

Bottom Lock, Slea Navigation

Oral History – Shirley and William (Bill) Kirk, 7th July 2009



Working at Bottom Lock

Shirley and Bill's father Len Kirk, who was born in 1910, was the Lock Keeper at Bottom Lock from 1937 until 1952. He and their mother Pat (she didn't like being called by her real name Martha) lived in the lock cottage with their 5 children. Shirley, the eldest, was a baby when the Kirks moved from Chapel Hill to the lock. Gordon, Arthur, Brenda and June were born in the cottage. Brothers Bill and Clifford were born after the family moved from the lock to the Kirton Fen area. You didn't go to hospital in those days – midwife Nurse Everard was called from North Kyme.

Before taking the part time job of lock keeper, Dad worked on the land, and he balanced his part time hours looking after the lock with continuing to work for a number

of local farmers. By this time there was very little boat traffic on the Slea apart from the barges that carried the sugar beet after the harvest. Dad's main job was operating the lock gates to control the flow of water and reduce the risk of flooding. Often was the time a local farmer – who thought he knew better – tried to tell Dad when the gates should be open or closed, but Dad wouldn't be pressured and made up his own mind. The job also included general maintenance of the lock and clearing weed from the water with a grappling iron and rake. Because of the nature of the work, it meant the family couldn't leave the lock for long or travel far.

Life on the 'island'

The lock keeper's cottage was on an island in the middle of the river. Access to the cottage on one side was via a bridge across the lock gates and from the other via a walkway made from 2 railway sleepers laid side by side with a railing to hold onto. It was very narrow and Shirley recalls the post woman getting the wheel of her bicycle stuck in the gap between the 2 planks.

Mum was worried to death about the river. When the children were young, she kept them 'fenced in' and the gates were tied with washing line to stop them getting out. As they grew older, they had more freedom, but their mother always worried about them falling in. She was always checking where they were and was anxious if she couldn't find them. Neighbors and people who knew them always told her if they had seen the children where they shouldn't have been. Amazingly though, none of them was ever taught to swim and Mum was very proud that they all obeyed her and none of them ever fell in once!

Very sadly, a local boy was drowned in the river – the Kirks knew his family, both Shirley and Gordon had often played with him. She recalls her father being called to fetch the grappling irons to help find his body.

Being surrounded on all sides by water was a precarious position in times of flood. Water would come up through the bricks of the floor. Neighbors brought their parents copies of the weather reports in the newspapers when there was going to be bad weather - they were worried the whole island would be submerged under water. The family wouldn't have stood a chance to escape. Shirley feels they were lucky to have survived such was the danger sometimes.

The cottage itself had 2 bedrooms and a small box room upstairs with a sloping ceiling. The windows had tiny glass panes. It didn't have electricity and they used paraffin lamps and so-called 'blow up' tilly lamps – these could be dangerous. Dad planted fruit trees by the cottage. The apple tree is still there and a few years ago Bill brought back an apple for Shirley.

When Mum and Dad moved out of the cottage, Dad didn't want the trouble of taking the old iron bedsteads with them, so he threw them in the river. Bill thought he saw them in the water a few years ago when he was walking down by the lock. They are believed to be still there.

Near Neighbors

The Kirks nearest neighbors lived in a small row of cottages a short distance down the bank towards Chapel Hill. Kit and Carrie lived in one of the cottages. Carrie had a truck which she pulled along with her shopping. It annoyed Dad that during the war they never bothered to put up black out blinds. One time, he went over there and nailed some up himself. He was worried that if the cottage lights were spotted, they might all be bombed. The cottages were pulled down some time ago, but you can still see some bricks in the field where they were.

There were also farmhouses across the fields. Even so, they still felt isolated. It was about a 3 mile walk along the river bank to the nearest shops in Chapel Hill. Shirley and the older children were sometimes sent by their mother to buy provisions. Shirley dreaded being sent – it was such a long walk, especially in bad weather – “I walked my legs off”. She also walked to Dogdyke to a local farmer who had a sideline business charging the accumulator batteries used to power the radio. They had 2 batteries so they could use one while the other was being charged. Some trades people delivered though, the baker from Walcot and Mr Wilson from South Kyme who sold everything. He came down the bank in his van “they looked after the family very well”.

Going to school

The Kirk children went to the village school in Billingham. To reach the school bus, the children walked along the river bank which could be treacherous in bad weather. The bus – run by Mr Twells, would collect children who walked from outlying farms and cottages to the nearest lane where the bus would wait. Shirley remembers that the bus was sometimes driven by old Mr Twells, whose eyesight wasn't so good – on several occasions he drove the bus off the road! It was a worrying experience. One of their friends not only had to walk along the banks, but across 2 fields as well. Sometimes there would be a bull in the field, which terrified the children.

The children went to church twice on a Sunday – in the morning to Sunday School and back again later in the day for evening service with their parents.

Catching the Sunday dinner

Lock keepers and farm workers at this time were not well paid, so Dad like many others, did a bit of poaching on the side to put a rabbit or pheasant on the table for Sunday dinner. He would go out very early in the morning to catch one in the neighboring fields, which were owned by his farmer cousins Jess and Fred. It wasn't until years later that they let on that had often spotted him, but had turned a blind eye, as they knew he had a lot of mouths to feed!

