

The Old Dock House at Sharpness and its Occupants

By Hugh Conway-Jones

The recent refurbishment of the Old Dock House beside the old canal entrance at Sharpness has prompted research into its history. This has revealed that the surviving structure was not the original building on the site but was constructed as an extension to an earlier office and house provided for the Harbour Master.

The main duty of the Harbour Master was to supervise the men helping vessels pass through the tidal basin and locks at the entrance to the canal leading to Gloucester. Incoming vessels would come up the estuary on the tide, aiming to reach the entrance around the time of high water. As the tide approached its peak, the level in the tidal basin was adjusted to suit, the entrance gates were opened, any outgoing vessels departed, the incoming vessels entered and the gates were closed again. Then the incoming vessels would take their turn to lock up into the canal and make their way to Gloucester.

The minute books of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company record that the first building beside the entrance, a small watch house and office, was built in 1827 immediately following the opening of the canal. The first Harbour Master, Charles Bosley, evidently lived nearby and did not need special accommodation. But early the following year, Bosley was sacked for neglect of duty and was replaced by Richard Wraith who came from Folkestone. So the Canal Company then arranged to extend the original building to provide somewhere for Wraith to live. This early accommodation was fairly basic, and two years later Wraith complained of dampness in the walls of his house. The Company's engineer William Clegram was authorised to do such repairs as he saw necessary, but there is no record of whether the problem was really solved. The Berkeley Tithe Map of 1840 shows this early building without the later extension. (1)

The accommodation for the Harbour Master remained basically unchanged until 1853 when the minutes record that Clegram was authorised to add four rooms to the Harbour Master's house, and local builder Oliver Cam was awarded the contract for doing the work. The resulting extension, with two rooms upstairs and two down, is the building now known as the Old Dock House. It has a distinctive classical portico like those of the bridge houses along the canal, and as a drawing in the British Waterways Archives shows that Clegram was responsible for the design of the bridge houses, it seems virtually certain that Clegram also designed the Old Dock House. An old photograph shows that the house originally had a parapet hiding the roof and that the windows had exterior shutters. The ground floor was raised above that of the surrounding area to accommodate a cellar underneath, but this meant there had to be awkward steps between the new and older parts of the house. The accompanying plans of the whole building were drawn from memory by Michael Beynon, a regular visitor in the 1930s. (2)

The Canal Company's minute books do not record why the extension was considered necessary at this time. It may just have been a recognition that the important responsibilities carried by the Harbour Master warranted appropriate accommodation, but it is possible to suggest a further reason arising from contemporary changes in operational practices. In the early days, arrivals and departures only took place during daylight hours, but to meet competition from the new railways

in the 1840s, the local trow and barge owners made arrangements to use the night tides as well. It seems likely, therefore, that the provision of extra rooms for the Harbour Master not only reflected his status but also allowed some of the rooms to be used as temporary accommodation for those required to work the night tides but who lived some distance away. This was certainly a practice in later years. (3)

As noted earlier, the first Harbour Master to live in the house was Richard Wraith, and the minute books of the Canal Company give occasional insights into the nature of his job. If an incoming vessel needed help to manoeuvre into the narrow entrance of the tidal basin, it was common practice to row out with ropes that were then used to haul the vessel into the basin. On one occasion, a brig was forced to slip its anchor during this operation, and when Wraith subsequently took a rowing boat out to recover the anchor, some accident occurred and the rowing boat was lost. Evidently this attempted recovery was an unauthorised action as Wraith was told he must make good the boat, free of any expense to the Canal Company, and in future he was not to use the Company's property except for assisting vessels in and out of the entrance.(4)

As well as supervising operations, it was the Harbour Master's responsibility to record the cargoes carried by vessels passing through the entrance. In 1834, Wraith asked for an assistant to be appointed to take command of the men on the piers when he was away recording the vessel cargoes, but it does not seem that his request was granted at that time. A few months later, Wraith had his leg broken by the recoil of a rope which parted while a vessel was being helped into the entrance. His duties were taken over temporarily by one of the local pilots. (5)

Wraith was in trouble again when an outgoing vessel ran foul of the upper ship lock gates and did considerable damage which might have been avoided if the boom provided to protect the gates had been in place. This time Wraith was summoned to a Committee meeting in Gloucester and was told to ensure his men placed the boom across the mouth of the gates immediately after the working of the locks was completed and to keep it there until the locks were again required to be worked. The Committee also ordered that a notice be put up requiring all vessels passing down the canal to stop 200 yards before the lock gates until given authority to proceed by the Harbour Master. (6)

Richard Wraith continued as Harbour Master until he retired in 1869 after 41 years' service. He was replaced by James Calway who had been Harbour Master at Lydney. (7) By this time, operations at Sharpness had become very difficult due to the increasing number and size of ships using the entrance. The largest vessels could not pass through the lock and so had to discharge their cargoes into lighters in the tidal basin. At times, this caused severe congestion, and the Canal Company set about constructing a new entrance and dock that could accommodate much larger vessels.

