

Memories of the Ambrose Street Community and Ferry in the 1950s

Postings from the York Past & Present Facebook Page entries,

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Jayne Brown: 4 May

This is my Dad, around 1952. He bought a boat and operated a ferry going from the bottom of Francis St across to Rowntree Park. My Mum met him and fell for him. The first photo shows him with some mates trying it out. He was in partnership with one of them.



Kath Burton: Memories of the old ferry to Rowntree Park.

I was born in 1954 and my family used the ferry a couple of times a week throughout the late fifties and the sixties. It was right at the bottom of the steps leading to Ambrose St where I lived (43)

In those days it was perfectly ok for us as very young kids to go over to the park and the baths. We went over on our own despite not being able to swim! We were very familiar with it and used to hang round all the time messing about around the ferry. I loved the old tatty wooden landing area and the tyres hung on the wall.

The boat was worked by many local fellas, the ones I remember most was old Mr Driffield and Kevin. Kevin was very strong and did little tricks like fancy jumps on and off the boat and making the boat turn in a full circle in a split second, or so it seemed. The boat was sometimes VERY well laden and quite low in the water, this was often on race days and the queue was very long so people were packed in.

He used to let us bale a bit of water out for him with tin cans, especially if a pleasure boat came by when the little boat was full of passengers. The swell of the big boat sent us downstream, but Kevin used to stand up on the edge

of the boat, one foot on each side and row so hard he rocked the boat, he had us over the other side in a very short time.

The lads who sometimes rowed used to have competitions to see who was the fastest. There were quite a few different rowers, the ones I remember were the Lambert brothers, “Kipper” Johnston from Ambrose St and now and again Kenny Mason from Ambrose St.

It was a very big part of the community and Fulford in general. Everyone knew the ferryboat and the families who worked it. The only other way over was Skeldergate Bridge which was quite a way so we used to BEG our parents for 2d for the fare. We used to go over on the boat but if we didn't have the fare back we had to walk around. We were so happy if we did have the money or a neighbour paid for us to get back.

When it was the races there were so many people waiting to go over. All dressed up. My Dad, a very tall and gangly man used to be all dressed up in his suit and squashed going over, his knees round his ears and surrounded by families with picnics and the local kids all piled on. We used to ask the fellas going to the races for money!!!! This ensured our ride home. Can you imagine this these days.

The Ambrose St side was easier to get on and off, the other side had steps and at one point a diagonal track leading up that was covered in nettles and those smelly wild purple flowers that grow quite big.

The Driffield family had a papershop in Frances St and there was the pie shop run by the Skaife family. The Potts family had the shop at the bottom of Frances St and Mr Lucas (later the Hamiltons) had the shop at the top opposite the chip shop (Pipes family). In the middle of the street there was a shop run by the Clemmits.

In Ambrose St the top of the street shop was owned by Mr and Mrs Bulmer and at the bottom was The Jacksons. At about No. 60, there was a shop selling all sorts but think some electrical stuff? Owned by Mr Porter.

My neighbours were the Broadheads then the Overends and Kevin Benson lived a door or two away. Ted Breeze used to collect “pigswill” from all the street to feed his animals. Kipper Johnson lived near the top of Ambrose St and used to “sunbathe” all the time, he was burnt red raw.

In the 80s a boat opened up for a short while. Can't remember the details but we went across in it for old time's sake. (Tim Robinson posted Kath's pictures of it at this time, right)



Lastly, I never did fall in despite hair raising trips over the river but my husband did. He was running down the overgrown diagonal bank on the park side, rushing so as not to miss the boat and did not stop running! He went straight in, he was four years old. His sister fished him out and took him home to dry out before his Mother got home from work.

Great article, Kath Burton, thanks for posting. Do you have any more pics of the ferry? Thanks.

Tim Robinson (York Past & Present Facebook Page Manager)

See below for comments and more local information...



New Walk / Ambrose Street Ferry (photo from a private collection)

Comments on Jayne Brown and Kath Burton's Articles....

Kelvin Clarkson: In the 80's it was run by Jim McGurn

David Clark: I used to visit Almer Terrace every Saturday and stay all day with a friend of my mum and I remember going over on a kind of rowing boat and it cost a penny to cross.

Sue Noble: My sister and I lived at 38 Frances Street and would use the ferry often. I remember swimming in the river at Fulford fields jumping off the big concrete block. The street was always full of kids where we played Mr Wolf, and tig amongst other games - used to love trying to climb up the lamp posts but never got very far. We played with folk like Joseph Sewell, Alan Richardson and Gilliam Raine from Alma Terrace.



I was also born in 1954 so probably came across you Kath playing in the street. There used to be a man in Ambrose Street who played a concertina and there was the odd show put on for the kids in someone's back yard in Ambrose Street.

Annette Annett: I remember a shop on the corner of Ambrose Street at the end of Wenlock Terrace the lady was called Annie Wardle

Phil Burton/Sue Noble: I was Kath Barrett and lived at 43 Ambrose St. I remember the shows! Other kids I played with were the Luxtons, Masons, Quinns, Tattersfields and some lads from Holly Terrace, they were Antony Foster and Tommy Kidd. Kevin Benson too!