Dad also supplemented the family income on occasion by catching and skinning otters - something which wouldn't happen nowadays. These otters had got trapped in the lock pit when both gates had been closed. The skins were sent away by train and Dad got paid Ten shillings for each skin. Shirley recalls what a horrible sight it was to see - they had to hold the lamp for Dad or fetch his knives for him.

Visitors to the lock

Visitors to the lock included the boatmen and women who worked on the barges transporting sugar beet from the fields to the sugar factory at Bardney. Because the land could be waterlogged, it was easier to get the sugar beet out by boat - lorries wouldn't have been able to get to the fields. The barges would tie up for a couple of weeks on the river while the beet was loaded. Shirley remembers the bargees coming across to the lock keepers cottage in the evening to play cards and chat to her parents. Jess Overton was one of the barge owners. He gave Dad a number of clay pipes - Dad smoked so much he could wear a pipe out quite quickly.

There were a lot of tramps around too. Sometimes they would knock on the door - 'cup o' tea missus?' they would ask. They frightened Shirley - when she looked out of the bedroom window in the morning she sometimes saw one asleep by the bank. Her mother always told her not to speak to anyone she didn't know. When she was out doing an errand, she would keep her head down to avoid looking at them.

Crowds of anglers, mostly from Sheffield would come to fish. They came by train to Dogdyke station, or by coach. The family got to know some of the regulars and Mum would make them cups of tea. In return, they would bring sweets and chocolate for the children, or pieces of cutlery for Mum. Subsequently, the Kirks had the best knives and forks for miles around!

One particular visitor was a well to do gentleman who owned a sweet factory in Sheffield. He would arrive in a 'posh' car - cars could get right up along the bank in the summer. The banks were impassable in bad weather though. Dad would give him a ¼ of one of the pigs he kept after it had been slaughtered - there was rationing then so the man would have been grateful and he brought sweets for them. In those days, anyone with a large enough garden, or plot of land would keep a pig. It was a big

occasion when the 'pigman' came to slaughter it. The water was put on to boil in the copper washing tub at 5 in the morning so it would be hot enough when he arrived at 7 to kill the pig. The boiling water was used to scrub the slaughtered pig and remove the bristles.

The man also 'loaned' Dad a shotgun – it was a very fine gun, a Purdy possibly, the Rolls Royce of guns. At the time Dad had an old fashioned single barreled 12 bore gun. Dad always regretted not buying the Purdy when the man offered it to him at a good price.

Mum's father came to stay at the cottage for a while. Grandad had cataracts and could hardly see. Nevertheless, he would take a gun and listen for the crows – shooting at them wildly. He was a nuisance recalled Shirley and a danger to everyone!

A wartime tragedy

One Sunday, in March 1941, the family were sat having their dinner when they heard a plane flying low over the roof. Suddenly there was a loud explosion – the shock waves travelled through the water and shook the cottage. The pumping station nearby at Chapel Hill had been bombed by the enemy aircraft. It was thought afterwards that the pumping station had been mistaken for a factory because of its tall brick chimney. Dad rushed to see if he could help, but the Richardson family who lived in the station house had been killed instantly. The pumping station itself was untouched and the engine machinery, or 'engine' as it was known locally, was still pumping away. John and Annie Richardson, their sons John and Thomas and daughter Annie were buried in the churchyard at Chapel Hill. Their other daughter Ena survived as she wasn't in the station house at the time, she had been invited to Sunday lunch by her fiancé's parents Mr and Mrs Maplethorpe.

Dad always said the most vivid memory he had of the awful scene was the strange sight of little fluffy yellow chicks scrambling about the bricks of the wrecked house. They heard later that fighter planes from RAF Digby shot the enemy aircraft down over the Wash.

The site, like many other bomb sites, wasn't cleared for years and Shirley always hated having to go past it when she was doing errands as it scared her. During the war, dad would often stand on the island and watch the Lancaster bombers flying out and returning back to base after their mission – sadly not all of them did come back.

Friend or Foe?

Dad worked hard and so looked forward to his Saturday nights at The Crown in Chapel Hill. He enjoyed chatting to locals and any new faces that appeared. He would often

invite people back to the cottage and Mum would find complete strangers in the house the next morning!

A short while before the outbreak of war, Dad brought back 2 foreign chaps from the pub. They had told him they were traveling round on holiday and Dad said they could put their tent up at the lock. Each day they pedaled off. Mum noticed that they had expensive looking cameras and tripods. When they returned, Dad would chat to them about what they had been doing and it seems they had been touring the sites of the local airfields at Digby, Cranwell and Coningsby.

After a week, Mum wanted her privacy again and Dad diplomatically told them it was time to be moving on. Some months later Mum and Dad got an envelope through the post postmarked Germany and it contained some great quality photos of the local area. Looking back, could these 2 well spoken foreigners have been spies? It seems very suspicious that they were taking photographs in the vicinity of the military airfields. Or was it just a curious coincidence?

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Mum and Dad had fond memories of living on the island and Shirley enjoyed her time there as a child – in particular she remembers some happy Christmas days there. However, it was a very dangerous place and 'it wasn't an easy life'. Looking back, she wouldn't have advised anyone to live there.