The opening of the new entrance in 1874 led to a review of staffing arrangements. James Calway remained in overall charge but with special responsibility for the new entrance, and a new house was built for him at the end of Dock Row (now Dock Road) overlooking the new dock. The Old Dock House then became the residence of a lesser official known as the Harbour Master for the Old Entrance. The first holder of this post was James Smith, and after he died in 1882, the responsibility passed to Capt Frederick Field. By this time, usage of the old entrance had fallen to a low level, and in 1890 Field also became assistant to Calway at the new entrance. When Calway retired in 1897, Field was promoted to succeed him and Albert Everett took over Field's

former responsibilities and his house. In 1906, however, Everett was asked to resign after he failed to relieve Field at the new entrance "having taken too much intoxicant", but his previous good service was recognised and he was given a pension. (8)

Everett was replaced as Harbour Master at the Old Entrance by former pilot John Brinkworth, who then moved into the Old Dock House. For a time the entrance was comparatively busy as it was being used by barges carrying gravel from Frampton for the construction of the Royal Edward Dock at Avonmouth. But when this traffic came to an end in 1907, arrangements were made for the clerical work associated with recording vessels to be done only at the General Office near the new dock, and in the following year the old entrance was closed as a further economy measure. (9)

Brinkworth was then given the job of Berthing Master, which required him to assist the Harbour Master, Capt. Field, by supervising the berthing of vessels arriving in the new dock on both tides each day. When Field died in 1917, Brinkworth must have hoped to succeed him, but the job went to Capt. James Henry Evans, recently Dock Master at Gloucester and a former steamer captain. Presumably by way of compensation, Brinkworth was given the title of Dock Master at Sharpness with the same salary as Evans, and he remained living in the Old Dock House. (10)

During the inter-war years, the old dock was a very quiet backwater compared with the thriving activity at the new dock. The unused tidal basin gradually filled with mud to within about eight feet of the top of the pier walls. Over much of the area, the mud was firm enough to walk on, although the overflow from the canal formed a small stream across to the entrance gates. The piers were covered with long grass crossed by gravel paths, and there were large clumps of blackberry bushes near the house. The main living area was in the old part of the house, the downstairs rooms in the 1853 extension being mainly reserved for when there were visitors. Piped water and gas were available, but rainwater was also collected and pumped to a header tank for the flush toilet. All drainage and garbage disposal was direct into the estuary. A telephone was mounted in a mahogany box on the wall of the kitchen with a separate earpiece and a winding handle on the side. At each end of the "office" was a high sloping-topped desk carrying long-abandoned ledgers, and on the back wall was a large notice giving the regulations for handling carbide cargoes. During winter storms, waves sometimes came over the quay wall, and spray lashed the house windows. On these occasions, a heavy wooden storm door could be slid across in front of the front door, and the upper guide for this can still be seen. A severe gale in 1908 blew down the original parapet, and another in the early 30s lifted off the roof of the wash-house, which then became derelict. (11)

Brinkworth continued as Dock Master until after the outbreak of the Second World War. In December 1940, shortly before he was due to retire, he was accidentally killed while on duty when he fell into the tidal basin at the new entrance. It was an exceptionally dark night with no lighting because of an alert, and he fell about twenty feet on to the sloping concrete side of the basin. Former steamer captain Richard Whittington was appointed in his place, but he did not move into the Old Dock House. (12)

It was at this time that arrangements were in hand to reopen the old entrance in case the new entrance was damaged by enemy action. New lock gates and operating machinery were ordered from Messrs Vickers-Armstrong Ltd in 1940, although they were not fully operational until 1942. It was probably also during this period that the older parts of the Old Dock House were demolished and replaced with a single storey extension to the 1853 block containing a living

room, kitchen and bathroom. The next occupant of the house was the retired Bristol Channel pilot Bruce Smith, who had the job of supervising the refurbished entrance. In the event, it is not thought that the entrance ever needed to be used, but Smith did play host to the canal campaigner Tom Rolt when he brought his famous boat Cressy to Sharpness for a month in the summer of 1948. Later occupants of the house were former dock workers Dolph Barnes and Aubrey Darnley, the latter moving out in the late 1980s. (13)

