

Woolston Floating Bridge

10th April 2014 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

The Society had another full house, with many visitors from the local neighbourhood, to hear George Neale talk about the Woolston Floating Bridge. The talk was informative with a number of humorous stories and the Floating Bridge had many important memories for George as he met his wife on one and got engaged on another.

George said that prior to the floating bridges there was a ferry across the River Itchen from the 1620s, when fishermen rowed passengers across in dinghies. The Floating Bridge Company was set up in the 1830s as competition to the Northam Toll Bridge and the first floating bridge had a wooden hull and was powered by a steam beam engine with two chains across the river.

The second floating bridge had an iron hull and over the years the chains changed to cables and George explained the maintenance that had to be carried out to these as they stretched. Initially only one floating bridge operated but eventually two worked at the same time.

Day, Summers & Co of Northam built the floating bridges from No 4 and the later ones were constructed by Thorneycroft of Woolston and powered by diesel engines. These last ferries had the sides filled in to keep the weather off the passengers.

Floating Bridge No 7 sank after a collision with a tug in bad weather, but it was salvaged although it was never used on the ferry again. When the floating bridges were underway they raised their ramps to ensure water did not come on board.

Originally the floating bridges carried horses, carts and foot passengers and later cars and bicycles. The foot passengers in the later years could travel for free. The floating bridges were an essential link for local people and when the workers at the docks and at Thorneycroft shipbuilders left work they were packed with no space to spare.

George explained about the ferry shelters, the waiting rooms and the connecting buses. The Crosshouse shelter on the Southampton side was designed to protect the passengers from the weather, no matter the direction of the wind.

With the opening of the Itchen Bridge the floating bridges were withdrawn in 1977 and one of them was moored on the Woolston slipway and used as a nightclub called the 'Floaters' for a number of years.

Finally George described what happened to the last floating bridges and that several of the old steam engines are still owned and stored by Southampton City Council. Today a floating bridge still survives on the Hamble River as 'The Ferry Restaurant' at the Elephant Boatyard at Bursledon. An earlier

floating bridge was converted to a houseboat and kept on the Hamble River at Bursledon in the early 1900s.

The meeting conclude with several of the audience sharing reminiscences of the floating bridges. One said his father operated the floating bridge during the Second World War and he accompanied him as a young boy. For three days at D-Day only one floating bridge ran as the other was used by Thorneycroft to load landing craft. Another Society member remembered as a teenage girl going to Southampton on her bicycle against her mother's wishes and she got her toe caught under the landing ramp.

Other Hamble residents remembered taking the number 81 bus from Hamble to Woolston to catch the floating bridge and very often would run from the bus and the floating bridge would just pull away. This was another good evening of sharing memories from the past.