

Dear Heather here are a few of my many memories of Dudley No2 canal from Windmill End to Coombs Wood.

I became familiar with this canal from about 1954 shortly after my mother died and I moved down from Rowley, the playground of my years up to aged 10, to live with an aunt only a short walk up the hill from the canal.

Sunday afternoon walks with my father Charles Bennett Adams would often be along the canal and over the semi-rural landscape of abandoned coal tips near to Lion Road and Totnall Bridge. We discussed the boats which were still in use along that part of the canal transporting coke from the gasworks at Garrets Lane/Powke Lane to the tube works adjacent to Waterfall Lane. This led us to decide to make a model 'Joey' boat and one afternoon we went to the wharf at Waterfall Lane Bridge and measured a seventy foot Joey. The measurements were then drawn up ready for the model. This we built in balsa wood and used match sticks to represent the ribbing of the sides. I still have the model which shows how we had difficulty in moulding the side plank to the curve of the prow. There is still evidence of the scorch mark of the heat we applied to effect the bend. Another thing which my father pointed out to me several times about canalside industry was that between Waterfall Lane bridge and Totnall bridge when he was a boy in the 1920s there were glead ovens. These were in effect coking ovens to provide the small coke needed by the many small chain and nail making shops of which there were then still very many. By my time the ovens had all gone.

My Grandfather Eli Adams with whom I spent lots of time in the late 1940s and early 50s had been born in Hill, which is a suburb now of Halesowen and he was apprenticed to a cabinet maker in Halesowen so would have walked to and fro from work over the Dudley No2 near to Coombs Wood. But the tale I remember him telling me was about the canal at Waterfall Lane. He said that a fairground box truck carrying animals had run away down the The Tump (Perry Park Road) and animals had ended up in the canal. It seems the story is true and this is borne out in the canalside sculpture by Luke Perry which tells the same story.

Later when I joined Rowley Regis Grammar School, in the late 1950s, which was housed in Wrights Lane, Old Hill in the premises previously built for the Central School, forerunner of the Grammar School. (alongside fellow pupil Marie Smith!), I became interested in the canoe club which made and used 16 foot kayaks which were built to the designs of Percy Blandford – wood frame with stretched cotton duck hull and decking over-painted for waterproofing (?). These we used on the adjacent Dudley No2 and occasionally we were allowed to forgo normal PE lessons and carry the kayaks up to the canal. We would then head for the Gosty Hill tunnel and paddle through into the very busy Coombs Wood factory, much to the astonishment of the office ladies looking down. The factory used lots of boats to transport tubes to the railway interchange basin – Hawne Basin – and sometimes pairs of boats would be leaving with cargos en route to far off places. When I sometimes walked home via Lion Road and Totnall Bridge I would see pairs of boats heading away from Coombs Wood.

Because of the School interest in canals (we obtained and converted a Joey boat into a cabin cruiser, but not on this part of the Dudley No2) we were members of the IWA. This led, one Saturday, to us being invited to be part of a protest cruise which was to focus on the illegal closure of the Stourbridge Canal. We were to follow on our bikes. We joined the protest boat (sadly I cannot remember the name of the boat although I do remember that it belonged to a Captain Grundy who was understandably protective of his boat as we progressed later along the Stourbridge) somewhere between Old Hill and Windmill End at what must have been breakfast time. It was a sunny day and Robert Aikman (Founder IWA) was sitting on the top of the boat with his meal on his lap. As the boat went under a bridge a large piece of rust debris dropped directly into his meal – much to the amused delight of the others who included David Hutching (saviour of the upper Avon Navigation). The motley crew and we bikers then proceeded towards Stourbridge.

Another part of school interest in boating was, as mentioned above, the conversion of the Joey boat into the 'Bumblebee' cruiser. Quite a few of my afternoon woodwork lessons were spent at Harris's Boat Yard at Bumble Hole arm. Sometimes we were ferried there in the sporty Rover belonging to 'Clem' our art teacher. After the 'lesson' was over (and there were activities related to Woodwork – such as drilling for the prop shaft) I would walk home along the Dudley No2. In those days (1958/59) Doulton's Pottery Works were still operating and they had a covered wharf for the delivery of coke for the kilns. Presumably, previously they would also have used boats to take away their wares which were mostly tubes and sanitary ware, but I never saw any boats apart from the coke boats.

As a result of my school interest in kayaking I bought a Blandford design package and set about making my own on the back yard at home. My aunt and uncle were very understanding in allowing me to take up a large part of the yard and turn it to boat building. After consulting my uncle's cousin Earnest Smith about the best place to obtain supplies I put in an order with Palmer's Timber whose timber yard was, and still is, adjacent to the Dudley No2. Needless to say the completed kayak was first trialed on this canal and although it was a double seater I often used it alone to explore along to Windmill End. Here, in the early 1960s I would meet Alan Smith at his boat Laurel, moored in the Bumble Hole arm where he was working to convert it from working boat into cruiser. The Dudley No2 canal became the starting point for me and friends to explore farther afield by canal – Netherton Tunnel led on to trips into Staffordshire and Shropshire which opened up a whole new world of nature and heritage.

The extreme weather of winter 1963 froze the canal for what seemed like months. The ice was solid enough to walk safely upon and my friend Jim Sidaway and myself several times walked along from Waterfall Lane to Windmill End. There were times when the ice moved underfoot and one would hear a soft pinging noise as this happened. This noise seemed to travel away into the distance as the ice adjusted to our movement. We never, in the hardiness of youth, worried about going through the ice. It was very cold and the ice very thick. During those days

there was no movement on the water and no ice breaker came. But then the days of boat carrying were virtually over for this part of the waterways.

As an art student training to be a teacher in the mid '60s I began to draw the local scene and a number of my drawings and paintings were of this canal and its environs. I was particularly interested in the Coombs Wood Tube Works and its adjacent railway interchange basin, now known as Hawne Basin. This is the terminus of the canal and has been since the lowering of Mucklow Hill bridge which cut off the part of the canal which went to Lapal Tunnel. The railway came through to here from the junction at Old Hill. As the canal needed Gosty Hill tunnel to arrive here so the railway needed a tunnel at Haden Cross to access this place. The entrance to the basin has a lovely bridge with very interesting cast iron copings. The basin when I drew there was full of boats which were moved about by the two Coombs Wood Works tugs. Near to the basin but on the side opposite the towpath was the boatbuilder employed by the Works to repair their many boats. Here they had a slipway and steam chambers for heating and bending timbers. The remains of the slipway are all that is now remaining of this small boatyard.