

FALLING SANDS LOCK

Foley Park, Kidderminster

'The Staffordshire and Worcester Canal is one of the most beautiful in the country.... with Brindley's famed flight of three locks near Wombourne and the sandstone cuttings and ivy-covered tunnels near Stourton. The canal leaves the Trent and Mersey at Great Haywood and joins the River Severn at the 18th Century canal town of Stourport in the county of Hereford and Worcester'.

(thepotteries.org website, 2005)

If you travel north from the canal basin at Stourport, where the canal meets the river Severn, Falling Sands lock (No 4) is located some two miles or so into your journey between Pratts Wharf and Caldwell lock. The carpet town of Kidderminster lies a further two miles along the towpath.

The Magic of Falling Sands

I have reached the stage in life when childhood reminiscences take hold from time to time. I'm constantly reminded of Falling Sands by a painting produced for my late father by H G Carter of Kidderminster that hangs in our village home here in Hampshire. On a recent visit to Kidderminster I found myself standing in that painting. It did not take much effort for me to recall life at Falling Sands all those years ago. In the fifty years that have elapsed since we left the old lock house for the last time, inevitably things have altered; changed forever. Sadly, the house disappeared forty years ago. No longer can you see a profusion of hollyhocks, nasturtiums and wallflowers adorning the south wall of the property. The well pump is nowhere to be seen. The remnants of the pigsty are buried deep beneath nettles. There remain some fruit trees, racked by old age, barely recognisable. Despite all this the Falling Sands I remember is still there.



As well as H G Carters evocative painting I also possess three faded box camera prints. Two were taken from below the lock and one from above at some distance away. None of these ever satisfied my curiosity concerning the accuracy of my memories about the house itself. Having written to Waterways World enquiring about old photographs of Falling Sands, imagine my delight when I received this superb photograph from David Stevens taken in 1959. I understand that the original appeared in Inland Waterways Association Bulletin No. 61, published in April 1960. Although the house was in disrepair by then, it still carried much of the character and charm I remembered. David said he would be interested in any recollections I may have of life beside the canal and having received similar requests from others I thought I should at least commit some memories to paper, however fleeting. It seems that much is written about working life on the canal, rather less living beside it in a lock house.

In putting pen to paper I have to reveal at the outset that we were never cast in the role of lockkeepers. Canal barges – as we erroneously referred them to in those days – passed through Falling Sands exactly as narrowboats do today with no assistance save that provided by those on board. That's not to say that family life in the lock house was immune from the never-ending flow of canal life, just that we did not play an *active* part of the *working* life of the canal.

My childhood impression of fearless and unending adventure was the magic of Falling Sands. Even today, with the lock house long gone, the unforgettable aura of *Swallows and Amazons* still remains. However I must confess that in those days 'living down the cut' was not something that readily impressed others, I suspect today however owning such a property, were it to still exist, would be counted as rather fashionable.

The name Falling Sands lock was most likely derived from the general location known as Falling Sands Common. Although being something of a romantic I often wondered whether the real inspiration for the term came from the three-yard wide cascade of fine sand tumbling fifty yards or

more down the hillside immediately adjacent to the house (still visible today). It could be that the Common itself took its name from this natural feature, where I spent endless hours as a child.

The Lock House

You will see from David's photograph of Falling Sands that the lock nestles at the foot of a tree-covered hill. The canal snakes round the foot of the hill creating an 'S' shape bend which opens out into a small basin above the lock. The setting is one of the most beautiful you are likely to encounter on this stretch of the canal. Over the hill from Falling Sands lies the old Sugar Beet factory, which was built in 1925 and I understand only closed recently. On at least one occasion during WWII enemy aircraft targeted it. My father once told me of hearing a low pitched shrill as a parachuted land mine destined for the factory, flew over the house and landed about a mile away. The explosion left a large crater in the field and a crack in the brickwork of the house running vertically from the front door to the window above that remained to the end.

The lock house was of conventional brick construction with a traditional lime wash, which had faded over the years. It had a tiled roof with chimneys at either end. A boiler house stood at one end, with a separate outside lavatory beyond that, each with slanting slate roofs. A weir ran under the house, boiler house and the outside lavatory; I will leave the significance of this latter example of eighteenth century ingenuity to your imagination. There was also a roof of corrugated sheeting covering a lean-to at the rear.

