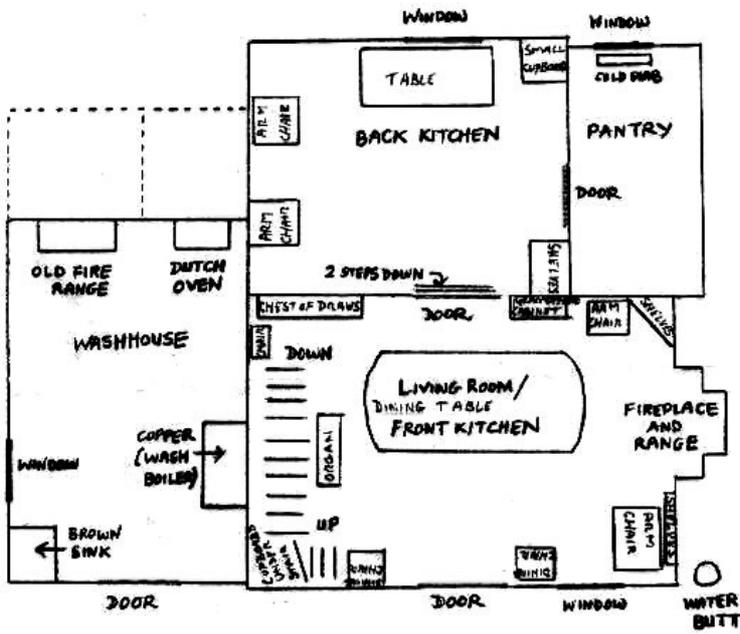
David Jones would also like to acknowledge the key role that Mary and Ray Picking (members of Stafford Boat Club) played in finding Olive Price. It was serendipitous that their friends Tony and Peggy Payne knew Olive Price - they had kept in touch with her since school days.

A modified version of this article appeared in the April 2011 edition of *Canal Boat Magazine* (pages 60 – 63).

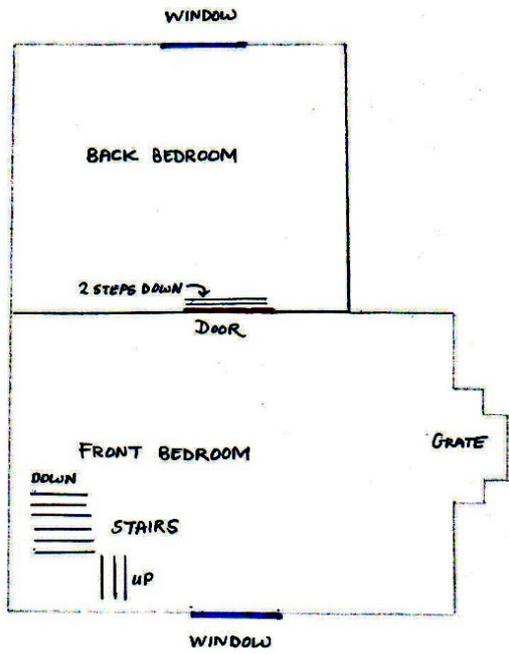
APPENDIX: Plans and Photographs



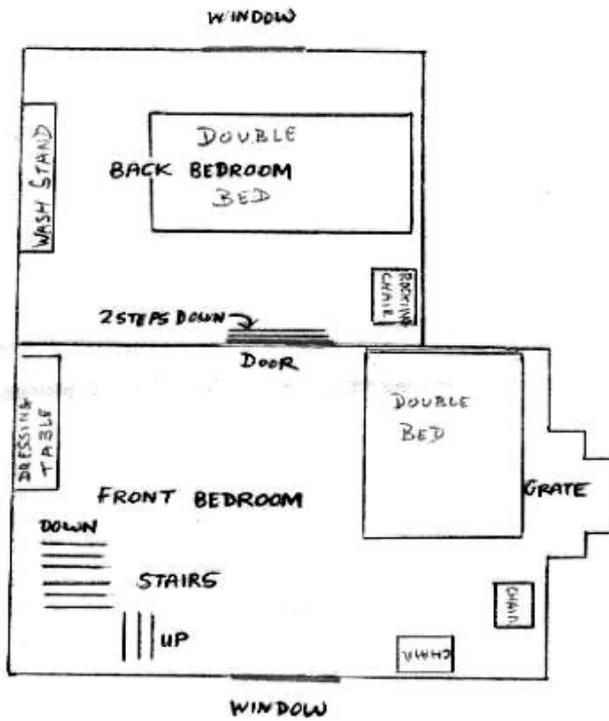
1. Lock House Ground Floor Basic Plan.



