

Swansea Canal Locks at Godre'r Graig

This latest historical article on the Swansea Canal, written by Clive Reed, concerns the structure referred to as The Narrow Lock or the Squeezed Lock.

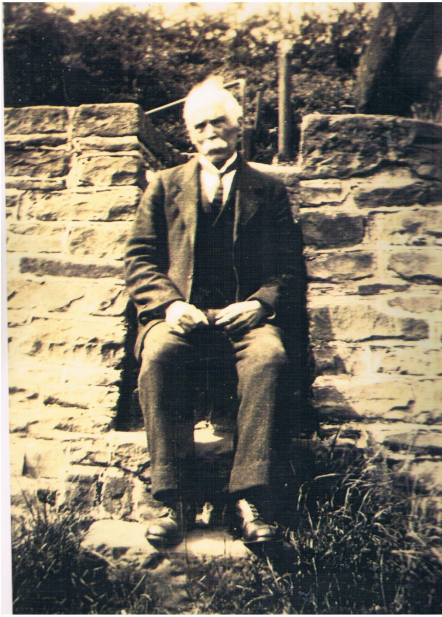
The original information on this curious lock structure was given to me by John Hutchins in the mid 1980's, a former Swansea Canal lengthsman and later foreman. John and his canal workmates referred to this lock as the Narrow Lock or the Squeezed Lock. This structure is lock number 18 in the Pantyffynnon flight of locks between Godre'r Graig and Ystalyfera. The six locks in the flight numbers 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 raised the canal a total of fifty-seven feet two and half inches. They were last used by boats in the 1920-30 period, when perhaps one boat a fortnight would make a local journey from a coal mine to a coal yard. Sam Howard, a Godre'r Graig man and one of the founding members of the Swansea Canal Society in 1981 remembered barges or boats carrying stone from nearby quarries down the canal toward Pontardawe c1930.

Mr Glyn Rees, a native of Godre'r Graig who lived at Hodgsons Road when I met him in 2012 and whom I interviewed during my research into Tareni Colliery provided me with additional information on the locks at Pantyffynnon. Lock 22 was known as Fountain Hall Lock because of its closeness to that building. Lock 21 had a wooden shed alongside the lock chamber and which was used a workshop. Lock 20 he named as Jack White's lock and that had a footbridge crossing the lock chamber. Lock 19 he named as Danny Rees' lock, and lock 17 as Mona's lock. A Mr Haverson was employed on the canal in the 1940's and he lived in Pantyffynnon Cottage near lock 21.

Even though no canal boats travelled along the canal after the c1930 period, the canal water course was kept open up to 1963 to supply water to local industries that used the water in industrial processes. The Ynysmeudwy Tinsplate Works, Pontardawe Foundry, Pontardawe Steelworks, Mond Nickel Works, Clydach Foundry and Clydach Tinsplate Works were major users of the canal water. Shortly after that date most of the lock structures were demolished

prior to the construction of the Godre'r Graig by-pass road. The reasons for constructing the by-pass road are well known locally, but for those new to this history, the village of Godre'r Graig suffered immensely with severe landslides from the late 1950's onwards, with the period 1958-60 a particularly bad period for the community, with landslips still continuing into the present time. Large sections of the village were destroyed, streets demolished and the main road through the village along the slope of Mynnydd Alltygrug and up the Swansea Valley becoming unstable and no longer useable to traffic. Godre'r Graig and the mountainside obtained the unfortunate nickname of the "Moving Mountain". A new road had to be constructed up the Swansea Valley (A4067) along the route of the Swansea Canal between Ynysmeudwy and Ystalyfera.

The canal north of Godre'r Graig was reduced in width with the water course culverted in an open concrete channel about five feet wide, which it still is at the current time (2021). Locks 15 and 16 below the flight were left semi-derelict with the western lock chamber walls left intact and the eastern chamber wall greatly reduced in height. Locks 20 and 21 were completely removed, leaving sections of lock 22 as an end of garden feature at Pantyffynnon. Lock 19 was mostly removed leaving its by-wash and remnants of a lock wall surviving alongside the A4067 road. Lock 18, the Squeezed Lock, and lock 17 with the canal boat building yard alongside were left intact but with no water courses. No photographs were taken at that time to record for posterity what those historic structures looked like, however photographs did exist. Mr Mal Mainwaring, a resident of Godre'r Graig offered copies of small black and white images of those locks to the Society in the late 1980's. They were filed away among a mass of other canal related material, until I unearthed them again during my research into coal mining in the region. The photographs were taken in the early 1940's and the locks chosen purely as backdrops on which family members posed to have their photographs taken. They are typical of that period with Mr Buttress, a family group of mam and her children, two girls, and a child on a trike.



