



# A Hop along Skips Lane



What do Hire Boats, Tow-bars, Scouting and Horse Boxes have in common? They have all played a significant part in making Skips Lane what it is today.

Until the early 1920s there were no houses on what was a farm track. Over the next 60 years or so, the track became noted for its pleasant houses, many the homes of a variety of successful self-made businessmen. Although it is many years since a new house has been built on Skips Lane, there has been a steady stream of building activity. Many of the original houses have been substantially extended and the area remains a desirable place to live. This story was put together at the end of 2008 to capture some points of interest in the short history of the lane.



Aerial view taken in April 2007



## The Early Days



*A sketch made in about 1860 of Rowton Bridge showing Salt Box Cottage*



*Photo of around 1917 showing the gate leading to a farm track off Rowton Bridge Road with the Salt Box Cottage on the right.*

Rowton Bridge was built in about 1775 as part of the construction of the Shropshire Union Canal. The 1910 Ordnance Survey Map shows a public footpath track through fields parallel to the Canal with no indication of any buildings. For many years the postal address was Rowton Bridge before eventually being named Skips Lane after the nick name of Miss Smith who lived in one of the first houses to be built on the track.



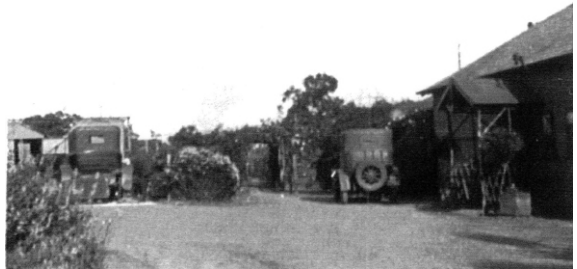
*Looking down the newly named Skips Lane towards Medway in about 1975*

## Hire Boats

The proximity to the canal gives the obvious link to Hire Boats and in turn to the Wain family who ran a colliery business in Stoke on Trent.

In June 1921 Thomas Wain (Grandfather of David Wain) bought an area of land, with a covenant that no more than three houses be erected, off a local land owner and Parish Council Chairman, Captain William G T Currie. Thomas Wain took out a mortgage with Leek & Moorlands Building Society,

built two wooden houses and ran a small-holding on the land. Thomas lived in the first house, Coney Grove, later re-named Cardeston and now known as Mulberry House. A dramatic fire in the 1920s destroyed the house's garage and cars.



*A hazy pic of the front yard of Coney Grove in the 1920s, before the fire (and the fancy lights)*



*Coney Grove in the 1930s*

After Thomas's death in 1934 Coney Grove was sold and a variety of people have lived there, including a Canon Gorst. In the 1962 the house was purchased from a well known solicitor, Jack Blake by Dr Bill Pollitt, the area Medical Officer of Health. In the early 1990's Bill built himself a substantial new house (Old Court on Rowton Bridge Road) on what was his tennis court. Bill and his wife now live in Badgers Close; Old Court is now the home of Sue and Lewis Rees. Mulberry House is occupied by Jane and Peter Roberts and family; Jane runs a public relations company from there.



*Dinas in the 1950s*

The second house, Dinas, was built for Thomas's son Geoffrey and his wife. Geoffrey kept a 24 foot cruising boat powered by a Model T Ford engine, moored on the adjacent canal. After Geoffrey's death in 1956 his wife & daughter Jean lived there for a few years before the house was sold. Dinas was demolished in 1986 and the Radcliff family built



what is now No 2 Skips Lane.



*Nora Wain watching demolition of Dinas in 1986*

In 1934 Ernest Butler bought from the Thomas Wain Estate the present site of Waterside Court. Butler was the owner of Butler's Mill beside the canal in Christleton. He also bought the land between the canal and the Eastern end of the lane from Captain Currie. This land was later used for haymaking by Charlie Cummins, a well known local character. He was the Groom for the Porritt family who lived at Christleton Grange. Later he ran his own stables and horse riding business.



*A Morris Cowley and haymaking in the Top Field in the 1920s*



*Charlie Cummins (not to be confused with Roger Beswick) haymaking in what is now the garden of Haslemere, circa 1965*

Part of the haymaking field was bought by John Dean in the 1970s, his boys kept ponies and a small stable was built on the canal bank. It now accommodates Roger Beswick's lawnmower. John Dean later built Haslemere and then Heron Water on the land.