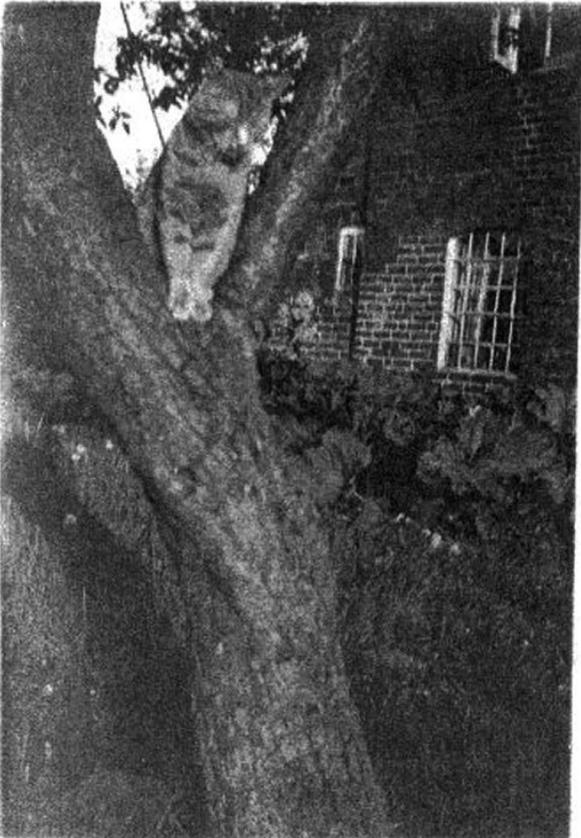
1a. Lock House Ground Floor c.1950.



2. Lock House Upper Floor Basic Plan.



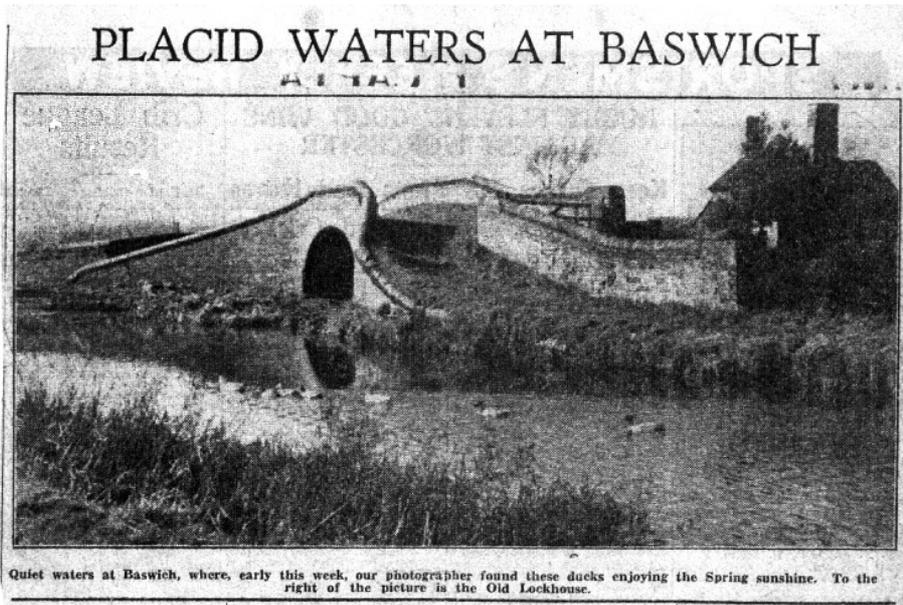
2a. Lock House Upper Floor c.1950.



