
N&Q 27.07 re OP 119 – Swimming in canal locks.

Anne Willis writes:

Two comments on OP 119 concerning the K&A. For many years people learnt to swim in one of the Devizes locks on the K&A (I think the first one actually in the town). I knew someone who survived being thrown in with a 'sink or swim' command.

In Bradford further to the west along the canal the place to swim was off the Beehive bridge where the Trowbridge Road crossed the canal. Here the bottom was 'nice and gravelly' according to my informant. (Another place to swim was to jump from the railway bridge where it crosses the Bristol Avon just west of Bradford station)

Adrian Padfield writes:

A propos of Brian Goggin's paper, as you know I'm interested in the Royal Humane Society and its provision of resuscitation apparatus to canal companies. In the RHS books there are references to people saved from canals in various parts of the country but I haven't followed them up in the local papers. Perhaps a possible future OP or an addition to Brian's. The trouble is I'm a bit busy with the probability of moving...

Alan Levitt writes:

Might we suppose that the Irish affinity for swimming in a canal dates (at least) to the mid-1820s?

The 84-mile (135.2-km) Farmington Canal (also known as the New Haven and Northampton Canal), which ran northwards from Connecticut into Massachusetts (some authorities cite 86-miles – 138.4-km) was dug principally by Irish immigrants who had come to America seeking canal-digging employment on the Farmington, and perhaps the canal-swimming opportunities in it.

From the outset, the workmen (and the population in general) were permitted (perhaps, encouraged) to swim in the completed portions of the canal and its locks. In the winter, when the waters were frozen, ice-skating became the popular activity or sport. Although they worked in 28 gangs with 10 to 20 men in each, records have not revealed the social structure (if there was one!) of their recreational activities!

Ground-breaking took place on 4 July 1825 (a date selected for a dual-celebration role?) and the canal was fully opened on 30 July 1835. The canal was short-lived. In 1848, the first sections of New Haven & Northampton Railroad – built on the canal's bed, or alongside it – opened. Many of the Irish found employment (but lost swimming opportunities) on the railroad.

Today, swimming is permitted in extant portions of the canal (now a Rail Trail), both for people and dogs. Present-day laws prevent recording of ethnicities or breeds.

Peter Brown writes:

Extracts from 'Crime on the Cut' and 'Death on the Cut', a series of articles written for Cuttings, the magazine of the Shropshire Union Canal Society:

Judging from the number of letters to the press (not the most reliable measure, I admit), in the first half of the 19th century nude bathing in the canal was one of the most serious problems in Chester, causing great offence to ladies. For example, one letter referred to an occasion when ladies passing on a boat 'almost found it impossible to turn their eyes in any direction where the ... disgusting spectacle did not present itself'. Not that everybody was opposed; 'Pelagius' wrote 'Surely the humanity of preventing the labouring man from enjoying the salutary refreshment of bathing ... after the completion of his daily labours is very questionable'. Bathing breached canal byelaws; nude bathing breached public decency laws. In 1819 the *Chester Courant*, disapproving of this 'disgusting practice', reported that a defendant in a recent case had been sentenced to two months' imprisonment, the court intimating that 'the most exemplary punishment would be inflicted on any future offender'. This didn't seem to be a deterrent — nude bathing was still being reported in Chester in the 1840s.¹ The problem was largely solved after Chester's public baths opened in 1848, using water supplied from the canal.²

But bathing brought dangers. For example, in 1821 a twelve year old boy named Latham was swimming with a group of friends just above Tarvin Lock when he got out of his depth and drowned.³ Drowning was not the only risk from swimming in canals. When in 1900 Algernon Fletcher, an expert swimmer, was giving lessons in the Plas Kynaston Canal to some of his fellow workers he caught typhoid from the water polluted with effluent from Cefn Mawr and died a fortnight later.⁴

1. *Chester Courant*, 8 July 1817, 17 August 1819 and 3 August 1827; *Chester Chronicle*, 26 June 1846
2. Shropshire Union Finance Committee, 22 June 1848: RAIL623/9
3. *Chester Courant*, 18 June 1821
4. *Wrexham Advertiser*, 21 July 1900

Mike Clarke writes:

I have attached a L&LC notice re prosecution of swimmers in the canal (from the Vint Hill Killick Papers in Bradford RO), together with a photo from Liverpool RO of previous culprits. Where power stations feed cooling water into the canal were often places for swimming.

LEEDS & LIVERPOOL CANAL CO.

BATHING IN CANAL CAUTION

AT THE CITY POLICE COURT, DALE STREET, LIVERPOOL, on the 24th of July, 1936, Six Youths were convicted of **BATHING IN THE CANAL NEAR BURLINGTON STREET BRIDGE, LIVERPOOL**, and were **FINED**.