In 1935 the Inland Cruising Association was founded by Geoffrey Wain, Sidney Hathaway and L Gilmore who contributed an initial fleet of five river cruisers. They established the first company in Britain to hire out holiday cruisers on the canal system and six new cruisers were built by Taylor's boatyard in Chester. They bought back from Ernest

Butler the site of what is now Waterside Court and in 1937-8 built docks & repair sheds adding in 1938-39 a large boat building shed.



*The entrance to David Wain's boatyard in about 1965*



*Early days of the boatsheds in what is now the garden of 2 Waterside Court with Skip's house in the background*

A canopy beside the canal came from a petrol filling station which used to be opposite Butler's Mill on the Whitchurch Road.



*A busy scene at the boatyard in the 1960s*

The outbreak of war and petrol rationing meant that building and hiring of cruisers had to be abandoned. Business ground to a halt apart from some rental of caravans and the hiring of moored vessels as holiday houseboats.



*David Wain, in his Kings School uniform in 1939, riding past where Haslemere is now on the right*

By the end of the war the fleet was reduced to four; the business was re-started by converting about four



ex war landing craft to canal cruisers.

In 1956 Geoffrey Wain died, and his son David, born in 1927, took over the business, renaming it Inland Hire Cruisers. David developed the boat building operation and in the following years a total of 19 new boats were built using traditional craft skills.



*Building Canal Cruisers circa 1970*

In 1954/5 David had a house, Greenwharf, built on the site. David & Nora Wain lived there until 2003 when they moved to Caldley Valley in Chester and sold the house to Mike & Penny Fitzgerald. David is the source of much of the information in this article.



*David Wain driving his car along the canal, probably in 1963*

Following the death of Geoffrey, his wife sold part of the family orchard land to raise some cash and another house, Newland, was constructed in about 1957. Gerry and Sheila Newey have lived there since the house was built..

David closed the business in October 1973 and the boat yard equipment was auctioned off.



*Auction of boatyard equipment in 1973*

Far from retiring David has maintained his links with Inland Waterways by undertaking a variety of high

level business, advisory and consultancy roles.

His son Nick inherited the family interest in water, a keen canoeist, he became a world champion.



*David Wain in 2002 when President of the Association of Pleasure Craft Operators*

The Wains had some local competition from Jack and Sid Dean, a family of local builders. The Deans lived on Rowton Bridge Road adjacent to the canal bridge and opened their marina in 1947 opposite Skips Lane. Dean's also converted ex army pontoons into cabin cruisers and later constructed marine ply based boats themselves.

In the early 1970s Ken Edwards, a well regarded Consultant Psychiatrist then living at Whitegates sold the bottom part of his garden to Jack's son, John Dean. John built Rowton Way for himself. He then persuaded Miss Smith to sell him part of the field to the east of Wain's boatyard and built Haslemere. Eventually he managed to buy the rest of the field off Miss Smith and built Heron Water in about 1978. John and his family lived in each of these ever more splendid houses.

Whitegates was bought several years ago by Ann and Michael Wilkinson.

In the early 1980s Beryl and Arthur Seddon lived in Rowton Way, Arthur was well known as a master brewer and director of Bass Breweries. They sold the house to a Mrs Hume who moved from Little Paddocks on Plough Lane after the death of her husband, a Director of Cunard. She was the aunt of Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, the Primate of the Catholic Church in this country. Mrs Hume thought it "was a nice little cottage to retire to" and installed a pottery kiln in the garage. Apparently Mrs Hume was looking after all sorts of church artefacts in the house and when she died these were rapidly spirited away by the Church. Roger and Christine Beswick bought the house and a few years later moved across the lane to Haslemere. Taff Powell a senior manager in the Health and Safety Executive then moved into Rowton Way. Like most John Dean built houses it features a fairly extensive entrance hall and landing, which leads to difficulties in accessing the central landing light. Taff is remembered for his precarious manoeuvres along makeshift access planks and ladders to change the landing light fitting! Rowton Way is now the home of the Willetts family.

Doug and Yvonne Jenkins bought Heron Water after John Dean's former wife Avice died in 2007; John is now living in Florida. Doug is currently restoring Heron Water to even greater splendour.



Taff's wife Judy was walking her dog some years ago along the lane and heard plaintive cries for help. They were from Avice Dean leaning out of a bathroom window at Heron Water. It transpired that one of her young grand children had playfully locked the door from outside, trapping Avice inside. Judy asked Jim McCready to assist with rescue. Being uncertain about the state of Avice's dress, he was somewhat apprehensive about the task, especially when Avice requested he fetch a sledge hammer to smash down the locked front door. Fortunately Avice was fully robed and had left the house back door ajar.

