

GLAMORGANSHIRE CANAL CONNECTIONS

I was born eight years after the Glamorganshire Canal closed to commercial traffic; I have never lived in the Taff Valley and was always very much aware that "home", as far as my paternal ancestors were concerned, was a small, rural community in Wiltshire. Why might I know anything about or be interested in the Glamorganshire Canal?

For the first thirty-five years of her life my mother, Enid (1912-2011), had lived at "Well Cottage" in Nantgarw, a village which was once a canal settlement. She was only nine when her mother died and at the age of fourteen she became house-keeper for her father, William Williams (*Will Nant*) (1881-1957). Being of a canal family, his early working life was spent on the boat with older family members. He had already retired by the time of my mother's marriage and he accompanied her when she moved to her new home in Tynant. I was her only child and during my early years "Gram-pa Williams" was the gentleman in his 70s who sat beside the fire in our front room, smoking his pipe and enjoying the odd twist of chewing tobacco.

In my preschool years my grandfather would take me for walks. In response to a request from a gentleman we would often stop to chat with, he agreed to draw a diagram showing the locations of all the locks along the length of the canal. My mother provided a supply of card which could be used to record the information and "Gram-pa Williams" spent hours reliving the journeys he had made as a young man in order to get the details accurate.

Amongst the bric-a-brac was a set of brasses reputed to have decorated the horse which pulled the last boat to leave Cyfarthfa. Whenever they were brought out it would be time to recall tales of "Granny" who lived "up the Bwnsy". I was told how she made cheese to sell at Caerphilly Market and of the evening when, dressed in her Sunday best ready for chapel, fear caused her to grab a sweeping-brush and strike out at the horse. The blow to the horse's head was apparently delivered with such force that it proved fatal and left one boatman in need of a new companion to pull his boat.

The birth certificate of my great-grandfather, also a William Williams, shows that he was born in 1854 at "Heolybwnsy, Eglwysilan", the son of Henry Williams, Boatman. Could this be the Henry Williams referred to as one of the boatmen "*taking Gelliwion coal from the Doctor's Canal to Cardiff*" Volume 2 of "The Glamorganshire & Aberdare Canals" by Stephen Rowson & Ian L Wright? His home was close to what would become the location of the Groeswen Halt on the Pontypridd, Caerphilly & Newport Railway, near the end of the lane leading from Upper Boat to Crossroads. It would have been convenient for access to the canal at the Maesmawr / Weaver's Bridge Boat Dock and also at Tynywern Bridge.

My mother had two special, life-long friends, her classmate Mary Close (1911-2000) and Mary's older sister, Nellie. They had also lost their mother at an early age and were brought up by their father in the Storehouse situated on the canal bank opposite the Nantgarw Pottery. Mr Close was the Glamorganshire Canal Company's Cardiff foreman. Neither of the sisters went on to have children and I became their adopted nephew.

By the time I was born, Auntie Nellie and her father lived in adjoining houses at Llandaff North. One of the few childhood photographs of me was taken in Nellie's garden on the day I took my first steps. Whenever visiting we had to 'pop' next-door for "Dad" and Nellie's step-mother to see my progress. Mr Close married a lady who already had links to the canal community. She was the daughter of the Melingriffith lockkeeper, the person who also had responsibility for the operation of the Melingriffith pump. As quoted in the previously mentioned book by Rowson & Wright, "*She remembered the pump in action and had childhood memories of the excellent sewin (Welsh: sea trout) her father caught in the tail race at the bottom of the lockkeeper's garden.*" [The pump has been restored and can be viewed on the river side of Ty-Mawr Road, Whitchurch, whilst "Oak Cottage" remains on the opposite side of the road. The roadway between the two replaces what was formerly the canal.]

For many years Mary Close made fortnightly visits to our home, joining us for afternoon tea on Thursdays and spending the evenings reminiscing and exchanging news with my mother. The canal and those who had worked on it were regular topics of conversation and they would recall the times when boats brought Cardiff children to picnic on the grass in-front of "Dyffryn Ffrŵd". During the latter part of her life, Mary lived in Shirley Road, Roath Park. A chance meeting with a shopkeeper who had grown up in Nantgarw brought quite a surprise. He had bought the canal-side Storehouse which was her childhood home, was in the process of having it modernised ready for his planned retirement and he arranged for her to view the work in progress.

In the 1950s I would sometimes be taken to visit one of my mother's former neighbours in Nantgarw, or my uncle and aunt who lived in "Ivy Cottage", Tongwynlais. A trip to Nantgarw would include a walk along the canal bank whilst a visit to "Ivy Cottage" would really be appreciated if I was taken to the canal near the bridge at "Ivy House Farm" and given the chance to catch sticklebacks. In the 1960s, whilst a pupil at Pontypridd Boys' Grammar School, I would find a leisurely stroll alongside the canal from Ynysangharad to Glyntaff far more to my liking than participating in the school sports being held in Taff Vale Park on the opposite bank of the river.

When sorting through some family heirlooms from my mother's home I rediscovered the tobacco boxes used by my grandfather when I was a child. One bears the inscription "William Williams, Boatman, 1897, Walnut

Tree Bridge". This item's link with the canal is undisputable, as is the fact that it was in the possession of my grandfather who was a William Williams who once worked on a canal boat. However, he would only have been 16 years old at the date shown on the inscription. Could the box have been handed down by his father or was it passed on by the family of some other person of the same name? I will never know the answer. I am not aware of any specific family link with the Walnut Tree Bridge. The Walnut Tree Inn was a large inn which stood near a smithy at the bottom of the road leading to Ty Rhiw. It was on the eastern bank of the canal, just south of the Garth Works, Taff's Well. The line of the A470 trunk road now follows that of the canal at this point. When the Taff Vale Railway moved to its replacement station in 1863 it was named Walnut Tree Junction. In 1866 it was renamed Walnut Tree Bridge, a name it retained until 1/4/1900. The bridge of that name crossed over the canal linking the station with the inn which was demolished in the 1910s.



The photograph, taken circa 1913, shows my grandfather, William Williams (1881-1957), with his family. My mother, Enid (1912-2011), is seated on her mother's lap. My grandmother, Sarah Ann, died in 1921 at the age of 39. Daughters Hilda and Lily, seen here standing either side of their mother, died at the ages of 19 and 17 respectively, whilst brother Idris survived until 1970.

Wm. Howard Fowler, (August 2012)