Mr Buttress



Mrs Buttress and children



The Buttress girls

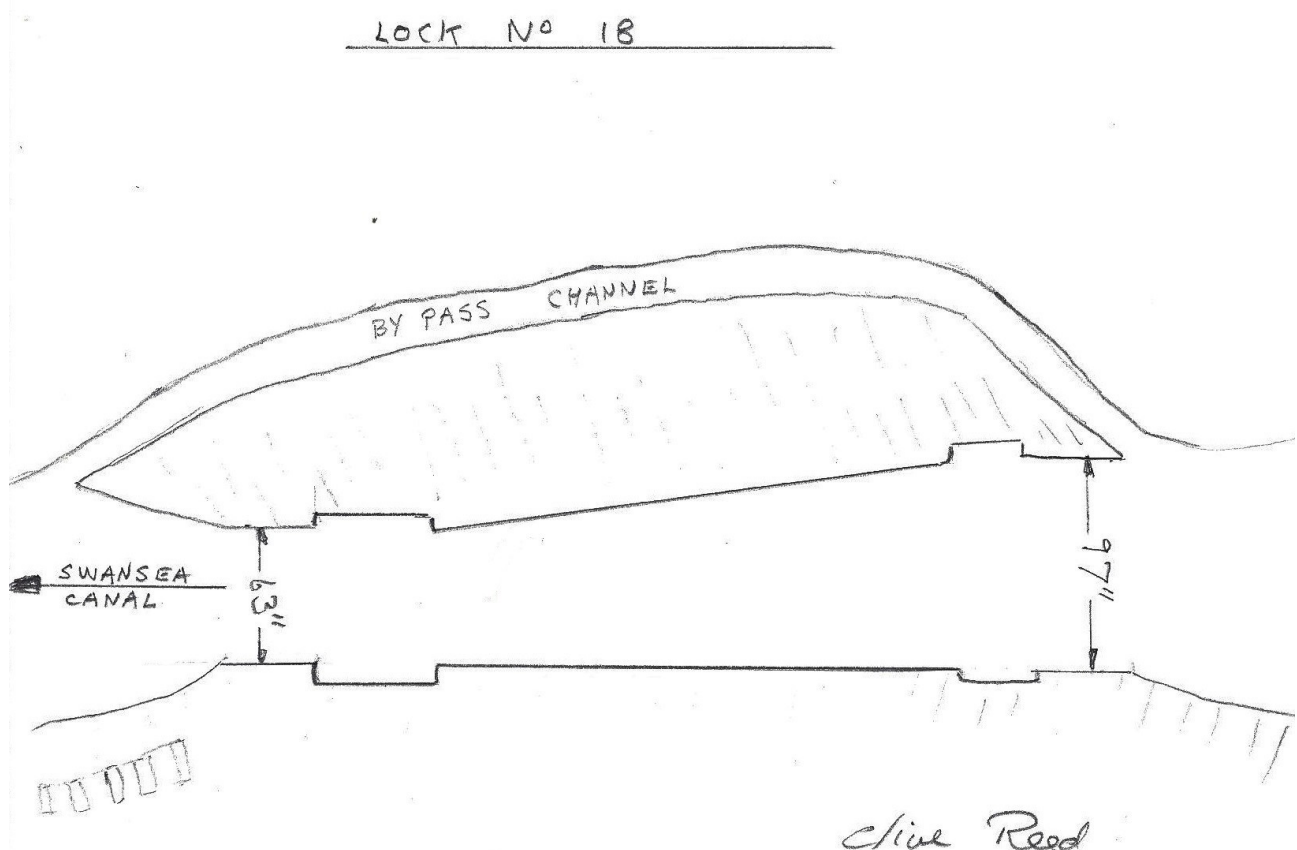


Child on trike

Historically lock 18 was first recorded as being affected by geological ground pressure in the Swansea Canal Minute Books in 1830, as underlying rock strata applied pressure on the lock chamber and subsequently affected boat traffic through the lock. The western lock chamber wall was being pushed eastwards by earth movements. John said that after about four years or so the chamber had narrowed significantly and there were concerns that the lock wall would collapse and block the water channel, but also the lock gates had become inoperable. The canal company resolved the problem by pushing the western lock wall back into place. That was achieved by inserting large timber baulks against

the masonry wall and massive G.W.R. jacks inserted into the lock chamber between the timbers. A squad of navvies would dig out a trench or large ditch along the western side of the lock chamber and the jacks would be brought into operation and force the lock masonry back into its correct position. That operation had been taking place every four years during John's time and memories of older canal men. The last occasion that task was carried out was in 1960, since then the lock chamber has continued to move because of the ground pressure and the lock has now assumed the proportions of a wedge shape. The original lock width was eight-foot three-inches, but at present the upper end of the chamber is eight-foot one-inch, and the lower entrance currently five-foot three-inches (63 inches), hence its nickname of the Narrow lock or the Squeezed Lock.

The lock chamber is deep! Being twelve feet in depth. The chamber is currently very overgrown with vegetation of thick brambles, scrub and grass and fallen trees. The site is unfenced and alongside a footpath and the A4067 road, so if anyone does attempt to visit this unusual canal lock please take every care.



“Tareni Colliery” by Clive Reed and Lynne Gent contains much information on the Godre’r Graig landslips and photographs of the village c1930 and of the many ruined and abandoned former homes and shops that once made up this community.