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TOWPATH WALKERS OF STAFFORD

by

D J Jones

A Tale of Old Stafford

Have you ever walked the towpath at Stafford? The section of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal at Baswich? Between St Thomas' Bridge and Radford Bridge?

Have you ever felt a cool, cold wind like an icy finger gently caressing your neck and face? An eerie, tickling sensation that travels the length of your spine? Have you ever heard the sound of moving water there, a hint of gurgling, or seen the rippling waters in the moonlight swirling in the breeze? The hint of mustiness in the air? Have you ever seen the figure that perhaps is not there? Just an illusion, or not?

I have walked the towpath here many times over the years. The first time was in January 1997. Yes – 7 January. Tuesday 7 January. I remember it well. How could I forget? Do you remember 1997? It was the year Princess Di was killed in that car crash in a Paris underpass.

I'd been told by a local that "all was not quite right with the towpath" and had come prepared with a sturdy pair of walking boots. Sometimes towpaths deteriorate quite quickly in winter.

I'd caught the bus from Stafford to Baswich – much later than I had originally planned – and then walked up Baswich Lane to join the Staffs & Worcs at St. Thomas' Bridge. The bridges have numbers as well as names. Believe it or not, St. Thomas' Bridge is Bridge 101. I know ... Bridge 101! Possibly as bad as Room 101?!

I intended to walk along the towpath to Radford Bank and have a Carvery at *The Trumpet*. The vision of food appeared to increasingly loom large in my mind! My nose imagined the smell of the succulent roast and before long my taste buds had been activated! To walk or not to walk? That was the question! I headed purposefully along the towpath towards Radford. The sun had set and dusk was giving way to darkness.

Passing an overflow weir at a bend opposite the former Baswich Salt Works, I was soon at the Railway Bridge (100A), a straight stretch then led to Baswich Bridge (100). All very pleasant and most picturesque in summer. Even the electricity pylons have a characteristic beauty, imposing their presence across the landscape. And the towpath was well-maintained – at least in this section! I heard the sound of a train rumbling over the bridge behind me. Darkness had quickly encroached on the scene and it had started to rain. The mistiness rose continuously from the waters and rolled onto the towpath.

I was approaching Meadow Bridge (99) when I saw a shadowy figure ahead, coming towards me on the towpath. The figure had already reached the Bridge. So, I had company on the towpath. I saw the waspish figure appear momentarily out of the darkness. Just a flash of something and then it was gone only to reappear out of the mist and disappear again before reappearing. And then – nothing! There was no sign of anyone. At the time I didn't give it much thought. After all, the person had probably decided to turn round or had gone up the steps. Perhaps the teasing odours from *The Trumpet* had been too tempting for them too? The waters now glistened in the pale moonlight, the raindrops danced merrily on the surface.

However, as I reached Meadow Bridge I felt uneasy – it was completely illogical. It was then that I experienced a strange sensation. I felt a cool, cold wind like an icy finger gently caress my neck and face. An eerie, tickling sensation travelled the length of my spine. I heard the sound of moving water there, a hint of gurgling and saw the rippling waters in the moonlight swirling in the breeze. There was a hint of mustiness in the air. I was sure I had seen a figure but perhaps I had been mistaken and there was nothing there. Perhaps I had imagined it and it was just an illusion, or not. But I sensed that I was not alone.

“Hello, hello - any one there?” I called out somewhat apprehensively.

There was no response. All was quiet.

“Hello, hello?” I enquired again. I listened.

No, there was nothing. How strange. Just tricks of the mind! Flights of fancy! It's surprising what the darkness does. But to be quite honest, I had expected to see my fellow traveller a few feet away but ... there was no one. No one at all.

So, back to reality and onwards to Radford Bridge (98), up the steps and food! I quickened my pace. It was now raining heavily – I should have brought my umbrella.

The Trumpet had been refurbished and rebranded as a Carvery. I had been there once before the renovation and I was looking forward to the meal. Who can resist the aromas? Do they tempt people like this on purpose, like sirens floating in the breeze?

The Board outside proudly announced that every Tuesday there was a Quiz and every Thursday was a Theme Evening. I opened the front door and was pleasantly surprised with what I saw. I was immediately impressed and delighted to see the new décor, genuine old world furnishings, Victorian period, the circular tables and sturdy chairs – all repro of course. There were period paintings on the wall – I liked the one of the

mail coach arriving at an Inn. Gas lamps were tastefully placed around and they added to the charm. A bit dim though, but certainly gave the place 'atmosphere'. A Victorian period refit - yes a nice touch I thought. Different, certainly different. And the bar staff too had been encouraged to join in the mirth, they were dressed in 'period costume', quite Dickensian.

