

George Poole

There was nine of us altogether, not all on one boat, my sister went to live with my granma, I couldn't tell you at the time how many was on the boat. All the family was brought up on the canal boat.

I went to school at Middlewich, then when I was 12 my father brought me out of school to work on the boats because my two sisters who I was living with at home were working in Crewe doing shift work; so he said we'll all be together, me, my brother, mother and father worked the two boats. You'd run to locks or steer the boat, mainly steer the boat because you're not strong enough to lift the paddles up at that age but you had to dive in you know. You just didn't do one job; you steered the boat, help round the locks, shut the gates, as you got older you did more work. We had a houseboat and butty.

Working for Cowburn and Cowper, we carried mainly chemicals and oil. We'd start off at Manchester, there's a fella who filled the tank by connecting the pipe onto your boat. When the tank was full enough he'd take the pipe off and seal it then you had to pull your boat forward, he'd connect the other tank up. It would take an hour to fill the tank up, when the other was full you'd move your boat out of road and you'd pull your butty boat in to load that. Used to take you hours to load because they had tanker motors, if those tankers come in they take preference so you could be all day loading, makes a lot of difference.

Just say we start from there about 10 o'clock in the morning, we'd go to Preston Brook then you had to wait for a time for the tunnel and the tug. That was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, then you'd go through Barnton, then to the Big Lock, that was 10 o'clock at night and then it took us an hour to get to turn pike and that was if for the day. Next day you'd start at 6 o'clock in the morning to get to Trentham Park, that used to take hours with two boats, 45 ton on. We got through loads of locks that day, 24/26 double ones and then loads of single locks before you got to Harecastle tunnel between 2 and half past, you had to wait then for the electric tug, that was four at night, took an hour to go through there, then you had no locks for about five or six miles. You hit 5 locks at Stoke Eturia, by the time you'd go down them it was about 8 o'clock, then you've got a good run to Trentham Gardens, one lock there then that was it. We'd get to the lock then stop and that was it, 9 o'clock at night from 6 in the morning, that was a light day. The next day you'd be getting up again at 6, you'd come through Stone, eight locks there, you'd go through about half 8 or 9 o'clock, then another 6 locks but were big distances, say about 5 or 6 mile between them. You'd come to the last of the six, then you'd get a 10 mile Pound through Lichfield, Rugley, you'd come to a wall lock Woodend, you'd got a Pound for a mile then two locks just before you came the Fradley then Brudley Junction, turn off there and you're on the Birmingham Canal then.

It's 11 mile to Ascot, used to take you 6 hours to do that, two locks there, then you'd got another pound for 8 mile then another 11 locks before Coventry where we'd deliver to Coultards, I would say in about 20 miles and that was the end of your journey. 258 miles round trip!

My father got paid for the boat not the cargo, I think he got £16 for the trip that's all. I got £1 and my brother got £1.50, then you got the same coming back; you came back quicker being empty and go through the same process again. If you didn't do any work, you didn't get any money, if you were froze up you might get £3 a week and that was to keep your whole family on. We were caught up at Nantwich 8 weeks and froze up at Adderston for 16 weeks.

There was that much brine in the canal that when we got to Preston Brook the boat would raise over an inch out of the water, it lifted your boat. When you got out at Middlewich past Kings Lock it would drop again and now they're fishing aren't they? Me father worked on the Shroppie Flys that was from Birmingham, Wolverhampton somewhere to Ellesmere Port, he said they always took their shoes off on Sat night, working and sleep about 3 or 4 blokes to a boat. It's a fair way to Ellesmere Port with a horse, he said he went on for years like that.

(Motor boats) He played hell with the one they sent him. He didn't want it, my sister Eve could do anything with a horse. She could more or less talk to them, he'd be grazing on the side like, "come on Tom" and he'd go up to her and put his head on her shoulder!

It was a rough life really. It was a healthy life, all the time I worked on boats I only had 1 cold, never went to the doctors. Your parents had stuff in like, lint plaster or my mother's favourite iodine and on a cold morning when it was freezing, my mum would make that mint stuff, peppermint before you started, you had a little glass like that, that used to just warm you up. I think if they brought these remedies back, people wouldn't be so bad. I know that the tablets they give you now keep you going but, then, some of the old people never left their boats; we nearly always went to Dr. Neil at Middlewich, if there was anything really bad with you.

Me mum did really good food, we had 7 meals a day on the boat on a long day. Used to get up have a cup of tea, bread and butter, then once we got going you'd have bacon and eggs. If we were on time for Stone, there's a pub there at bottom lock and we'd have a quiet jug and mother would have some roasted spuds in the oven. We'd tied up the butty and leave it and have our supper, we were never hungry. If you were going through Middlewich and you got through Booth Lane top lock you got a pound then but only a short one, we used to have a bit of bacon, once you'd finished your butty in the cabin you'd come up and take over steering so the next one could go down and eat. When you got to Harecastle tunnel we waited there a hour and half you'd have a nice cooked meal and then when we got to Trentham Park we'd have a bit of supper and to bed probably with cheese or bread, cup of cocoa or something like that, well fed.

When it got towards the end, if there was no cargo for you then they'd employ you on the works then. Until I was 14, I couldn't get nothing, used to go Yarwoods with them with the motor boats, they built the 8 motor boats, all birds, we had snipe, the butty boats was painted and decorated at Stretford.

I never liked boating you know, I hated it on the boats because my mates at Middlewich were going out on the Saturday nights and I was there working. When I finished, I went to work at the Salt Works in Middlewich and that nearly killed me because it was red hot inside and I hadn't been used to that. I got brine on my face, I went twice in there in 12 months. Second time, I choked then I had to wear a linen mask, it was like fire. I used to do 12 hour nights so I was in bed more or less all day I used to get in bed about 6:30 until 3, I couldn't sleep.