For a family of six the accommodation was cramped to say the least, with three small bedrooms upstairs and two slightly larger rooms below. In one of the downstairs rooms there was a large blackened cast iron range for cooking and heating water. A typical scene on most Sunday evenings in winter would be a pot of pigs' trotters and assorted vegetables casseroled over an open fire in the grate. The Tilley Lantern (circa pre-War) would do its best to light the room; just enough that is to pick out the clotheshorse and large tin bath to be found in a corner recess. Whole shoulders and legs of pork wrapped in muslin would hang from hooks in the ceiling.

On a winter's night you would receive little sympathy if it was your turn to 'fetch the water'. Even ten minutes operating the cast iron hand pump situated fifty yards or so from the house, was not a welcoming prospect with only a Davey lamp for light. I still have that lamp to this day and it rarely fails to summon a slight shiver as winter nears. I have since wondered the exact source of the well water. I just trust the river Stour, for which no amount of natural filtering would have helped, was not implicated. In any event in later years this water had need to be boiled before consumption, until eventually it afforded one of the main reasons for abandoning the property.

An integral part of the setting of Falling Sands is the river Stour, which runs only a few feet away from the canal and lock, as it winds its way to the Severn at Stourport. The levels of pollution inhabiting this stretch were appalling in the post-war years. Over two centuries of industrialisation had taken their toll on the river as it made its way south through Halesowen, Cradley, Lye, Stourbridge and Kidderminster. During my childhood the river was used as a major channel for every kind of factory waste; discharges made oblivious of the consequences. By the time the flow reached Falling Sands the river was the orangey colour of Trappist ale, but infinitely less appetising! The stench, if you ventured too close, was something never to be forgotten. Today it resembles any other river, if somewhat murky. A measure of its recovery has been the reported sightings of trout and apparently even young salmon. I'm not quite sure how reliable these reports are, but the fact that the possibility exists is remarkable enough.

The location of Falling Sands meant that we were surrounded by an array of wildlife. The canal contained roach, perch, gudgeon, freshwater eels and many other species, much as I expect it does today. I remember in particular that we had a nesting site for a Common Crane located not far from the house in the marshes. In those days you could also expect to encounter red squirrels nesting among the sweet chestnuts to the rear of the house in Oldington Wood. In these trees and surrounding fields you could anticipate encountering all manner of predators and their reluctant prey.

Flooded in sunshine, the smell of pine and the dank stillness of the canal, with ‘scooters’ darting across the surface, invariably induced a sense of peacefulness undisturbed by the outside world. It was possible to hear the steady clank of diesel a good thirty minutes before yet another narrowboat chugged into sight. Blackie, the family dog, who became increasingly excited at the prospect of canine company, was always the first to alert us to listen out.

Our Neighbours

Pratts Wharf

In those days Pratts Wharf, which was situated less than a mile below Falling Sands consisted of a house with outbuildings adjacent to a lock that opened into the river Stour. An elderly lady lived there who was known somewhat enigmatically as ‘Granny Merchant’, but who always remained something of a mystery to me. My abiding memory of the inside of the house, apart from its meagre furnishings and damp, peeling wallpaper, was the ever-present smell of mothballs. At that time, it would be the late 1940s, there were a number of dilapidated brick and timber buildings attached to the house with the corroded remnants of workshop tools, general ironmongery including, I recall vividly, plentiful supplies of rusty nails of all shapes and sizes.

Only in later years did I learn the true nature of Pratts Wharf, which in those days was known to us as Platts Wharf, the name appearing on eighteenth century maps. The original wharf dated from around 1770 to provide a loading point between the canal and the river Stour, in the transportation of iron ore from as far away as Wales to a local forge. Wildern Forge, as it was known, was sited on the river, some half-mile or so downstream from the wharf. The original wharf subsequently fell into disuse, as an alternative and more direct route was developed to the forge from the river Severn some two miles further south. However, by the early eighteenth century this route proved increasingly impractical and a new wharf was constructed on the original site. By 1850 Wildern Ironworks as it had then become known, was taken over by the Baldwin Family. In order to make the transition from canal to river more efficient, the Baldwins built a lock adjacent to the Wharf to provide a direct link between the canal and the river.