The house then stood unoccupied for several years, and its condition deteriorated. This caused increasing concern among members of the Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology, particularly Neville Crawford and Ray Wilson. They succeeded in getting the building formally listed as being of Architectural and Historical Interest, and they lobbied British Waterways to look after the building. This pressure undoubtedly helped pave the way for the recent major restoration which has converted the building into a new base for the volunteer lifesavers of the Severn Area Rescue Association, opened in 1996. This conversion has cleverly retained the recent appearance of the house but with the 1940s extension replaced by a spacious shelter for the Association's rescue craft.

Acknowledgements

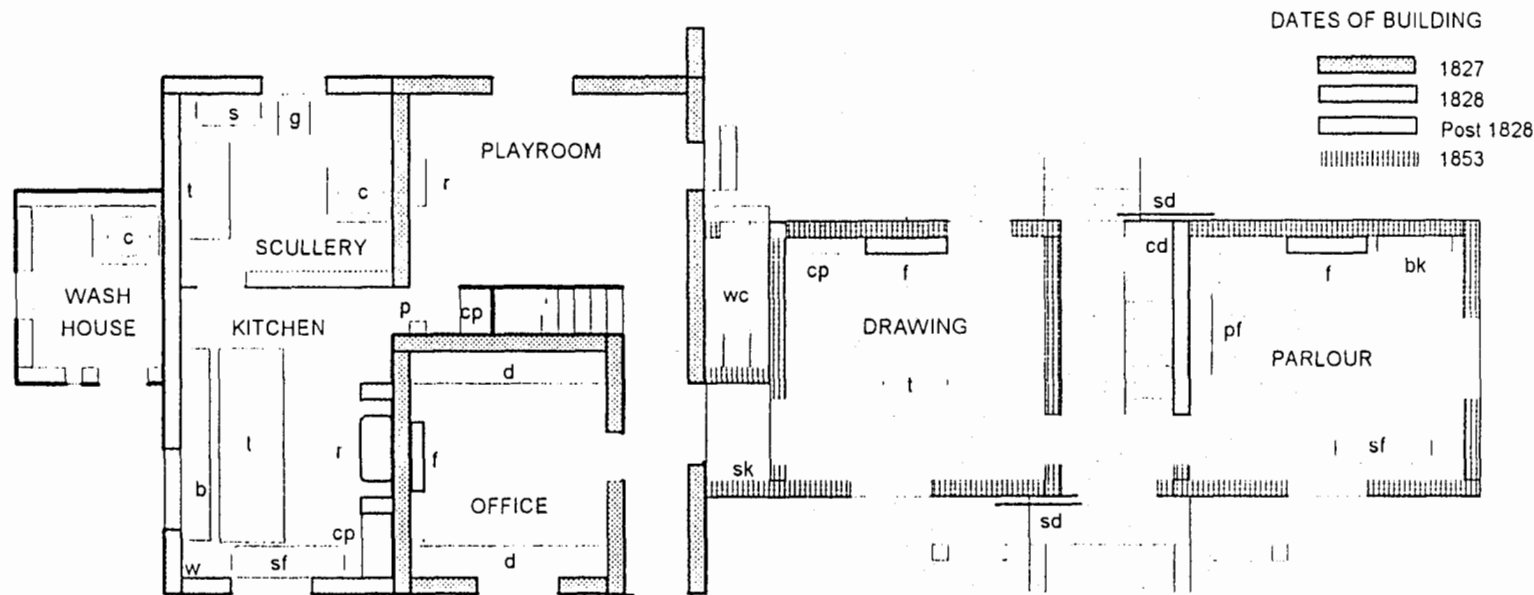
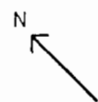
The author is grateful to Michael Beynon, grandson of Jack Brinkworth, for his memories of the house and its surroundings, and for drawing the plans.