Sue Noble I thought the oar was at the stern of the ferry (right)

Jan Altus: Thank you Kath Burton, I enjoyed reading your memories a lot. I'd forgotten that he would put his feet on the gunnels as he skulled the boat. I remember now though. I was both scared (that he'd fall in) and admiring (that he was so skilful and brave).

Phil Burton/Kath Burton: it was very skilful and he went so fast, causing his own waves which when they collided with the other river traffic... well, get the bucket to bale out. It was attached by some rope to the seat. How we were not drowned is amazing.

Phil Burton/Kath Burton: in the 60s an old couple had that shop Annette Annett they were very grumpy and were always telling us off for going in with a penny.

Annette Annett/Phil Burton: I remember they sold biscuits loose from big square tins. This would have been around 1956/57

Sue Noble: Yes Kath, I recall many of those names also Katy Broadhead who lived in Frances Street and moved to Alma Terrace when her Dad finished building their bungalow. Many of those names ring a bell - happy days.

There was a sweet shop at the bottom of Frances Street that was owned by an old lady. I spent my sixpence pocket money there every week when I used to go down to buy a loaf - Mothers Pride - for my Mam

Deborah Monroe: Love this story...my late mum was born in Frances Street in 1925 and often spoke of the ferry.

Tim Robinson: I don't think it'll embarrass Kath if I post these two pictures of her from the early 60s (as she's put them up before herself). This one probably relates best to the first subject of her narrative . . .



Tim Robinson: This one to the latter part as it's outside her house. I've known Kath(leen) since St George's days over 55 years ago. Although I doubt if I spoke to her then - cos she was a 'gurl'. Might have held her hand during country dancing though (yuck).



Barry Lawn: the ferry was run by the Driffield family Kevin and John are old friends spent many hours around there in the 50s it was a single scull oar at the rear. 2p per crossing HAPPY DAYS

Ron Hawkins: Like Barry Lawn says, in the late fifties early sixties, myself, Pip Lancaster, and John Pullen all took turns on weekends and race days to skull across, strenuous job when it was full!

Sometimes on a balmy summer night, we would skull up river to Ouse Bridge, and then float gently all the way back!! Wonderful halcyon days.

PipSal Lancaster: I remember Ernie Driffield so well. In the 6wks. holiday we would run the ferry while Ernie was at work. A good few years later I applied for membership of Fulford Working Men's Club in Wenlock Terrace Ernie was on the committee, when asked if any member of the committee could vouch for me, Ernie spoke up and said, "Pip is the most honest person I Know, he told me Ernie I'm making more money from the ferry than you are!" and I was welcomed as a member!

Dorothy Stockell: When we went on the ferry the man stood up at the end of the boat.

Patricia A Waller: Kath it was my dad Len Dawson who owned the ferry and paper shop. This was in the fifties. Ernie Driffield took it over when we moved to Osbaldwick but that's another story. As mentioned earlier, I have a tape someone recorded a project, taped my dad he talks about the ferry when he had it.

Meg Spreckley: In spring 1963 I was 19, newly married with a weeks old baby and a top floor two room flat on Holly Terrace. One weekend my husband and I managed to manhandle our big (second hand!) Silver Cross pram plus baby daughter into the ferry to get across to the South Bank side where both sets of parents lived! Walking via Skeldergate Bridge was a lot easier! Wonder if your dad was still running it then? I think it only operated at weekends, though I was told that years earlier it had ferried Terry's workers

Rosemary Taylor: Meg Spreckley yes you are correct, it did ferry Terry's workers morning, lunch and tea time

Annette Annett: I visited my auntie Mary and uncle Peter, they lived at the first house in Wenlock Terrace (next to the supermarket) uncle Peter used to take me and their dog over to the park on the ferry.

That was around 1959/60 when the park was beautiful, tennis and bowls being played. Boats on the lake, bandstand, aviary and cafe

Meg Spreckley: Sorry, jumped in without reading all the previous posts! I see Jayne Brown's dad gave up the ferry in the late 50s. Remember using it in the 50s as a child though, going across with the family, walking along Love Lane to the beer garden at the Plough in Fulford.

Michele Oliver: Used the ferry many a time to go to Rowntree Park Swimming Baths when my Nan and Grandad had a shop in Francis Street next door to Ernie Driffield who was the ferryman. Very good memories.

Susan Chittock: Used the ferry lots of times my nana & grandad lived in Ambrose street and my other nana live in Brunswick street South Bank so we were always between the two. Also to go to the swimming baths and park

Carole Hill: Anyone remember the Evette, the houseboat parked just a bit further along the riverbank. It was a land mark. When we went on cross country runs from Danesmead it was the point of return

Babs Spence: Oh yes, we have a photo with the Yvette in the background.

Pat Kynman: I used to use the ferry. Ernie Driffield took us across. I lived in Levisham Street. Sometimes the crossing was pretty scary...