

## THE OXFORD CANAL 1910-20

It was built by James Brindley. He surveyed the ground on horse back. He was not a good scholar but he must have been a brilliant engineer. I was brought up by the side of it and I worked on it for my last eleven working years. It was a busy waterway. Most of the barges were worked by their owners. I can name quite a lot of them. Most families worked a pair of boats. Children all had to help. The most numerous families were the Granthams. There was John, Jack, Louise, Will, Joe, Jim. The Coles family was Joe, Tom and his son Tom. Then Joe Skinner, Amos and Jack, Joe Beauchamp, Jack Wilson, Tommy Duckett, Joey Clark. Mrs Edwards who was deaf and dumb worked one boat with her son. It was interesting to us to see them talking in sign language. Joey Gibbons died in Aynho Wharf from 'flu in 1917. Alf Hone and some others I can't remember.

Some companies ran pairs of boats. Cannon and Clapperton ran two pairs to their paper mill at Sandford on Thames. Access to the river was either at Isis lock in Oxford or Dukes lock at Wolvercote. Pratt and Haynes coal merchants of Bletchington had a pair. Shipton Cement Company had two single boats. They were in white and blue colours. Hartshill stone quarries had several pairs and some single boats bringing six inch and four inch granite stones for the roads. All the family helped unload. The men filled the barrow, the women wheeled them, the children placed the empty barrows in place. Sometimes at night the wife would get out her dolly tub and do some washing, tying a line to any suitable thing.

One amusing thing we saw was a loaded barge ready to move after picking up food for the horse. At the wharf the wife stood on the walk planks in front of the mast where the tow line was fixed. Some slack line was behind her. She shouted at the horse, he trotted off. As the rope twanged tight it flicked her into the water. She didn't try to get out, just floated and swore at the horse. Her husband held out a long shaft for her to grasp. Jack Grantham brought coal to Aynho from the Coventry pits, each trip taking two weeks. His children Joe, Doris, Reg and Amos would come with us to school. The boats each carried 28 tons, the cost of transport the boatman had was 22½p per ton. We went in the cabins, very tiny but very smart and clean and warm. The boats were all painted in bright colours, paintwork was kept clean with a mop and water.

During severe weather when the canal was frozen, the maintenance men would have a small iron boat with a sloping front with six or eight barge horses to it. Six men would rock the boat and so break the ice but if the ice got too thick then all traffic stopped. The boatmen then must have had a thin time. No handouts then. We watched a deal between boatman Jack Wilson and a horse dealer. Both were tough bargainers. After a long time they agreed to each giving their boy 3p, then shook hands. Later on a few boatmen had motors put in the boats but the water was not deep enough for them to travel fast enough so they switched to the Grand Union canal. What a contrast. Today the canal is full of toy boats. I liked the old barges best and to hear a boatman playing an accordion. Travelling in the evening on a summer night, it could be heard quite a way off playing the old songs which we learned at school, such as The Raggle Taggle Gypsies, Come Lassies and Lads, the French Grenediers and others. That was the best bit of my schooling.