I couldn't see any other customers though – too late for the Quiz then. Should have gone in earlier – my own fault.

The landlord came over and began chatting. He was a friendly chap with piercing eyes - by the name of Hulme. George Hulme. Had an air of authority – possibly a former policeman – you could see why the Brewery appointed him – a no nonsense sort of person, down to earth. He'd certainly keep order in the House.

"Have one on me. This is the one I like, the *Queen's Ale* – and very popular with the locals" he offered.

Good man, Mr Hulme, he knows how to encourage people back. Good marketing tactic.

"Come far?" enquired my host.

"From St. Thomas' – along the towpath" I replied.

"Oh, you'd have passed Lizzie then? She's just left for home. Did you see her?" asked Mr Hulme.

"No, haven't met anyone ... although I thought I saw someone coming towards me by Meadow Bridge but they must have turned round or gone up the steps", I replied.

"Surprised you didn't see her, only left a few minutes ago. Well, perhaps she got a move-on.

"Interesting soul. She's been married for 10 years. Elizabeth Dale (Lizzie to some), married 24 year old William Dale when she was 40 years old at the Register Office in Stafford – told him she was 30!"

"Naughty, naughty!", I said, "A cradle snatcher? Or simply true love strikes again?"

Mr Hulme continued, "William took on her four children from her first marriage – not many people would do that – good man William. They live up the Canal, at St Thomas', in the Lock House. They have two children of their own. He's a gardener".

"Can't recall seeing the Lock House as I was coming down", I said.

"Just by the Bridge, where the Canal Arm goes off to Stafford", said Mr Hulme, "but the hawthorn hedge can screen the house", he added. "Haven't been up that way for some time myself, but if it's not cut as often as it should it quickly grows wild it does.

“Lizzie’s a good woman”, continued Mr Hulme, “heart of gold – my wife hasn’t been well for some time and Lizzie visits her regularly. Cheers her up no end. What they talk about, well who knows? You know what women are, gossip and all that”.

“Does Mrs Dale keep a Diary?” I said mischievously, with tongue in cheek. Mr Hulme looked puzzled. I decided it was wise not to press the question!

A couple of *working boatmen* appeared at the bar and Mr Hulme got up – he’d some business to finish with one of them, something to do with delivering coal. I really shouldn’t listen in to other peoples’ conversations should I? I vaguely caught the name of one of them – Tom Beckett or Bucket I think. I suspect they are going to a Boat Rally to demonstrate the life and times of the *Number Ones*. Good to see the old traditions living on. I thought about the lives of the old working boatmen compared with now. Yes – it had been a hard life and the sentimentalists had been putting some spin on the ‘good old days’! The Staffs & Worcs had itself seen many changes. Opened in 1772, it was privately owned until nationalisation in 1948 – it had survived the Railway Age. Of course the winter of 1963 finished off canal carrying and there weren’t many boats until leisure boating came along. And to think that this Canal was nearly lost – yes, we have a lot to thank Rolt and Aickman for.

“Carvery Sir? Carvery?”

I looked up. A fresh faced young man was standing attentively by my table.

“Didn’t see you come in Sir. Are you having a Carvery?”

I was somewhat taken aback. I blinked. What I saw seemed unreal. It was as if I had awoken from a dream!

That was clever, I thought. They’d turned the lights on and I could see they’d rearranged the room and changed the furnishings. How about that? That was quick! Quite remarkable!

“Yes ... Yes ...” I said, “Do you have the turkey roast?”

“Yes – just go to the counter when you are ready, but don’t leave it too long, it’s been very popular tonight and there’s not much left.”

I looked around and saw that the place was packed, absolutely chock-a-block. They were doing a roaring trade. But there was an eerie hush about the place. And then I heard a clear, schoolmasterly voice:

“Question 10. Who was known as ‘The Lady of the Lamp’?”

The Quiz was in full swing. I could see one person using their mobile phone. ‘Phone a friend’ time, I thought.

Then I thought some more. How strange. I must have nodded off. Yes, nodded off. Who would have thought that? A combination of fresh air, a brisk walk and the

Queen's Ale? Yes! And my glass had gone! I must have drunk the lot! The *Queen's Ale* certainly packs a punch!

Couldn't see Mr Hulme though – he was probably maintaining a low profile during the Quiz – letting others take charge – the art of delegation, the sign of a skilful manager!

Yes. The Carvery was just what was needed. I went to the Carvery Deck.

“Turkey please” I said to the neatly dressed Chef who was already in position.

“Yorkshire or seasoning?” he asked.

“Seasoning please” I said – the Yorkshire would have half-filled the plate!