In the late 1960's John Dean bought land on the north side of Skips Lane from Ernest Butler. John built more houses on this land, including Bow Brig, home of the Smith family; Lindholme home of the Barracks and Ellmeadow the home of the Szczupak family.

In October 1973 John Dean bought the site of 1 & 2 Waterside Court off Inland Hire Cruisers for £25,000 and in February 1974 Dean Bros obtained a mortgage from Midland Bank on the land. In 1976 planning permission was granted and the two houses were constructed. Number 1 was purchased by Richard Morris, Professor of Economics at Liverpool University, and his wife Sue. Number 2 was bought by a Stuart Dawson who within a year sold it on to Dorothy and John Lindop. In April 1985 this house was purchased by Lynn & Jim McCready. The links with the past are maintained, as any modest excavation around Waterside Court will unearth bits of anchor chain, engine parts etc.

## Tow-bars

In 1921 Basil Dixon-Bate founded an engineering company in Chester which, among other activities, built trailers. They developed a speciality in manufacturing tow-bars.



*An early Dixon-Bate Trailer in Northgate Street*

From 1929 Basil lived at Whitegates, the large Edwardian house at the entrance to Skips Lane with his wife, sons Barry born in 1926 and Dennis. At the time the garden of Whitegates extended to about where Lindholme is now. Basil's wife had a brother Colin Witter, and he became Sales Manager for the engineering and tow-bar business. During World War II the company made precision parts for the Merlin Aero Engine, continuing later to make specialist components for jet engines. In 1950 Colin Witter went his separate way, setting up another company to make tow-bars and in due course his sons Brendan and Rodney took over running his business. Rodney and his family lived for many

years at Lindholme. Rodney named the house after an Airfield near Doncaster where he had served time in the RAF. Serving time at Lindholme now has a different meaning, it is the site of a prison – sorry about that Jan and Ron Barrack.

Basil Dixon-Bate and family left Whitegates in 1941 and Barry returned to the area in 1953. (He took over running the engineering company in 1963.) Miss Smith was persuaded to sell a strip of land at the North-Eastern end of the lane to Barry and a friend, Tom Eaton. Barry wanted a view over the open fields to the east and Tom wanted to be on mains sewerage, so this led to a logical split of the site. Barry built Fieldfare in 1956 and Tom built Medway a year or so later. Medway is now the home of Ernie and Catherine Steward.



*Site Hut for Barry Bate's House in 1955*

Tom moved away in about 1980 when he sold a major portion of his garden to John Dean who subsequently built a bungalow on the site. The bungalow was called Marbri after the names - Margaret and Brian, of the people that first lived there. Unfortunately they got divorced and when it was sold to Bernard & Marie Bate (no relation to Barry next door) they renamed it to Low Gables; it is now the home of Peter and Linda Wilks.

Barry retired from the business in the early 1990s; he has contributed much to this article

As well as the home of two major players in the tow-bar world, the lane had another resident with links to the vehicle industry. For many years Bruce Butterfield lived at Haslemere. He had set up a business specialising in hydraulic lifts, diagnostic and other equipment for garages. He made his fortune equipping garages for the newly introduced MOT Test and his Rolls Royce was a familiar sight on the lane. It is said that he visited the local Rolls showroom nondescriptly dressed and was treated in an offhand manner by the snooty salesmen – until he produced a bag full of cash for the purchase.

## Scouting

In 1936 Ernest Butler sold the strip of land east of the Wain domain, between the lane and the canal. The purchaser was a lady of means, Miss P C Nevitt-Bennett and she and her companion Miss Hermione M Smith built a thatched house, Water's Edge.





*Water's Edge on a winter's day in the 1960s*

Miss Smith was Assistant Cubmaster of the local Scout Group and called the shots at Water's Edge. She progressed to Group Scout Leader and was therefore known as Skip, leading to the scout's nickname of the lane in which she lived. She liked to safeguard her territory and there used to be a gate across the lane marking the boundary of her land. The name Skips Lane was officially sanctioned by the Parish Council in 1975.



*Skip Smith with the Chief Scout Lord Rowallan (& Ian Luxton) circa 1965*

Miss Smith was reluctant to let go of her land, but in the 1960s she was persuaded by Barry Bate to sell a plot at the end of the lane to a David Rutherford, who at that time was living on Plough Lane. David had Lane End built and lived there for several years with his wife Brenda. Brenda ran a mail order business for postage stamps from the house. Lane End subsequently became the home of the Gillies family.