All similar offenders will be prosecuted.

FRANK H. HILL,

Bradford, August, 1936.

Law Clerk to the Company.

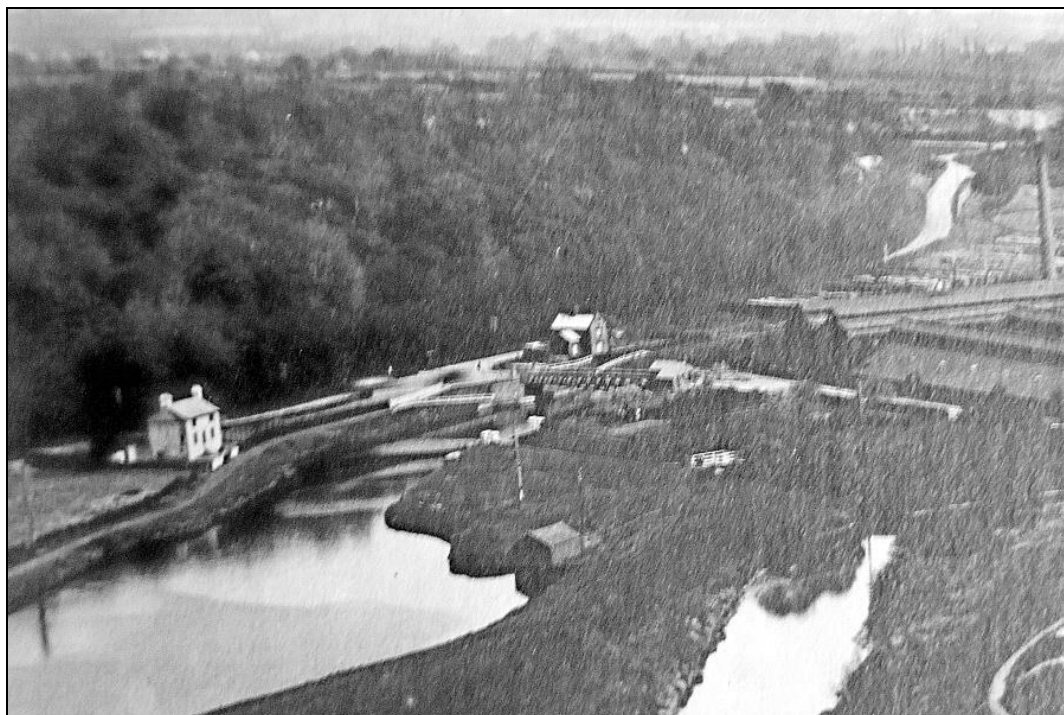


Colin Edmondson writes:

This is more to do with the consequences of swimming in canals and rivers, taken from the minute books of the River Weaver navigation:

1912 Jun *application from Barnton grappling corps for a boat house near Winnington bridge. Granted.*

1935 Jun Boat Mus BWWN 54/29 *Winnington side sluice. Barnton grappling corps have an agreement to use a boat shed on part of the land bought by ICI in 1934 at 1/- per annum under an agreement made in 1912.*