References

1. P.R.O. RAIL 829/6 p 2, 3, 23, 40, 46, 155; Glos.R.O. MF1126/22. The 1841 Census indicates that Richard Wraith was living at Sharpness Cottage, but as several other households have the same designation, this evidently refers to an area rather than a single building.
2. P.R.O. RAIL 829/11 p 38, 50; A.H. Conway-Jones, *GSIA Journal* 1994; Glos.R.O. D5530 1/13.
3. Conway-Jones op.cit.; Glos.R.O. D5530 1/13
4. P.R.O. RAIL 829/6 p 182.
5. P.R.O. RAIL 829/6 p 426, 497.
6. P.R.O. RAIL 829/9 p 361, 362.
7. P.R.O. RAIL 829/13 p 519.
8. P.R.O. RAIL 864/1 p 500; /2 p 69, 584, 588; /4 p 13; /5 p 145; /7 p 91, 97, 100.
9. P.R.O. RAIL 864/7 p 120, 194, 353.
10. P.R.O. RAIL 864/7 p 488; /9 p 149, 178.
11. Information from Michael Beynon.
12. P.R.O. RAIL 864/38 p 98, 112; Glos. County Gazette 28 Dec 1940.
13. P.R.O. RAIL 864/38 p 36, 200; information from Michael Beynon and Jack Evans; Glos.R.O. Electoral Registers; L.T.C.Rolt, *Landscape with Canals*.

OLD DOCK HOUSE SHARPNESS
GROUND FLOOR PLAN c 1938

NOT TO SCALE



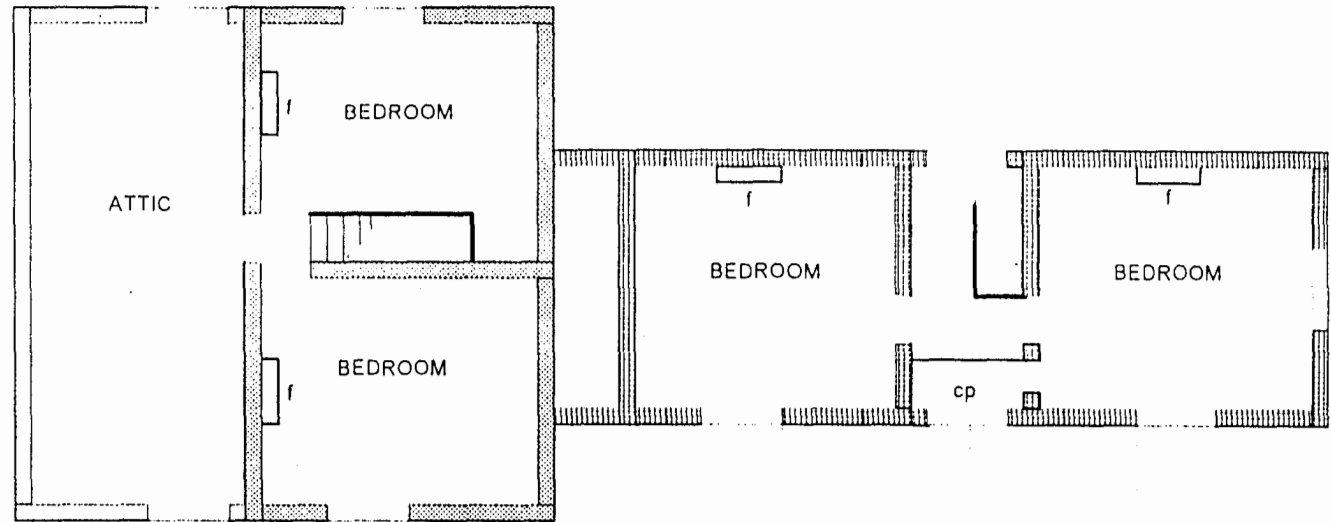
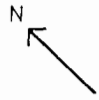
The wall between the Office and the hallway was of half height with a wooden grill above made up of vertical pillars
The kitchen wall was lined on its lower part with vertical tongue & groove match boarding of pine, varnished
The wall of the parlour on its lower part is lined with wainscot panelling

KEY

d desks	c "copper" boilers	f fireplace	b bench seat	sf sofa	bk book case
sk skewed steps	sd sliding storm doors	t table	g gas cooker	pf piano	w "wireless" on corner shelf
r range: mantel shelf over	s sink	cp cupboard	cd cellar door	p telephone on wall	

OLD DOCK HOUSE SHARPNESS
FIRST FLOOR PLAN

NOT TO SCALE



f fireplace
cp cupboard