

10 Midsomer Norton Audio Trail - Numbers 94-97 High Street

[Ambient sound: demolition, storm/rainfall/flooding, boat paddling, steps through echoey tunnel]

Those distinctive looking black-and-white beamed houses you see in front of you were originally built as almshouses. Almshouses first appeared in Britain a thousand years ago, offering poor, old and distressed people somewhere to live. A charity would own the building and charge low rent to residents. These ones were built in 1895 by the Beauchamp family.

The Beauchamps were the most powerful of the local mine owners, with involvement in many of North Somerset's mines. Colonel Sir Frank Beauchamp was especially important, and his companies grew and grew, producing nearly half of local coal by the 1930s. After the war, though, the coal mines suffered from a lack of maintenance and labour, and when the whole industry was nationalised in 1947 the Beauchamp empire came crashing down. Unprofitable mines were shut, their grand houses were demolished and those almshouses are one of the few physical reminders of the important role the family had played in and around Midsomer Norton.

You'll have looked at the river as you walked along the High Street. It looks tranquil now, but until the 1970s it flooded often. Heavy rainfall further up the valley meant that lots of water headed downstream and the river channel was too small to cope, so it overflowed. Floodwaters covered the street from outside the Town Hall, right through to where

you're standing now. At its worst, it touched the brickwork just below the ground floor windows of the almshouses. The water reached the shop at 79-81 High Street, so if you look back along the road from there, you can imagine how high the water was; sometimes even the railings around the river were submerged.

There are photographs of people in canoes and a lady remembered how, as a schoolgirl, she had to be collected from school in a canoe by her father one afternoon. One photo even showed someone in a boat with an outboard motor! It flooded the baker's, the butcher's, many other shops and dwellings. The damage and disruption to people's livelihoods must have been heartbreaking.

Eventually a relief tunnel was built. It was finished in 1980 and before it became useable everyone had the chance to walk through it from end to end. There were puddles on the floor, but it was quite an experience underground and in places you could hear the traffic overhead. The central part of the High Street has only flooded once or twice since.