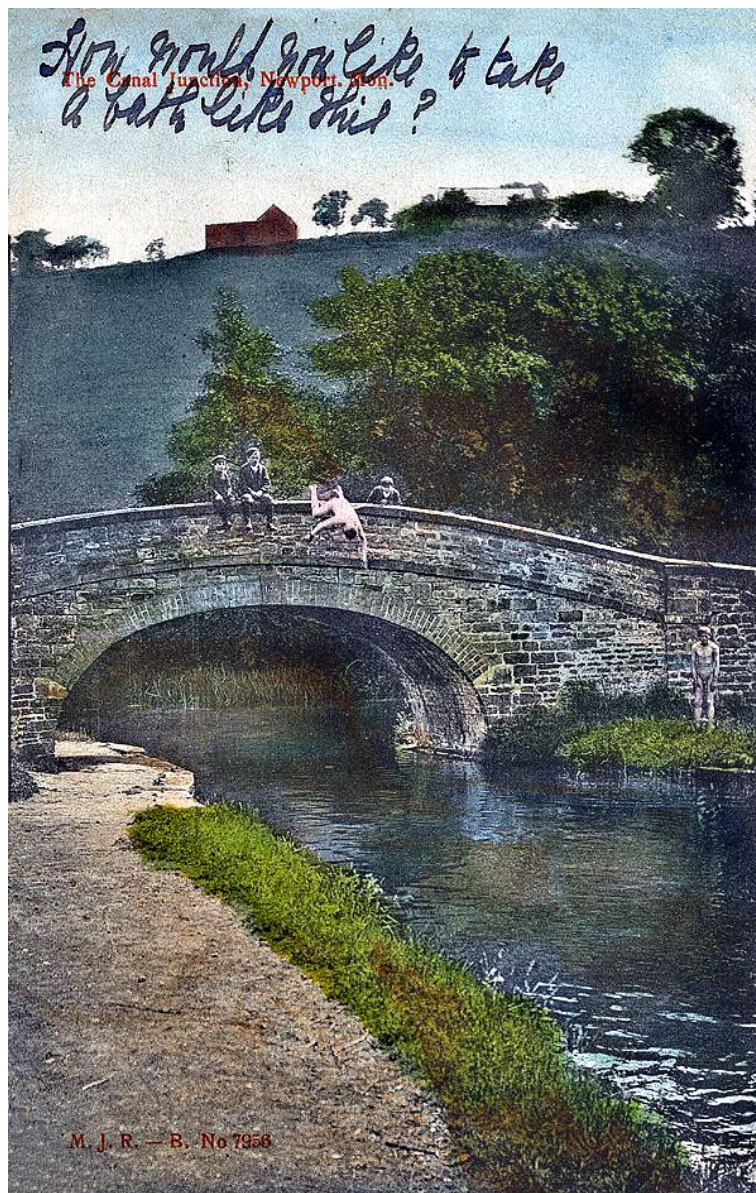
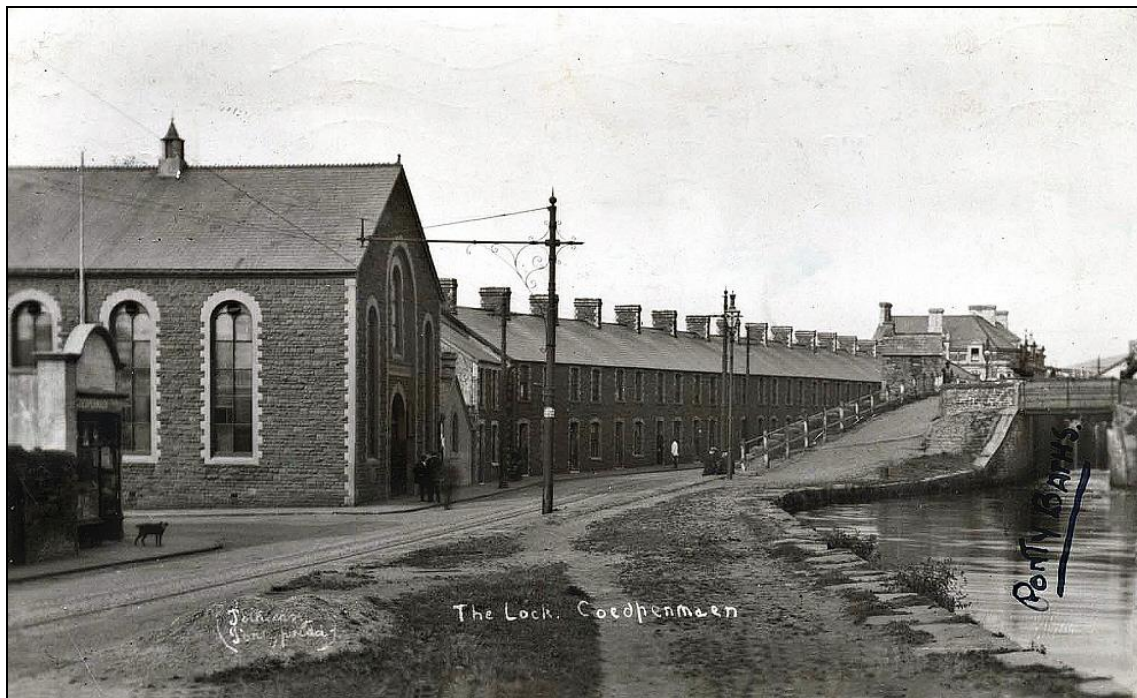
I believe that the building in the centre of the above photograph is the boat house referred to. This is enlarged from a corner of a much larger photo taken during the building of Wallerscote works, which is steadily being replaced by houses.

Winnington swing bridge was replaced in 1909 by the present one, shown here in about 1923-5. The boat house sits in the centre of what was the original river course, filled in after a new man made waste water course was opened on the right in 1871. The white house was the lock tenders house, there used to be a pair of locks here, they went out of use c.1874.