5. This photograph was possibly taken in the 1940s and shows part of the back of the Lock House. The Kitchen Window is on the right and the smaller Pantry Window is just visible on the left. The Back Bedroom Window is above. The family cat is in the greengage tree. There is some rhubarb growing by the house. [Courtesy of Olive Price]



6. This photograph was probably taken around 1947 and shows Olive Shaw (aged about 8) by the Pigsty with the Roving Bridge beyond. Olive is holding a small toy pram – a 'Dinky' size toy. Notice the metal railing fence across the bridge hole with 'wicket gate' across the former towpath. The chimney is from the Saltworks beyond the bridge. [Courtesy of Olive Price]



7. This is the only known image of the Roving Bridge at the Junction viewed from the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. It appeared in the *Staffordshire Newsletter* on 11 March 1950. [Courtesy of the *Staffordshire Newsletter*]



8 & 9. Two views of the Roving Bridge at Atherley (Wolverhampton) at the junction of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal and the Shropshire Union Canal. This bridge has many similarities to the former Roving Bridge at Baswich. (May 2010)





10. The remains of the Basin and some of the edging stones leading to the former Aqueduct and Lock. Taken looking west towards the hawthorn hedge. (August 2010)



11. The remains of the Basin and some of the edging stones leading to the former Aqueduct and Lock. Taken from by the hawthorn hedge and looking north. (August 2010)



12. Looking up (south) towards the site of the Roving Bridge; towpath and hawthorn hedge to the right, and site of the Lock House Back Garden to the right of the hedge. (August 2010)



13. Another view looking towards the site of the Roving Bridge; towpath and hawthorn hedge, and site of Lock House to the right of the hedge. (August 2010)



14 & 15. Two views looking back along the hawthorn hedge towards the site of the Aqueduct and Lock. Site of the Lock House on the left (14) and the Basin (15) on the right. The path into the Lock House front garden is visible to the left. (August 2010)



16. Looking (south) towards the site of the Roving Bridge at the Junction of the Branch Canal with the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. The picture was taken close to the site of the Pigsty. (August 2010)



17. The remains of right-hand (west) abutment of the Roving Bridge. (August 2010)



18. The remains of the right-hand (west) abutment of the Roving Bridge, showing the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal with St Thomas' Bridge (101) just visible. (August 2010)



19. The entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards St Thomas' Bridge (101). The remains of the left-hand (east) abutment are visible. (August 2010)



20. The entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards Radford. The remains of the right-hand (west) abutment are just visible. The picture is taken from about the midpoint of the former bridge-hole. (August 2010)



21. Another view of the entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards Radford. (August 2010)



22. A closer view of the right-hand (west) abutment taken from the entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards Radford. (August 2010)



23. A view of the left-hand (east) abutment (right-hand from the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal) taken from the entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards St Thomas' Bridge (101). (August 2010)



24. Another view of the left-hand (east) abutment (right-hand from the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal) looking towards the entrance to the former Branch Canal looking towards Radford. (August 2010)



25. Olive Price (née Shaw) (right) and Peggy Payne (left) at the site of the former Lock House. (September 2010)



26. Electricity pylons are an ever-present feature of the landscape at Baswich. (August 2010)

Sources

(a) Images 1-2, 8-26: David Jones.
(b) Images 3 – 6: and 27 Olive Price.
(c) Image 7: *Staffordshire Newsletter*.

Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, St Thomas', Baswich



27a. The photograph was probably taken in the 1940s. The photograph shows the main Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, between the entrance to the Branch Canal and St Thomas' Bridge (101). A rural landscape is opposite.



27b. The photograph was probably taken in the 1940s. The photograph shows a working boat passing the entrance to the Branch Canal (left) travelling along the main Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. Part of the Roving Bridge is visible on the left of the picture. St Thomas' Bridge (101) is just visible in the background.



27c. The photograph was probably taken in the 1940s. The photograph seems to show a holiday boat approaching the entrance to the Branch Canal along the main Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal travelling towards St Thomas' Bridge (101). The Saltworks is opposite. The Railway Bridge is visible in the distance