

Notes of a meeting with Emily Deavell - 16/7/11

Emily and her twin sister Sheila were born in 1947 at Moss Hall Basin at the bottom of Audlem flight of locks. Her parents worked the Clayton boats (probably Fellows Morton Clayton boats) with her grandparents. It seems likely that her great grand parents had also worked on the boats. Her grandparents (XX and Annie Bickerton 'Beck') looked after the twins whilst her mother and father (George and Emily) looked after their brother George who was born in 1948.

The boats carried a variety of cargoes including catering tins of tomatoes and chocolate crumb. The usual route was Wolverhampton to Ellesmere Port but the boats would also travel on the Ellesmere Canal and the Manchester Ship Canal and call at Port Sunlight. The boats sometimes waited two to three days for their next load.

Emily recalled the children in their night dresses being attached to their flock mattresses by safety pins in order to prevent them falling off. The children discovered they could reach the hatch into the hold from their bed and Emily recalled being able to obtain chocolate crumb from damaged sacks. She could still remember the taste of the chocolate!

The children bathed in a tin bath with one child at each end and one in the middle.

The children would play in the hold when it was empty. Their aunt's children, the children of Arthur and Annie, were playmates. As they grew up they helped to operate the locks. Inevitably they fell in the canal from time to time and had to be hauled out with a shaft. Despite this Emily did not learn to swim until she was 33 years old. She recalled that on one occasion when she was about seven years old her granny fell in the canal and had to be retrieved with a shaft.

Before her mother was married the boats were drawn by horses. They also fell in the canal from time to time and had to be led to places where they could climb out. When the family operated two boats they lived on the butty boat.

Meals were often stews and included pigs trotters and tripe. Rabbits also featured and were obtained from butchers and farmers. Chickens lived on the boat and could be heard moving about the hold. The eggs could only be collected when the load was removed.

Mr Potts was a butcher in Audlem who acquired a certain notoriety with his cleaver making some wary of visiting the shop alone. It was also said he would refuse to sell to the boat people.

Schooling was limited. The children could only attend school if the boats were moored for any length of time perhaps awaiting a load. The children spent their days at school on simple tasks such as painting.

When the family eventually left the boats in 1957, Emily went to school in Audlem. Her parents could not read.

A dog called 'Ting,' a terrier/Alsatian cross breed, also lived on the boat.

Emily's mother met her future husband who was not a boatman at The Bridge Inn in Audlem. They were married at Acton church and worked on the boats until Emily's grandfather died. It was 1957 and the family then moved off the boats bearing in mind Emily's father did not have a history on the boats.

Emily's brother George went to live in Yorkshire but has now returned to the area and lives in Northwich.

Emily lived on a local farm where she made cheese and now lives in Crewe. Her children by her first marriage are Ruth Anna (42 years), Yvonne (40 years) and David (36 years).

GDDodd 22/7/11