Tamlyn

A place to see & a song to sing

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COAL BARGEES

There are not that many collieries left in Lancashire today. The ones that are left have to earn their keep to stay in business. But, behind all the coal hewed in the Lancashire mines this last seventy years, there is another story of the coal carriers – the coal bargees.

It was only in July 1971 that the coal traffic came to an end on the Leeds-Liverpool and Bridgewater Canals, when the Coal Board policy was to switch the coal transport from canal to road.

Yet, if you care to take a walk along the Towpath from Plan Lane, just north of Leigh, just fourteen miles eastwards into Trafford Park, you can see what is left of a long history of canal transport.

The Bridgewater Canal was built by the Navigators (Navvies) in the middle of the eighteenth century, working under the expert guidance of the Duke of Bridgewater's engineer John Gilbert and consultant James Brindley. The traffic along the canal from the Duke's underground mines at Worsley to Manchester began in 1761, with the opening of his famous aqueduct across the River Irwell at Barton. It was not until 1820 that the Branch West of Worsley was completed to link the Leeds-Liverpool Canal with the Bridgewater Canal through Leigh and Wigan. The great army of men who used to work for the Duke were were often sent out West of Worsley on to the Bog and ill-drained land of Barton and Chat Moss. It became a spoil area for the waste from the Duke's mines, and the land was eventually reclaimed. Trees were planted to form what is now known as Botany Bay Wood. This name began as a nick-name because the workmen that were sent there reckoned they were being exiled to Botany Bay, the name of the Australian Penal settlement to which British criminals were being transported. And in those days transportation was a reality.

Coal was the main ingredient of the Industrial Revolution. That necessity for coal built the canals. The local roads around Manchester could hardly support any form of transport and even if they could the tolls that were charged were very high. So the Bridgewater Canal provided an easy access for Manchester's insatiable appetite for coal. The mines at Worsley and Patricroft continued to work as new mines were opened up in the South Lancashire Coalfield. New ones appeared close to the banks of the two canals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, the Howe Bridge Collieries, Bedford Colliery, The Gin, The Nook, Astley Green and Sandhole. All were connected to the canals by mineral railways. The railways led to the coal chutes, or staithes, under which the narrowboats and flats loaded. Hundreds of boats were built for this trade alone, first they were made of timber and later iron and steel. Many's the night the young lad leading the horse along the canal bank would be almost on his knees with exhaustion. It was not unknown for the lads to actually fall asleep, keel over into the canal, and even drown. Likewise in the morning, the young lads would be shaken from their deep sleep by their bosses to lead the horse out of the stable with sacking over their hooves and stealthily beat their comrades in the race away from the wharf, to be first to unload at their destination.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the 20th century the first use of what we call

containerisation came into being. Small boxes were loaded at the collieries and put into the narrow boats by crane. They would be taken along the canal to Castlefield in Manchester where they would run into an underground tunnel. The boxes would then be lifted to street level by a crane operated by a waterwheel, emptied and returned to the barge.

The Bridgewater and Leeds-Liverpool Canals are wide canals as opposed to the narrow canals of central and southern England. They also have another important factor in that there are no locks from Ince-In-Makerfield near Wigan to Preston Brook Tunnel in Cheshire, or Castlefield in Manchester. The canals were built roughly along the 82 ft. contour, and kept well away from the moss lands of the area. Coal traffic could therefore, move steadily at all times, and there were no major hold ups with locks.

A narrow boat is seventy feet long with a beam of seven feet. A flat, as the wide barges were called, was sixty or seventy feet long with a beam of 14 ft. A flat could carry about 600 tonnes of coal at a time, and later when the barges were motorised the flat would also tow a butty boat so that a total of more than a hundred tons could be carried at one go. The narrow boat could not compete with this. The total for the two boat's would be in the region of 45 tons. It is little wonder that in the end it was only the flats that were left on the Bridgewater Canal.

Over the last fifty years coal was not only carried to the power stations in Manchester and the great Trafford Park Industrial Estate, but also further afield to Runcorn and Northwich, and North to Wigan and Blackburn, and Eastwards to Rochdale and Ashton. Cargoes to Gas Works, Breweries, Brickworks and Cotton Factories. There were narrowboats of Horsefields, Southerns and Gordon Waddington, and the flats of Monks, Blundell, Dean, Waddington and the Coal Board.

