



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

My Visit to Rose and Jack Skinner

On a quest for information for our Business and Trade exhibition three years ago I had a most memorable afternoon in the company of Rose and Jack Skinner.

On a wet Friday afternoon in September 2006 I set off along the towpath of the Oxford Canal to see if I could find Rose Skinner. I had been given a vague idea of where she lived. When I came across a row of little cottages I realised I could have arrived, but which one was it? The first one was closest to the water's edge, but then I noticed that the next cottage had a window box painted with canal art and that there were lace curtains at the windows. I approached the door of this house and tentatively knocked. A man came to the door and I explained that I was hoping to find where Mrs Skinner lived. "She's right here" he said, standing back as if to ask me in. I started to explain that I was hoping to be able to find out about the delivery of coal to Heyford Wharf, but he was saying "Come in, come in." So I did.

I went straight in to their small living room, which was packed with memorabilia. There were many family photos on the walls as well as photos of Elvis Presley. There were plates and clocks and model boats. Rose told me who was in the photos- four children and ten grandchildren. She is 82 and Jack 87. She was born on a boat but Jack (or John) was born on land, though he has lived on a boat since he was three weeks old. They started courting when Rose was fourteen, and married near Coventry.

Rose and Jack can not read or write and nor can their two eldest children, but as Jack says, they are not stupid. The children went to school once a week and were given books to take with them to learn to read. Of course there was no-one to help them on the canal but they enjoyed the pictures and would swap the books with other passing families. I wonder if the schools ever got them back! Rose said she was always falling into the canal. Rose's friend, who she has known since they were four, was often getting into trouble at the swing bridge at Upper Heyford because the boys would hammer a nail into the bridge. The little girl would sit down and then they'd put the bridge up and her dress would be caught on the nail and up she'd go. When she got home her mother would wallop her.



Jack's Uncle Joe had mules to pull his boat. He didn't like horses. Eventually the towpath deteriorated so badly that the mule, Dolly, couldn't get along and one day slipped into the canal and caught pneumonia. They took her to a shed but Dolly died, and that's when Joe retired. He was the last person in the country to have a "horse" drawn boat. Rose's father

had a horse which went lame. It was left in a field for two years then put back to work. It went lame again because of the poor state of the path and was sent to Belgium for dog meat. Rose and Jack always had an engine powered boat which belonged to the company and travelled at three and a half miles an hour. They usually started at 6am and finished about 10pm, but one day Rose remembers Jack calling her to get up at 3am. They were at Somerton



deep lock and they went down to Sandford and returned to Oxford at 11pm. They earned £7 a week between them. In winter they would have to break the ice to open the lock gates and in summer they had to beware of sunburn. Their boat carried 27 tons of coal, from Baddesley, near Tamworth and they also transported stone, bricks from Napton, and tiles. Rose would shovel the coal out into a wheelbarrow and Jack would wheel it away as this was too heavy for Rose to do. Occasionally someone would help them but then they would have to pay them.

To do the washing they would light a fire on the bank and put the tub on it, then Rose would pummel the clothes with a dolly. When they stopped at Heyford, Rose would walk into the village to the bakery to buy bread. She was disappointed on a recent visit to find that it is no longer there. One year the canal ran dry and it was a week before it was navigable again. Jack went potato picking, earning a shilling a day. During the war Jack went to London to pick up a large number of bottles. A wire was rigged up between the bottles and the cockpit. He was told that if that wire changed colour he should run. He arrived in Birmingham and the receivers approached, dressed in protective gear. He had been transporting Nitro-Glycerine and was told that one bottle could blow up half of Birmingham.

Rose and Jack helped keep the cut open when it was threatened with closure a couple of times. Barbara Castle visited, and they filled the canal with water further north to make sure she had a straightforward trip. On retirement, the Waterways gave them a cottage at Napton, but it was "horrid". It was between two locks, where a boy had drowned, and it was on two levels so that you walked out of the bedroom straight onto the towpath. The Skinners are much happier where they are now, except that the council are threatening to develop the area with flats and that. Rose worked at a nearby factory for some years. She was given important letters to put into envelopes as they knew she wouldn't be able to read them. Jack was often called back to help with Waterways projects.

As I got up to leave, Rose insisted on giving me a guided tour of their tiny cottage. And as I stepped back onto the tow path I realised they had had no idea who I was, I had not even told them my name! Sadly Jack died on 28th April 2008, aged 88.

Diana Gardner, SAVA

If you have memories of life in the village that you would like us to capture please contact SAVA – see inside front cover for details.