By the turn of the century the Merchant family, including three sons, were operating the wharf and its traffic. They built workshops and boat dock on the site to maintain the boats and maintained the river to ensure it was navigable. Inevitably the introduction of modern transport eclipsed the use of canals as a means of transportation and by the mid fifties the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal, and with it the link to Wildern Ironworks, had settled into a steep industrial decline. Today there is little left to mark the site; some of its brickwork is still intact, however the lock has been filled in. The only monument to its industrious past is the recently restored bridge which marks the entrance to the lock.

The Lambs and Oscar

Mr and Mrs Lamb occupied the house immediately above Falling Sands. There was no obvious reason why the house was located as it was, nestling on the left-hand side of the canal just below the railway viaduct. Whether in the past it was ever connected with the eighteenth century tin plate rolling mills located nearby, by then long disappeared, will remain a mystery. The Lambs were by post-war standards a cultured couple that as a working class family it was never possible for us to really get to know. Their Dalmatian, who was called Oscar, was on the other hand a close friend of the family. This was because of the perennial love-hate relationship he shared over many years with Blackie, who was a mongrel with a distinct suggestion of Lurcher in the bloodline. They would chase each other up and down the towpath for hours, much to everyone’s amusement. Many years after their enforced parting, the mere mention of Oscar’s name was enough to send Blackie into fits.

I had much to thank Oscar for when he saved me from a stay in hospital in circumstances that in retrospect were quite amusing. All that remain of the Lamb’s property these days are the fading remnants of long forgotten fruit trees.

Just past the Lamb’s house, travelling toward Kidderminster narrowboats pass under the railway viaduct, which is now used by the Severn Valley steam railway. I recall when steam trains crossed this viaduct, then a loop line of the Great Western Railway, as regular as clockwork on their way to

Worcester and the journey south. The Bridgewater family occupied Caldwell lock, which is a short distance further up from the viaduct. As Anne Widdecome would say Mr Bridgewater had ‘something of the night’ about him. I steered well clear whenever I could. Unfortunately the Saturday morning trip to the Minors at the Central always ran the risk of encountering Mr Bridgewater in some uncertain activity or other. I expect he was a nice person really.

Living at Falling Sands

My parents, two elder brothers and sister moved to Falling Sands during WWII before I was born. My father, who was an engineer, left his job in Birmingham, to move to Kidderminster, where he was initially engaged in manufacturing parts for Spitfires. He eventually joined Brintons Carpets, where the family archives reveal he was to play an important role in the development post-war weaving looms.

An ingenious man, during the years of rationing he had several sidelines underway at Falling Sands, from growing and selling vegetables, breeding pigs, incubating and raising ducks, geese and chickens, to casting and painting lead soldiers. He did a fair measure of trade with passing boatmen who were only too willing to offload the odd scuttle of coal for some parsnips, or the occasional pork chop. I have among the family papers a letter from the Rural Food Office dated 29th September 1946, obliquely enquiring as to the exact scope of his ‘retail activities’, implying all may not have been according to regulation.

Apart from various jams and homemade horseradish sauce, fermenting damson wine was one of the main activities in the autumn. We would use unrefined sugar, ‘traded’ from the sugar beet factory, fresh yeast and damsons grown in the orchard. After fermenting in demi-johns, the wine would be racked into a wooden barrel before consumption. Although I was never allowed to partake in those days, I still retain a fondness for damson wine. I await the time when the damson tree in my garden will produce enough fruit to lay down a few bottles!

Initially my father travelled to and from his day job at Brintons carpet factory by bicycle. He could literally ride the towpath from Falling Sands to the factory, which backed onto the canal in the heart of the town. Sometime after I was born this journey became much quicker when he became the proud owner of a Scott Flying Squirrel motorbike. I still possess a photograph of the bike on which I would often ride pillion if I were late for school. When he later purchased his first car, an Austin 16, he was forced to take the route through Foley Park, over Bridge No 11 (by the viaduct) and along the towpath. To this day I can still remember when he first drove the car to Falling Sands. It was a wet winter’s night and the headlamps appearing round the bend in the towpath was a colossal thrill for us all. He later followed the Austin with a Standard Flying 9 and, just before we finally left, a magnificent Humber Super Snipe.