Stephen Rowson writes:

Ian Wright and I include several photographs and mention of canal bathing in our book *The Glamorganshire and Aberdare Canals*. Here is one picture postcard from my collection where the sender (in November 1916) has playfully marked the pound below Ty'n y Graig lock as 'Ponty Baths'. It would have been a convenient and safe bathing spot alongside the main road at Coedpenmain where a series of locks took the Glamorganshire Canal quietly round Pontypridd. Also, by this time the canal was closed through this spot. Another favourite nearby place was the reservoir for the canal feeder and Albion Colliery at Ynyscaedudwg, Cilfynydd. In 1927 an open-air lido was opened at Ynysangharad Park, Pontypridd, that would have taken the serious swimmers away from the canal – the lido was recently refurbished.

My other postcard depicts two naked swimmers and three young onlookers on the Monmouthshire Canal at the junction of the main line with the Crumlin arm. The M4 motorway now crosses where this bridge was when Martin J Ridley, the Bournemouth publisher, had this photograph taken. The Crumlin arm comes in from the right beyond the bridge and continues to the left to Newport, just a mile away and far enough for the swimmers to feel they are away from civilisation. The sender has written 'How would you like to take a bath like this?' [Incidentally, one of our members (Henry Gunston) is related to the Ridleys.]



Mike Corfield writes:

Concerning Anne Willis's query, I can confirm that there were two official bathing places on the K&A, one was at Devises on the widened pound behind St Peter's School, and the other was at the approach to Bath by Bathwick road bridge. Both pools were roughly the same, the bathing areas were enclosed with wooden fencing with spaces to allow the canal water to flow through. Platforms ran round the perimeter, though I can't remember seeing any changing facilities in any of the pictures in the K&A archives. I do know from people who bathed there that it was very popular and there was much dismay when it was removed. There was also bathing along the long pound, but I haven't seen any pictures.

Elaine Kirby (Kennet & Avon Canal Trust Archive) writes:

Regarding 'Swimming in Canal Locks' on the Kennet & Avon; Devizes Town Swimming Pool was between Locks 48 & 49 of the Devizes Flight, a steel surrounded area with wire mesh below, with diving boards, mud and leaches it was there from 1896 to 1933 when concerns were raised about cleanliness.

Near Darlington Wharf Bath in the canal was a public baths where men & boys could wash. The weir pool between where Southcote Lock cottage used to be and Burghfield Bridge, there was a very popular swimming place in the early 1900s. When the weather is hot there are several favourite swimming locks these days, so beware when cruising, Fobney Lock 105 near Reading, Heale's Lock 93, Burnt Mill Lock 65 to note a few.

John Howat writes:

The following is taken from NHS.net. Strikes me as a good reason NOT to swim in canals!

Weil's disease (also known as leptospirosis) is a bacterial infection spread by animal urine, especially that of rats. It tends to be found in urban rivers and canals, but you can also catch Weil's disease in still water such as lakes, either by swallowing contaminated water or, more likely, by getting it into your bloodstream through a cut or graze. What to do: Cover any cuts with a waterproof plaster before swimming and avoid swallowing the water. Never swim in an urban canal. If you develop symptoms of Weil's disease within a few weeks of being in water, see your doctor. The condition can be treated with antibiotics.

The symptoms of leptospirosis usually develop suddenly around 7 to 14 days after exposure to the leptospira bacteria. However, it is possible for symptoms to develop from between 2 and 30 days after exposure. About 90% of leptospirosis infections only cause mild symptoms, including: a high temperature (fever) that is usually between 38C and 40C (100.4-104-F) chills, sudden headaches, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, muscle pain, particularly affecting the muscles in the calves and lower back, conjunctivitis (irritation and redness of the eyes), cough, a short-lived rash. These symptoms usually resolve within five to seven days. However, in about 10% of cases people go on to experience more serious symptoms.

Severe leptospirosis infections are sometimes called Weil's disease. The symptoms of a severe infection usually develop one to three days after the more mild symptoms have passed. If the condition progresses to a severe infection, it may affect organs, including the brain, liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. This can lead to further symptoms, including: jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes), swollen ankles, feet or hands, chest pain, symptoms of meningitis or encephalitis, such as headaches, vomiting and seizures, shortness of breath, coughing up blood. If left untreated, the infection may be life threatening, and could lead to brain damage, kidney failure, internal bleeding and loss of lung function.

Severe leptospirosis. If you develop a more severe leptospirosis infection, you will need to be admitted to hospital. The underlying infection will be treated with antibiotics injected directly into the bloodstream (intravenously). If your organs have been damaged, the functions of your body may need to be supported. For example, you may need: a ventilator to assist your breathing, dialysis, where the functions of your kidneys are artificially replicated by removing waste materials from your blood, intravenous fluids to restore the fluids and nutrients in your body.

Some people may be well enough to leave hospital within a few weeks, while others may require several months of hospital care. It depends on how well you respond to antibiotics and the extent of any organ damage.