

TOOLEY'S DOCK

Some memories from Paul Hayter

As a small boy in the late 1940s, I travelled to school in Banbury each day by the public bus service from Steeple Aston and alighted at the terminus, which was then just below the Town Hall. The ticket I seem to remember cost 6d (2 ½p). Soon afterwards my interest moved down the road to the canal, because my parents bought an old coal boat which they planned to convert into a holiday home. Their first purchase was not a great success. Having got the boat to Lower Heyford, they were soon forced to recognise that the hull was not fit for purpose and the Fire Brigade had to be called in to get rid of it. So another boat was bought – by this time it was 1954 – and it made its way to Tooley's Dock.

The dock was at the bottom of Factory Street, which ran down the hill from the back door of Hoods the Ironmongers to a swing bridge above Banbury lock. The street led over the canal to a group of factories and warehouses behind the lock. Next to them, and opposite the dock were the relics of a house with a fine stone wall along the towpath and apple trees which shed their unpicked crop into the canal.

The dock is still there. Factory Street is not. Instead, the houses gave way, on one side of the canal to the bare tarmac of a new bus station, later replaced by the Castle Shopping Centre, and on the other side to the Spiceball Leisure Centre and car parks.

Cocooned inside its protective screen of Health and Safety approved glass, Tooley's Dock is almost as hard to find now as when it was concealed behind a pile of junk at the end of the bus station. For those who know that the dock is hiding there, the question is why. It comes as a surprise to find that it is one of Banbury's most distinctive ancient monuments and a powerful symbol of the town's past.

The building of the Oxford Canal from Coventry to Banbury in 1778, and then on to Oxford in 1790, brought prosperity in the wake of cheap transport and cheap coal. The trade needed boats. The boats needed repairs. So in the middle of the commercial wharves (also vanished under the Castle Shopping Centre), a dry dock was built. It had to be big enough to take the standard 70-foot by 7-foot working boats, and wide enough to swing a hammer or adze against their wooden sides.