The closest neighbourhood to Falling Sands was Foley Park, which is a residential area mainly of pre-war properties. This was where my first school was located, and still stands today. My form mistress was Mrs Robinson, who I fell in love with at first sight. I remember her coaxing me out of the cloakroom on my inaugural day at school having shown extreme reluctance to spend my time in the strange company of so many other children. Having spent my early childhood enjoying my own company, something I’m prone to even these days, the sight, smell and noise emanating from other children was hard to come to terms with for one so young.

In a very real sense Falling Sands was isolated from the world in those days, particularly when one realises that by the early fifties it still had no mains water, drainage, or other amenities of any kind. The conditions were symptomatic of living in post-war poverty. Only the introduction of electricity in 1953 brought any sense of joining the ‘modern’ world. Until I obtained my first bicycle, to reach the nearest road of any significance involved a near two-mile hike along the towpath to Foley Park, through Oldington Wood, or across marshes to other destinations. I was walking more often than not because of punctures endured along the towpath, or inflicted in the school bike shed.

My first genuine recollections of Falling Sands emerged around the winter of 1947 when pigeons were literally frozen to the trees and the ice on the canal was a foot thick. Once the ice melted and the

late spring sunshine worked its magic, my life – as I remember it – started in earnest. Until I began school my world was confined to the garden, which was fenced off from the lock and canal. I had a large natural sandpit to explore and spent hours there playing with anything I could find. I still have fond memories of my grey painted 30 cwt Bedford low loader dinky lorry. As a young child my life at Falling Sands placed me at the centre of the Universe, or so I thought. My elder brothers and sister were a lot older than me, and until my younger brother Martin was born I felt very much the ‘outsider’ in most activities. Once I was allowed to venture beyond the confines of the garden however, this didn’t concern me a great deal. With Blackie in tow I had a whole new world to explore. I would wander the woods, fields and marshes for hours building up a love of the countryside that has never diminished.

However with this freedom came more responsibilities. Living at Falling Sands meant that self-sufficiency was the order of the day. On what amounted to a smallholding we kept pigs, goats, chickens, Muskovi ducks to name a few. Sited across the canal just above the lock was the pigsty opening out into an enclosure of Victoria plum, Old English greengage, and damson trees. In between were numerous gooseberry, blackcurrant, redcurrant and raspberries for the pigs to root amongst. Strangely, and I never understood why, there were no apple or pear trees.

I played my part on washdays. The laundry was done in the boiler house where a large cast iron tub was heated from below. Lighter washes were done courtesy of a large wooden tub with a washing dolly. For the uninitiated the washing dolly was a long wooden rod with a crossbar near the top; the base resembled a stool, with several pegs protruding down from a small horizontal disc. The dolly, held by the crossbar, was thrust deep into the tub and rotated as it was moved up and down. Another important washing implement was a corrugated washboard made of wood, which stood in the tub and with a bar of soap was used to remove stubborn stains and marks. After rinsing the dripping wet washing would then be put through the mangle before hanging out to dry. I invariably got the job of turning the handle while mother fed the washing through.

Feeding the pigs was an unpleasant task I had to endure from about the age of nine, matched only by the tin of sulphur powder I had to hold out, with my eyes firmly closed and only one ear covered, as the piglets were being castrated. If we had a large batch of pigs in residence the mash, which was made from meal, loaves of stale bread, peelings and anything else remotely edible would be prepared in the boiler house tub. Quite apart from the rank smell, particularly in the summer, this imparted a faint odour of stale vegetables not easily removed from subsequent washes.

Those who passed through the lock always seemed to me to be invariably friendly; always primed to tell tales of their journeys to and fro from the Black Country and beyond. Rooted as we were in our own, rather isolated world, we were only too happy to ‘share’ in these experiences. Narrowboats would pass through at all times of the day and night. In winter if it was wet and miserable it would be customary to invite a rain sodden boatman in for a mug of tea and half an hour in front of the range. Invariably this would involve some scraggy mongrel exchanging dampened growls with Blackie as they lay in opposite corners of the room.

It seemed to me that we were effectively assuming aspects of the life of a bygone age and in retrospect I was never quite sure how those passing though Falling Sands viewed the ‘interlopers’, for surely that is what we were. Since we were not lockkeepers in the true sense, we must have appeared as something of an oddity. That much said the demise of the working canal probably made us early pioneers in the art chic canal-side residency; I think not!

