

MEMORIES OF HENRY VICTOR MOFFATT

Born Jan 1920 Benson Lock

Henry Victor's father, Henry James Moffatt was born in Bromley in 1880, the son of Henry George Moffatt, who worked as a river policeman on the Thames. Henry James married Alice in Teddington in 1905. Soon after the wedding, Henry James became the lock keeper at Benson.

Below: Wedding of Henry James Moffatt and Alice 1905



Henry and Alice had four sons and a daughter, who were brought up on the lock island. Thames Conservancy provided the house, a shed full of coal brought by barge and a small amount of cash. Money was tight and food was in short supply. The cottage burnt down in 1913 and was replaced.



Above: Henry James and Alice with Jack, Phyllis and Alex about 1912 at Benson Lock

Henry James had served in the Boer War before he married and came to Benson and when the First World War started he joined up again. From 1914 to 1918, Alice took over all his responsibilities as lock keeper including manning the ferry. At the same time she served teas and looked after her four young children and made sure they went to school. Henry Victor, the youngest, was born after Henry James returned from the war. He described life on the lock island, in his memoirs written in 2005 for a family reunion.

“There was only a small area of garden fenced off around the house, so Mum had to keep watch over her five children, in case they got into deep water. When the lock contained flood water it was easy for the children to wander from

shallow to deep water and fall in! One Christmas Mum tied an eel to a length of string, put a piece of bread on a hook and left it out on the lawn where the ducks used to feed. A duck took the bread and mum took the chopper to the duck. That was our Christmas lunch.

After the war, Dad kept ducks which were on the river all day and shut up at night. He kept free range goats on the Berkshire side of the river. The family would milk them and make goat's milk butter. The ducks' eggs, eels, home grown vegetables and goats' milk all helped to feed us.

In the lock house, hot water came out of the kettle or the copper. The copper heated the water for washing and bath night. Two tin baths hung outside on the wall. One was large enough for adults to sit down and the smaller one was used to bath the children. A big paraffin oil lamp hung in the sitting room and in the kitchen, a coal fired range with a big oven was used for the cooking.

A launch was kept in a boathouse at right angles to the millstream. Many happy hours were spent in the millstream, where there was a small island you could paddle out to, if the mill was idle. When the men came to start the water wheel, they first checked to see whether any youngsters were paddling in the water. They would shout and wave to warn us to move because more water was about to rush down and we did as we were told.

There was a carrier from Ewelme , called Mr Cherril, who used to call at the ferry, ring a bell and Mum would row over with a list of groceries. He then bought them in Wallingford and delivered the shopping back to the ferry. The low lying water meadow near the ferry was very wet and full of buttercups, kingcups and daisies.

The backwater (above the weir) was our playground in summer. We learnt to swim and paddled on improvised surf boards. When the river was flooded, we still manned the ferry. We had to row out into the stream near the top of the lock island to make landfall on the opposite bank. Mum did this to take us to school and collect us when we came home for lunch. Each day during term time, she rowed across the river four times just for the children. We passed the brook on the way to school and often tried to dam it, getting into trouble for getting our boots wet. We used to swing on the gate of the house called Battle Banks on the way home from school.

On the road through Preston Crowmarsh, a copse of willow trees was cut twice yearly for basket weaving. When a steam Foden lorry was delivering gravel to repair the roads, we had fun hanging onto the tail board. At Battle Farm we were given rides on the shire horses in the summer holidays. We used to cut the grass in the churchyard in exchange for cakes, orange squash and four pence.

Entertainment was provided by concerts in the village hall, when Len Snugs sang comic songs and Mr Saunders, our Headmaster and choirmaster sang ballads.”

Sadly Henry James Moffatt, the lock keeper died of pneumonia in 1926, aged only 46 and left a widow, Alice and five children. His funeral was attended by Mr Vaisey representing Lord and Lady Wittenham and also Admiral and Lady Miller, (*who lived in Brixton lodge.*). A Thames Conservancy steam launch conveyed the coffin on the horse punt up to what was then the coal wharf, on the Preston Crowmarsh bank. Then the family walked to St Helen’s church from the wharf, where Henry was buried.

They had to move out of the lock keepers cottage to make way for the next lock keeper. The two families were on good terms and Mr Eade, the new lock keeper taught young Victor to swim at the same time as his own son, Eric, who later worked as the Day’s lock keeper.

Alice and the children moved to Hale Farm, but one day in 1927, Lord Wittenham’s chauffeur turned up in his uniform of peaked cap, breeches and gaiters and asked Alice Moffatt to come out and speak to Lord Wittenham, who was sitting in his Daimler. He explained that his gardener’s cottage had become vacant and offered her the lease. So the family moved to Preston Crowmarsh, where they stayed for the next ten years. Henry James’s youngest son Victor described their new home in his memoirs.

He wrote, *“Lord Wittenham owned all the estate of Howbery Park as far as French Gardens. Between Battle Farm and our house was the home of Admiral and Lady Miller. (Then called Brixton Lodge.) Next door on the other side was a big detached house, the home of Mr Vaisey, Lord Wittenham’s bailiff.”* (This was Preston House, which was later the retirement home of Canon Palmer and his wife.)

When he left school, aged fourteen, Henry Victor’s older brother Alex worked at Preston Crowmarsh mill, which by then was producing electricity by water

power. His sister, Phyllis went to work in the offices of the Electricity Supply Company in Wallingford. (Voltage variation was common in the early days, resulting in uneven power.)

From 1927 onwards, Jack and Alex began to train seriously as rowers and would row every evening non-stop to the Thame stream bridge just short of Day's Lock and back with Victor as the cox. For several years, all the family took part in the Wallingford Skiff Regatta. They also competed for the Beck Challenge Cup which was raced on the University Boat Race course – a double skulling race in clinker built skiffs. They won in record times in 1929 and 1931. The first year they were coxed by their grandfather Henry George Moffatt, a retired river policeman who used his knowledge of the river to help them steer the most advantageous course.

Alice outlived Henry by over 50 years. She lived at Cholsey for many years after she left Preston Crowmarsh, and then lived in Goldsmith's Lane in Wallingford until she moved to Woolacombe in Devon, where she died.

With grateful thanks to Keith Dyer, grandson of Henry James Moffatt and Alison Greig, grand-daughter.