

THE HEBE AND THE STAFFORD BRANCH CANAL IN AUGUST 1929

by

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In the summer of 1928, 1929 and 1930 Desmond Stoker and his father Stephen rowed, sailed and man-hauled a double skulling skiff called the *Hebe* around the canal system of England.

The skiff had been modified, had sails and a hooped frame to support an awning for overnight accommodation. Food, utensils, clothing and other necessities were stored throughout the boat.

Desmond was a medical student at the University of Edinburgh and he kept a record of these adventures. Some 80 years later, Desmond's son, Simon Stoker, arranged for them to be published in a single volume called *The Adventures of the Hebe: Sailing on Britain's Canals between the Wars*.

During their 1929 summer venture, Desmond and Stephen were travelling along the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal when they found themselves at the entrance to the Stafford Branch.

The entry for Friday 16 August contains a few paragraphs about the Stafford Branch, which they unsuccessfully tried to navigate, due to the near dereliction of Baswich Lock, silting and thick reeds. The salt works is also mentioned.

The following is an extract from the book for that day:

Autherley to Great Haywood

Friday 16 August 1929^a

"Towards midday we passed a salt works² and just beyond it came to a canal junction.³ Imagine a letter 'T' laid on its side. We had just come along one arm of the top of the 'T' (from the lower end) and wanted to go straight on across the top, which led to the River Sow. If we had got onto the river we could have gone on to Stafford. We had, however, to turn around and go along the tail of the 'T' to Great Haywood.

"At first we thought it might be possible to force our way through the reeds and get down to the river lock, then push through more reeds to the river which was only a hundred yards away. But on inspection we found the lock to be impassable. Having pushed and pulled our way to the lock our hopes were dashed. The upper gate was holding water and standing the strain very well, but the lower gates were only just moveable due to accumulated silt. Great gaps and rents showed in the planking. These alone would have stopped the lock filling, but also the boards were in the last stages of decay and in all probability would have given way if we had tried to fill the lock.

“After a short consultation we decided against making a portage. There were only two of us to carry the boat, and so we changed our plans and turned our prow towards the Trent and Mersey Canal and set out for Nottingham.

“By the time we had emerged victorious from a second struggle with the weeds it was nearly time for dinner and as the sky was threatening to deluge us with rain we made for the next bridge and took our repast in safety.

“Just at our back was the old LNWR main line and during our stay at this spot we were entertained by a spectacle of many of the high flyers. The *Manxman* whistled by, shortly followed by the *Welshman* and after that thundered past the *Irish Mail*.

(2) Baswich Bridge and Saltworks.

(3) This would have been the junction with the River Sow Navigation. Bradshaw’s canal handbook (1904) calls this Baswich Lock and gives a distance from there to Stafford Wharf of one mile. It is not mentioned in Imray’s 1950 guide. ”

Desmond and Stephen Stoker may have met the inhabitants of the Lock House as they attempted passage. At the beginning of 1929, Harry and Martha Holloway were living there but they left during the year, and the new tenants were Leslie and Isabella Shaw and their family.

Although the Stafford Branch had been closed to navigation for several years, it is highly likely that the Branch was still connected to the main line in August 1929. Had it not been, it is probable that Desmond would have made a comment in his book. What is certain is that the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company had blocked off the entrance to the Branch Canal by the November.

Three days later, the *Hebe* was on the Trent and Mersey Canal and Desmond Stoker mentioned an “old rustic bridge” carrying the towpath where the canal joined the River Trent at the confluence of the River Derwent. From the photograph and description, it seems there were similarities between this bridge and the *Ladder Bridge* which carried the Stafford Branch towpath over the River Penk at its confluence with the River Sow. And both bridges were in a perilous state of repair.

The following is an extract from the book for that day:

The Trent
Monday 19 August 1929 ^b

Picture, with the caption: “That ‘rustic’ bridge”.

“Where the canal joins the river² the towing path is on the right bank and there is a bridge for horses to cross. On investigation this structure was found to be in an advanced stage of decay. From a distance it seemed to be a little out of perpendicular, but not enough to cause alarm. When we draw near, however, we

found the reason some of the joists were out of the perpendicular was that they were actually swinging, tied by bits of old rope to the bridge. We could see no reason why the bridge should not fall down, but by exercising a little care we were able to cross it safely.

- (2) In fact the T & M joins at the confluence of the Derwent, on the left, and the Trent which takes almost a right-angle path from the right. Modern aerial pictures show this bridge not to exist any more. ”

References

Adventures of the Hebe: Sailing on Britain's Canals between the Wars, D. Stoker (ed. S. Stoker), 2011 (Amberley Publishing).

- (a) Book 2: *Hebe in the Country* 1929. Chapter 2: Aurtherley to Great Haywood, page 84.
(b) *ibid.* Chapter 4: The Trent, page 98.

Further Reading

Two early books describing canal journeys on English Canals are:

- (i) *Two Girls on a Barge* by V.Cecil Cotes 1891.

Click here for ebook: <https://archive.org/details/twogirlsonbarge00cote> .

V.Cecil Coates was the pseudonym of Sara Jeannette Duncan, a Canadian journalist and author. It was probably the first *tourist* account of a canal journey.

- (ii) *The Flower of Gloster* by E.Temple Thurlston 1911.

Click here for ebook: <https://archive.org/details/flowergloster00thurgoog> .

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