I suppose because I was the ‘baby’ of the family, in those days I developed an easy rapport with the passing boatmen. They would sometimes give me a few pennies, or if I was very lucky a ‘silver’ sixpence. I would then fearlessly ride the boats as far as the viaduct, before leaping off to the corner shop at Foley Park to spend my good fortune on a quarter of dolly mixtures packed into a paper funnel. I still remember narrowboats with huge Shire horses in spectacularly coloured livery, coming through the lock from Stourport up to the Black Country and back as late as the early fifties.

The small iron bridge just below the lower gates to Falling Sands lock contains a two-inch wide gap through which towing ropes were threaded. We knew them as barges but strictly speaking they were more accurately described narrowboats, a function of the narrow Midlands waterways. Despite the efficiency of the horse, narrowboats were invariably powered by diesel. In the post-war years they were normally working boats. Until the fifties the sight of a 'pleasure boat' making its way through Falling Sands lock, was relatively rare. Cargoes varied but were mainly coal, fuel oil and timber. The use of engine power sometimes meant that barges ran in tandem. Very rarely a steam-powered barge would arrive, which always created great excitement, but in reality this was an eccentricity left over from the nineteenth century.

Living by a canal held untold dangers for children. Before I had started school my elder brother John had fallen into the canal seven times before he could swim. My first excursion beyond the garden was through a loose fence panel when I was four; it proved near fatal. This extract is from the report in the Kidderminster Shuttle dated 9th August 1949:

'... John has seven times been rescued from the water by his father, and now the youngest member of the family, who is only just five, has also joined this exclusive pastime. David was in trouble when he fell into the canal at the weekend and Mr Godson's knowledge of artificial respiration was the means of saving the boy's life. Kidderminster firemen arrived with special resuscitating apparatus but found their job already done, and although they took David to hospital he was well enough to be back home in time to preside over his fifth birthday party last night.'

I recall falling in as if it were yesterday and to this day it does not take much water in the nostrils to relive the terror of it all. My elder sister found me floating face down near the lock gates after I had given up my terrifying struggle against the murky depths. It beggars belief how it was possible that such a thing could ever happen to a four year old. Despite these experiences and numerous other skirmishes with many 'accidents awaiting' me, my school reports had me down as a reasonably well-balanced child. School and its associated activities increasingly dominated my life, but not without its own dangers however. I was able to survive encounters with a car when thoughtlessly running across the road outside school. I was administered something decidedly 'spiritual' after enduring a near fatal encounter with a lightning bolt whilst innocently sheltering under a tree in the playground. Later I managed to swallow a toy train wheel during a lesson, which lodged in my throat causing considerable consternation all round.

By the time I was eight life at Falling Sands changed dramatically with the introduction of electricity. This was introduced via pylons across the fields and revolutionised our way of living literally overnight. Instead of the flickering shadows of candles following us around the house at night, the whole house was illuminated at the flick of a few switches. Before the installation of electricity we had to rely on small crystal sets with headphones for broadcast news and of course early evening episodes of Dan Dare and Dick Barton. The only entertainment to match listening to the radio was the arrival of the Dandy and Beano on Friday evenings. I had witnessed the power of electricity at school, but could never quite get used to its arrival at home. The introduction of the television set shortly afterwards eclipsed everything. Life as I knew it had changed forever; I no longer needed to find my own entertainment among the fields and woods, it was right there in the corner of the room. It is remarkable that electricity should have been installed at what must have been considerable expense, at a time when other more essential amenities remained so pitifully rudimentary. I suppose that is what, in those days, we liked to call progress.

Time to Close

I must bring this short collection of reminiscences to a close. There are lots more memories to recall but they should wait until another time perhaps. I hope you will have at least some insight from these fleeting recollections of what it was like living at Falling Sands in the late forties and early fifties.

For those yet to make the trip if you tie up just above the lock, let your imaginations take hold; as you draw in the delicate scent of pine needles, above the sound of the weir you might just hear the distant barking of a dog, the soft grunts of pigs and the muted natter of Muskovi ducks among the echoing voices long gone.

