

Triple tragedy at Audlem

Within just a dozen years in the early 20th century, three wives of Shropshire Union boaters were drowned in Audlem locks.

Mary Boswell drowned in Lock 13, close to the Company's toll cottage, on Tuesday 11 January 1910 at about 7.30pm, in cold but not freezing weather. She normally lived in a house in Chester, but on this occasion she was accompanying her husband. He was attending the horse, leaving her to get off the boat and open the locks. He heard his eleven-year-old daughter Annie call out, "Mamma's in the canal," so rushed up, took off his coat and jumped in to save her. He failed; indeed he had to be rescued. Annie told the Coroner that her mother had stepped from the boat onto the lock step and fell in the water. Mary was aged 32, and the family had six children.

The next accident happened less than a fortnight later, on the icy morning of Saturday 22 January. The press report does not state the exact time, but as it says they had started from Wolverhampton on the Thursday at 6am, it is likely that this accident happened whilst it was still dark, sunrise being about 8.15am. Mary Rush had opened the gates of Lock 6 and had started the horse to draw the boat *Harold* out of the lock. She slipped when getting back down onto the boat and fell into the water. Her husband William was returning from preparing Lock 7 when he saw her fall and heard her call out. He took the rope from the horse and threw it round his wife, under her arms, and pulled her to the edge of the canal but was unable to get her out until their son arrived to help. A messenger was sent on horseback to fetch a doctor; meanwhile Mary was got into the cabin, wrapped in a rug, and given some brandy, but she died shortly afterwards. Mary, aged 56, was said to be 'pretty active' but lame on one foot. The Coroner thought that if she had been a younger woman she may have been saved after she was taken out of the water, but it was probably the shock which that caused her death.

On the relatively mild morning of Monday 3 January 1921 Nellie Statham, aged 32, was working the boat *Chancellor* with her husband William; their four-year old daughter Nellie was with them. They had tied up at Audlem wharf for the weekend, then started off at 6.15am. The accident happened at Lock 8 at about 7am. William had gone on to prepare the next lock and heard Nellie call out, "Oh, Will!" He ran back as quickly as possible, saw her head just above the water and jumped in, but she had sunk. He nearly lost his own life in attempting to rescue her. He thought she must have lost her footing when trying to get on the boat as it was leaving the lock. Henry Williams, the Shropshire Union carpenter who lived in the cottage (now long gone) alongside Lock 8 heard the shout and helped get Nellie out of the canal but they could not revive her.

There are many similarities between the three accidents: all involved the wives of steerers, all had homes ashore and all were experienced boaters. All happened when the wife had been left to work the boat alone. All were in the dark or near dark. All were in January. Everybody would have been wearing several layers of woollen and cotton winter clothing, which would have become very heavy when waterlogged. Nobody involved could swim — neither the victims nor those trying to help — a point about which James Bate, the Coroner on all three occasions, was particularly critical.

All three were recorded in the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Shropshire Union, but in no case was the woman named. Whereas the husband was deemed to be an employee of the Company in the eyes of the law so his dependents could benefit from the Workers Compensation Act 1906, the rest of the crew were not. The Company's main concern seemed to be that no blame was being attributed to it, the verdict in three cases being 'accidentally drowned'. Following the 1921 death, the Company's District Inspector had promised the Coroner that he would report to the General Manager the recommendation that the Company should try to encourage boaters to learn to swim. Was this recommendation passed on? There was no mention of it in the minutes. But was it a coincidence that at the same meeting that noted Nellie Statham's death in 1921 it was decided to close all locks at night?

Peter Brown

Sources: *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser*, 15 & 29 January 1910 and 8 January 1921; minutes 23474 & 25541 of the Executive Committee of the Shropshire Union

[About 750 words excluding Sources]