There was a good serving of meat – well within tolerance, so I won't be complaining to Mr Hulme or going to 'weights and measures'! And then onto the vegetables! Self service of course – peas, onions, roast potatoes, boiled potatoes, carrots, cauliflower, green beans, parsnips ... and the gravy, mus'n't forget the gravy. Yes – I recommend the Carvery – good value for money and honest food, you know what you are getting. It is quite remarkable watching how some people are able to balance so much food heaped on their plate and successfully return to their seats without loss!

Was I going to be asked if “everything is all right”? I was not to be disappointed.

I enjoyed the meal and then it was time for off – I didn't want to miss the bus from Radford back to Stafford. I still couldn't see Mr Hulme, a pity. I wanted to tell him I liked the new set-up, quite an experience! It had all been 'service with a smile'.

I reflected on the day's events. Some of it didn't make sense. I'll have to do that walk again! Check the route so to speak.

I have walked that section of the towpath many times since. I am always somewhat expectant and a little on edge but I goad myself forward! Usually it's the same – the same strange sensation – but not always, there doesn't seem to be a pattern. I sense that I am not alone, as though someone is accompanying me along the towpath. Sometimes I am certain that I can see a figure by Meadow Bridge but then, the next instant, no one. And it doesn't seem to matter if it's day or night. I understand that I am not the only one to have experienced this phantom of the imagination. Have you?

Years later my researches into the history of Stafford's Waterways took me to many places – local archives and the like.

On one occasion I came across the *Staffordshire Advertiser* of 16 January 1897. Sandwiched between “Pantomime at the Lyceum” and “Dance at Seighford” was an article head-lined “Drowned in the Canal”. This reported the inquest into the death of Elizabeth Dale (aged 50) whose body had been found in the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal near the *Trumpet Inn* on the morning of Friday 8 January 1897. She was married to William Dale, a gardener, and had lived at St Thomas' Lock House. The Coroner, Mr Morgan, stated that “the deceased lived on friendly terms

with her husband, who lodged in Stafford during the winter months". Elizabeth Dale was in good health and had left home on the Thursday afternoon to go to Stafford and had called at the *Trumpet Inn* at Radford on her way back. She was friendly with the landlord's wife. The landlord was a Mr Hulme and he said that as his wife was unwell, Mrs Dale would often call round. Apparently Mrs Dale was partial to whisky and had left at closing time. It was a dark night and it had been raining – but Mrs Dale had said she could find her way home as she was familiar with the route. It was supposed that Mrs Dale had accidentally fallen into the Canal and her body was found the next morning. As there was no evidence of foul play, the Coroner returned a verdict of accidental death. Elizabeth Dale is buried in Baswich Church Yard.

I found that Elizabeth had married twice. Her first husband was Thomas Hudson. They were married in 1872 and had four children. In 1881 they were living in the Queensville area of Stafford. Thomas Hudson died of a heart problem in 1883 aged 32. Elizabeth then married William Dale in 1886 and they moved to St Thomas' Lock House around 1894.

William Dale moved from the Lock House soon after Elizabeth's death. In 1900 he married 37 year old Elizabeth Bird at St Paul's Church in Stafford. At first they lived in Pilgrim Street, and then at Court Mill Bank. William died of pneumonia in 1904. He was 40.

The Lock House was inhabited until 1956 and was demolished soon after. Today, you can see some discarded bricks and a hawthorn hedge. The Lock has long since gone. It is thought that the Bridge at the entrance to the Stafford Branch Canal was demolished in the 1970s – all that remains of where it was is some brickwork and an overflow weir at a bend opposite the former Baswich Salt Works between St Thomas' Bridge and the Railway Bridge. The Branch Canal was part of the River Sow Navigation that once linked the Staffs and Worcs Canal with Stafford. This waterway was used from 1816 until the 1920s and terminated at a Coal Wharf just before Green Bridge in the centre of Stafford.

One other thing I should mention. I came across it in the 1901 Census. On Census Day there was a boat moored in the Branch Canal by the Lock House. On board was well you know who was on board don't you? It was none other than Thomas Beckett and his family.

Well, what do you make of all this? Had I imagined it all? Had I been to a place where there is no difference between past and present, that limbo land between reality and unreality, between fact and fiction? I leave you to decide.

Are you a towpath walker? And when you too come to Stafford, do walk the towpath there, the section of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal at Baswich between St Thomas' Bridge and Radford Bridge. Will you too feel a cool, cold wind like an icy finger gently caressing your neck and face, an eerie, tickling sensation that travels the length of your spine? And will you hear the sound of moving water there, a hint of gurgling or see the rippling waters in the moonlight swirling in the breeze? Will you detect that hint of mustiness in the air? Will you see the figure that perhaps is not there, just an illusion, or not? Perhaps you too will feel that towpath walkers never walk alone.