In 1967 David Rutherford "For and on behalf of the Lane Residents Committee" organised a resurfacing of the lane by Flathers of Ellesmere Port. The total £520 cost of repair was allocated to each of eight householders "in proportion to the length lane used taken to the furthest gate post." Mr Edwards from Whitegates contributed to the cost as well as the Rutherford, Smith, Bate, Eaton, Luxton, Newey and two Wain households. The cost to the Wain and Luxton families was loaded to reflect the wear caused by their commercial traffic. Papers held by Barry Bate indicate that David Rutherford had to pay an extra four old pence to balance the books. Presumably Doug Jenkins will bear any balancing costs in the future.

Miss Smith died in 1982, a year or so after Miss Nevitt-Bennet and John Dean bought Waters Edge and the lane from her Estate. John sold the house to Vera and Geoff Warriner.

## Horseboxes

In the late 1940s Geoffrey Wain rented out the northern part of his land adjacent to the lane to Charles W Luxton. Geoffrey's wife was a farmer's daughter from Yew Tree Farm Rossett and she had run this area as a small farm before and during the war. It included pig sties, a small cattle shed and a barn which had also been used for caravan storage. Charlie Luxton augmented these structures and set up his car repair and vehicle body shop business, building truck bodies, horse boxes, hearses, and the like.



*This way to Chas W Luxton* 



*Charlie Luxton on left with assistant Bill Johnson in about 1963*

In 1959 Charlie bought this plot of land from Inland Hire Cruisers. In about 1962 he bought in addition a narrow strip of land to the east of the Wain site off Miss Smith and John Dean built him a house, Woodside on this plot. Miss Smith specified that the canal mile marker stone should mark the Eastern boundary, which gave Charlie a very narrow canal frontage. The mile stone mysteriously moved a few feet further east one night.

Charlie took it on himself to act as an un-official building inspector of houses under construction by John Dean. He was looking round the ground floor of Bow Brig and banged his head on the floor joists above. "Nothing wrong" said John before bumping his own head. A slight measurement error had resulted in the joists being set over a foot too low requiring John to correct using his well known creative construction techniques.

In 1982 when he was 73, Charlie closed down his vehicle body shop and the plot was bought by John Dean who built the house "Charlie's Yard" now occupied by Jim & Pat Hawkes. It is generally thought that the Hawkes' house is a visual improvement on Charlie's sheds.





*Charlie Luxton's Establishment before demolition in 1982, now the site of "Charlie's Yard"*

Charlie was quite a character, he used to ask Jim Hawkes about the buried treasure, Pieces of Eight, that Jim came across; he was referring to bits of Morris Eight and other vehicles. One Sunday morning Jim & Pat were on their way to church and bumped into Charlie who said "When you kneel to pray, thank God you are not on the Skips Lane sewer system." This was a reference to the fact that Charlie's Yard had its own Septic Tank. It was not reliant on the then notorious underground piping system linking many houses on Skips Lane to the mains sewer under Rowton Bridge Road. It used to block at regular intervals leading to flooded front gardens and gangs of residents wielding sewer rods. The situation greatly improved after 1998 when a piece of metal was discovered to be intermittently blocking flow in a previously unknown

manhole. The sewer manhole is now inscribed as a memorial to the discoverers, John Szczupak and Jim McCready - an honour indeed.

Charlie Luxton died in 1993 a few years after his wife Eveline. Eveline had maintained the Skips Lane connection with Scouting by working with the local Cub group. The Luxton link continues as Charlie's son Ian and family took over Woodside and Ian lives there today.

### **A Hidden Activity**

Did you know that at the end of Skips Lane there is an essential contribution to the daily life of a million or so people? Much of the water supply for Liverpool passes though large underground pipes running from South to North at the bottom of the Bates' and Gillies' gardens. The water originates from Llyn Celyn and Bala and flows down the Dee. The water is abstracted from the Dee at Huntington by the A55 bridge and after processing in one of the country's largest treatment plants is pumped into the pipelines, which were laid in the 1960s. Apparently some quicksand was encountered in the area – who knows what that swallowed up! There is a concrete section of the canal towpath indicating where the pipes pass under the canal.

## **And Finally**



*Skips Lane Residents at their Jubilee Party, Haslemere 1<sup>st</sup> June 2002*