

WORKING ON THE OXFORD CANAL 1959-1970

I joined British Waterways on the canal in January 1959. Most of the work is similar to farming; hedge laying, trimming them, and cutting grass. The most frequent job was stopping leaks where the canal is on an embankment where it would leak into the fields. Some leaks were trickles, others much larger. The method we used to find them was a thin iron rod, pushed into the canal bank two feet from the water edge at three inch intervals until we found some water. Then we moved the rod up and down to make the water muddy, then looked at the outlet of the leak if it was muddy, then we dug a hole, round the inlet, then filled the hole with clay. Some were difficult to find. They would run under the towpath for a distance before breaking out. One was fifty yards.

I worked most of the time between Banbury and Oxford. Sometimes we went to help the piling gang, driving the engine which pulled the three hundredweight hammer up to drop on the piles which were concrete, six feet long, four inches thick. They were used where the canal sides were weak. They were not needed in the horse days as there was no wash to wear the bank away. Five miles an hour was the speed limit. The holiday makers were very interested in hedge laying, not having seen it done before. It's not done the same way now. I was the last one - too costly for anyone could do it.

During the winter months there were lock stoppages where a lock was cleaned and some locks had new gates put in first. The stretch of water below the lock was drained off, then at the top of the lock in the entrance there were slots cut in the stonework and four inch thick planks were put in there, then the lock was emptied, water squirted from the plank joints and at the ends. I was quite amused and surprised at the simple way the leaks were stopped. By sprinkling ordinary house fire ashes in the water in front of the planks, every drop of water was stopped. The lock was cleaned out with a winch. Putting in a bottom gate was a big operation. It weighed five tons. The old one had to be lifted out and three leg pulley blocks fixed to three tripods. The bottom of these had to be watched carefully to see they didn't sink. The operation usually took three days, always at weekends.

When we needed more piles we went to Hill Morton near Rugby to help load them on to the BW work barge. One load was shipwrecked at Shuckborough, Warwickshire, when the front of the barge was holed just above the water level at Braunston which is a junction with the Grand Union Canal and the Oxford Canal. As the boat travelled, the water ripple made by the boat allowed the water to get into the boat. The boatman did not notice the boat had become waterlogged until it was too late and so it sank. It was lifted up and pumped out by putting chains under it fixed to empty barges, one each side. I wont name the crew.

From Braunston to Knapton is an 11 mile stretch without a lock. At Knapton there are nine locks in one mile. This is where two windmills were built in one field but one had to be pulled down as there was not enough wind for both of them! At Claydon there are five locks in a half mile stretch. Sometimes one of us went with the boat as a lock wheeler, that is to prepare the locks and close the gates after it. It is an interesting job; like farming, very varied. The deepest lock is Deep Lock at Somerton. The shallowist is Wier Lock, Aynho. The River Cherwell crosses the canal here.

It's a very different traffic on the canal today than in my young days. It's a lovely holiday to my mind, much better than sitting round a pond abroad. In 1963 a very bitter winter, not quite as bad as 1947, the ice on the canal was eight inches thick. The worst thing for me was to keep my fingers from freezing. I carried newspaper and matches in my coat pocket. I had to use them several times.

It was during this time that I first began to feel the pain of arthritis which I have had ever since. It's good company, always present. I am now housebound and have to use the crawler gears, but I am thankful for the faculties I still have. I live on my own. My wife passed away in 1985, after a long mental illness. It was very sad to see her gradually getting worse. She spent her last two years in mental care. We had a good life together. We worked long hours and helped each other. We didn't have any cash problems as there was none to worry about.

This has been a nostalgic journey for me. I hope you who read it will find some of it interesting, perhaps amusing. I have tried to do it in a light-hearted way. You may need a pinch of salt with some of it. I have enjoyed writing it as a bit of fun. As I said, I live on my own so I had better go and put the rasher waggon on and get my dinner. I have a tailor-made kitchen, 4' x 6'. I only have to pivot round on my heel to reach all parts. So now I will say

Adios Amigos!

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25th February 1987