The narrow boats were gaily painted in traditional style with roses and castles and spotlessly clean ropework. The brasses shone around the stove in the cabins even though there was always coal dust around. The boatmen were a breed of their own with faces like leather cut by the wind, blue jerseys knitted in numerous designs and flared trousers made from corduroy. Some of the names still linger on, like 'Bazaroo Jack', he was always up-in-the-air at the slightest notion. Then there was 'Billy Seven Heads', he was always forgetting things, and one 'Ummery Gum' named so because he spoke with an impediment in his speech. And lastly, 'Lymmie' because he had been abandoned on the canal in Lymm, as a baby, picked up and adopted.

The man was the skipper and his wife was his mate, through thick and thin she'd stick by his side. She'd have the task of keeping her home clean and looking after the butty boat (that's the one without an engine) cooking and keeping an eye on her brood of shrieking kids. It was not unknown for a six year old to be put on a soap box at the tiller and left to get on with it while other members of the family were getting on with a meal or catching up on some lost sleep.

Some boats swapped hands for as little as £2.00 each when the boatman decided it was time to have a change.

The boats were built at first of oak planking with elm bottoms and iron frames to hold them all together. Elm, of course, it is a timber that almost lives in water. In the docks when boats when boats were under repair the young lads would seek their entertainment in the form of the pub with songs sung to the accordion or concertina. They would surely meet a girl and if everything was OK they would get married and continue on the boats. Other families did move on to perhaps better paid jobs. It is known that families have emigrated from places around Runcorn and Weston point and turned up in Astley. They have forsaken the life on the cut for the pick in the mine.

The boat owner would name his boats after members of his family. Albert Blundell who had a number of flats named them 'Christine', 'Tom', 'Edith' and 'Finch', after his father. Horsefield boats were named 'Marjorie', 'Winifred' and 'Jonathan'. It was easy to load the boat under the

coal chute, but it was not very easy to unload them until the days of the Pneumatic Suckers. Boatmen used to have 2 cwt wheelbarrows and move a complete load from a barge in a day with the aid of a strong shovel and a good pair of biceps. The following morning though those boatmen would be back in the queue at the coal chute weighing up the size of the coal and any wetness as the coal had come from the washeries. If they coal pieces were too big they would not go up the Pneumatic Suckers.

One coal barge had come from Bedford Basin at Leigh to Barton in 1923 with a cargo of coal for the power station. Whilst grabbing the coal the crane driver inadvertently put his grab through through the bottom of the boat, the barge sank immediately, but it could not be left there so the crane driver opened out the grab as far as it would go, gripped the sides of the barge and pulled it out on the bank.

The boat people worked come rain or shine, in all weathers up and down the cut. If they got iced up in a bad winter they would stay aboard or if they lived at home they would leave the boat wherever it had got frozen in and go home and come back when the weather had thawed out. Mining in the area led to subsidence and it affected the canal considerably in places. Parts of the canal would be drained and the bed of the canal re-puddled with clay which usually came from the clay pit at Boothstown. The Coal Board was responsible for the section of the Bridgewater Canal from Worsley Bridge to Leigh until March 1974.

When the coal boats finally finished what was left of the boatmen worked on the Bridgewater 'Dukers', as the flats were often called, transshipping maize and grain from the Manchester docks, which had come in 10,000 ton ships, up the Manchester Ship Canal to Hulme Lock, and then along the Bridgewater Canal to Kelloggs in Trafford park. Even this trade finally came to an end in May 1974.

The coal barges have gone, but some of the boats were converted into house boats or camping boats and you can still see them on the Bridgewater and Leeds-Liverpool Canals. Boats like the 'Irwell', 'Wye', and 'Weaver', the 'Jupiter' and 'Swan' and even 'Stour', but 'Stour' is another story.

In 1975 there is just a glimmer of hope that these canals may see some more commercial traffic. Grain is being run from the new Seaforth Docks in Liverpool along the Leeds-Liverpool Canal through Wigan and then down the Bridgewater to Manchester Docks. Could we once again see tarred rope, smell new paint, sweaty bedding, bilge water and bubbles rising from the cut in hot weather and amid all this the scent of a pan of stew on the galley stove?

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