

Braunston Strike: The Photographer and His Postcards

My apologies for a late response to the Braunston Strike article (Spring 2012 *NB*): a fantastic collection of images and an informative commentary by Richard Thomas.

The Speedwell Incident: The much-repeated claim that one of the FMC bosses was 'thrown in the canal' is questionable. David Blagrove, in his well researched history of the canals at Braunston, is sceptical. The local papers had reporters present during much of the dispute, and the *Rugby Advertiser* reported the *Speedwell* incident as follows: "Trouble threatened when Mr Anderson and another employee of Messrs Fellows, Morton & Clayton jumped on the boat to cut the ropes. They were immediately hustled by the boatmen and nearly forced into the canal, but got clear to the towing path, though not before Mr Anderson received a blow on the wrist from a stick, two policemen who went onto the barge covering their retreat."

The boatmen, incensed by interference with 'their' property and 'their' cargo, no doubt would have manhandled the FMC boarding party, but to suggest such anarchic behaviour as dumping one of the bosses into the cut must be refuted before it becomes embedded in canal lore. Surely, with such a heavy presence, the humble bobbies would have quickly arrested the miscreants if such violence had occurred.

The Postcards: Without doubt the H postcards were the work of Victor Wilson Long. My earliest VWL postcard is of Braunston (not canal related) V21, the caption of which is "The Round House", the upper case H having the same idiosyncratic 'concave uprights' of the strike cards. Furthermore, I would suggest that the remaining images, numbered or not, are the work of the same photographer; the camera work, developing and printing – all of generally high quality – and style of caption (where relevant) indicate VWL. And as Richard Thomas says, he was on the spot.

I have examined VWL's photograph register held by Warwickshire Record Office (WRO) but unfortunately his book-keeping is not of the standard of his photography. No dates are recorded anywhere, no mention of the Braunston strike photos, no clue as to why an H prefix instead of his usual V, and so on. There is even confusion about the two Braunston stoppage cards illustrated in Autumn 2007 *NB*, which do have the V prefix, V23 and V24. VWL's register identifies these both as Braunston church, although my V21 card is correctly recorded.

WRO holds some 1,800 glass negatives by VWL, but whilst these may offer conclusive proof, some discussion with staff would be necessary before they were made available for inspection.

The strike (and stoppage) cards are so untypical of the photographer's mainstream topographical work that he must have decided to keep a separate log for these cards; they were newsworthy, topical cards to eventually become social history cards, using today's postcard classification. But why there should be such inconsistency in the numbering of the strike cards, and why he ran two sets of parallel numbers, is inexplicable.

'H' for Harris?: Could Victor Long's H prefix be an acknowledgement of the assistance that Harris, the manager of Braunston wharf gave him? At a time of tension at the wharf it would have been prudent for VWL to seek permission to enter FMC premises. Lugging a heavy plate camera around, he would hardly be inconspicuous, so he almost certainly sought clearance from Harris, the manager.

Acceptance, even possible encouragement, granted, VWL took full advantage and, grateful of the opportunity afforded, might have begun to prefix his early strike serial numbers with the distinctive H. Then, overwhelmed by the amount of work, he began to omit the H and finally gave up on the serial numbers as well. It is a tenuous hypothesis, I'm afraid.

VWL, the Man: There is more known of VWL than Richard suggests. Victor Wilson Long was born in Bradford-on-Avon in 1896. He lived in Rugby from 1928 at 'Glenrose', Sidney Road, in a pleasant, new development at the time. His early life appears to have been unrecorded, but he served during WWI in the RAMC. He had a varied artistic career encompassing freelance photography, postcard publishing and as an author, piano teacher, and organist for 25 years at the Northamptonshire villages of Ashby St Ledgers and Welton.

On his death in February 1963 he left a widow, son (A.V. Long), stepson and daughter. His funeral was attended by church wardens and Lady Reddish, wife of Sir Halford Reddish, the formidable chairman of Rugby Portland Cement. Clearly, VWL was a respected member of local society, no doubt a quiet gentlemanly sort who enjoyed gardening in his spare time, but with a sufficiently strong character that enabled him to control crowds of strikers and their families for his Braunston strike portfolio. And evidently, whilst on location, his favoured headgear was a trilby!

VWL left behind an outstanding legacy of upwards of 3,000 photographic images of Rugby and its surrounding towns and villages, but most of his canal studies are frustrating because of VWL's emphasis on topography, any working boats being but a distant prospect. The exceptions, of course, are the strike photographs and the 1922 Braunston stoppage.

Whilst it has proved impossible to unpick Victor Long's mind, let us nevertheless savour his masterly, socially important photographic statement. Look into the faces of the strikers, their wives and children, Brooks and Gosling: frozen in time through the efforts of one man.

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