

SAILOR REMEMBERED

'Sailor' was a local character when I was a boy, and lived in a shack to the west of the canal along the Congerstone to Barton Road. I don't know whether he had really been a sailor, or where he came from, but I do know that he had a wooden 'peg-leg'. When he went to the old Fox & Hounds pub in Congerstone he was known to pick up his leg and kick people with it if he got involved in an argument.

He built his shack himself, out of scrounged timber. Later on he waterproofed it using the tin from old tar barrels painted over with tar. The shack contained a bed, an old chest of drawers and a tiny stove with an oven and a chimney. Sailor was clean and must have boiled his washing because his whites and bed linen were always as white as anyone else's. The shack was on Crown land, but was tolerated by the Crown agents until Sailor died in the late 1950's or early 1960's when it was knocked down and burned. Sailor left £40 or £45 in a drawer, which was enough to pay for a proper funeral. He was buried in Congerstone churchyard but the grave did not have a headstone and I do not know where it is.

As children, going to see Sailor was an exciting and slightly scary experience. If we caught a hedgehog we would wrap it in grass or straw and take it to Sailor who would put it - still alive - into his oven. After a while he would take the dead hedgehog out, give it a long hard shake, and then cover it with clay from his water hole and put it back in his oven to cook. I expect the shaking loosened its insides. This now seems an incredibly cruel thing to do, but at that time it seemed quite normal. Sailor also ate rabbits, but would never accept pheasants which he regarded as Crown property.

Sailor was given money, food and clothes by local people, so must have had local connections or aroused local sympathy. My Aunty Dot used to give him a Christmas dinner every year. He used to enjoy a clay pipe of tobacco, and I guess there will still be a lot around the site of the shack. The old photograph was taken in 1955 and shows Sailor with a man from the Daily Mail who is holding a plate. This reporter tried to persuade Sailor to tell him his story, but without success. On the back of the photograph is written 'John Beauchamp' which was Sailor's real name.

I would very much like to know more about John Beauchamp if anyone knows his history.

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