
Express & Star

From brothel to respected pub – canalside cottage hides a varied past

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They called it Botterham House, which sounded grand – for a canalside brothel, that is.



The canalside cottage with a hidden history



An old but undated image of The Boat Inn, perhaps showing the landlady and some of the regulars



A view of Botterham Lock in about 1900

Later it rose in the respectability stakes, when this property not far from Wombourne became the long-forgotten Boat Inn.

Then it was a home, with the pub sign propped against a wall a fading reminder of its days as the hub of the local community.

Then part of the roof fell in. And now it's an old and picturesque cottage with a hidden story – a story which Derek Partridge took the trouble to dig out, unearthing some evocative images into the bargain.

"I recently came across a couple of very old photographs of Botterham Lock on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal near Swindon village," said Mr Partridge, of Tettenhall, Wolverhampton.



An old but undated image of The Boat Inn, perhaps showing the landlady and some of the regulars

"From 1995 until 2010 we lived at Church Farm, Swindon, where we converted the farmyard and buildings complex into an award-winning barn conversion project which we renamed Swallowfield Barn.

"Our land ran down to border Smestow Brook and just beyond was the canal at Botterham.

"I became interested with the area and its heritage, particularly in the context of local industrial history.

"One day I decided to call at Botterham House – so-called house, it is only a cottage – and was welcomed and invited in by the then-owner Mrs Price, who showed me the interior and gave me the fascinating story."

She was the granddaughter of one of the original publicans and had lived there all her life, as had her parents and grandparents.

The story is as told to Mr Partridge by Mrs Price, although he says it might be mildly apocryphal in parts.

Temporary accommodation

To start at the start, James Brindley's Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal was fully opened to traffic in 1770.

While the section from Wombourne Bratch – and yes, that's the correct spelling – to Swindon was under construction, the canal company built a canalside cottage hostel as temporary accommodation for senior employees, managers, and foremen.

"The brick-built dwelling, grandly known by the canal company as Botterham House, was sited just below the locks on the west bank of the canal," he continued.

"As work progressed and the management moved further south, lower grade workers and navvies began to use the house themselves to improve their billeting.

"It soon became an unglorified brothel with local wenches providing hard-earned comfort for its inmates.

"When canal construction was completed, the building was extended to provide stabling for bargees' horses, and thus turned into a fairly respectable public house, suitably called The Boat.

"Photographs taken about 100 years or so later show the pub name board above the front door porch.



The canalside cottage with a hidden history

"I was actually shown this same original sign propped up against the cottage side wall when we lived at Swallowfield Barn from which the rear of the old company cottage could be seen through the trees across Smestow Brook.

"'The BOAT INN' lettering could still be clearly made out, although sadly I think that the sign has since been lost.

"Today the appearance of the cottage frontage is changed due to a major collapse of the roof above the stabling and storage wing some years ago, which now looks single storey.

"Mrs Price well remembered the night when the adjoining roof fell in with a tremendous crash.

"Her mother had tried to get her father to rebuild the roof as it had been, but he simply cleared away the debris into the canal and put on a lean-to corrugated roof.

'Telescopically extended'

"The collapsed part of Botterham House had a gantry beam sticking out from the small central warehouse window – you can see it on one of the pictures – which could be

telescopically extended out over the canal for unloading or loading heavy goods, coal for example, and I think maybe even beer.

"I think Mrs Price showed me the remains of the pub's old indoor home brew sinks.

"Apparently, the beams became weakened by age and rot, and in spite of his wife's sage warnings the landlord persisted to use the crane until it broke like a see-saw and pivoted forward into the canal, taking the roof above down with it."



By Toby Neal

Feature Writer

A journalist in Shropshire for 40 years, mainly writes features and columns, especially about aspects of Shropshire history. Lives in Telford and is based at the Ketley headquarters.

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