

Maureen Shaw

The first job I had as a child was driving the horse; walking behind it, you had to walk so many bridges lengths and then it would be your sister's turn. Learned to steer the boat, you used to learn to steer with a piece of cheese and a piece of bread, one on your left and one on your right and when your dad said bring the boat in so that he could get to the far end of the boat above a lock or meeting boat he would ask you where the bread was because you had to turn that way to bring her in, well we had already eaten it, which is normal isn't it? They were the boat jobs and then you learn to help your mother at night, one would do collars and one would help her to wash, one would do cleaning, one would do sewing, one would learn to crochet. Education was very new but you would learn your sums, money was very important and you had to pay your way, the 'work hard' thing was pushed at you and being clean, because no man would have you if you can't cook, wash, crochet and clean, big deal!

Danny Jinks was already a man who wanted to fly around the canal, he would work all night if he could pass you above a lock or below a lock, he would have you creeping about in the dark because he believed six boats behind you was better than six boats in front of you! When you were waiting to unload at Oldbury, for Thomas Claytons, you got paid and then you go on your journey to Banbury, Oxford and Leamington because we used to go to the gas works, so if you worked hard the money was there and the work was there.

Food was another thing you didn't get food from the supermarket, it had come from little shops when you could find them and they weren't always ten minutes down the road. You would buy things like sugar, tea and cheese, things that would last because they had to go in the stone cupboard outside. The houses on the locks became like a shop at the back door, they always had rabbits, chicken, taters and all your greens, you had to pay but they had them, especially on this flight of locks.

We didn't stop, the lock would have to be out of action first, we used to pray for that but didn't tell our dad, we never told anybody. Mother never bothered, she could get the washing done and get the cooking done and make some pies and things that would last a bit longer you know, do a big stew, it would last a few days, keep topping it up with something else, so she didn't mind. Dad used to what they call, 'chaff', it means moaning and worrying, he would be up and down the boat, "two days has passed Nelly, money, where do these girls think the money comes from? They're going off again to that woman's house". He would be up and down and it didn't make things better you know, you couldn't go until the lock was fixed and it didn't happen very often but it did happen.

Thomas Claytons he carried crude oil and tar, because that's what they were, crude oil boats and tar boats. We loaded at Ellesmere Port, when you worked for them you were carrying oil and you had to hurry up because if you didn't get there for Friday morning, you would spend all the weekend there and that was a lot of money to loose. There would be many boats tied abreast in twos and they would be loosing money because they had missed the 12 o'clock deadline, you had got to be going down that river before then you see, clearing to locks at Ellesmere Port and

getting onto the ship canal, going down to Stanlow and getting back because a tug came with you. You put your boats abreast like that and the tug pulled you down the river and up the river because they were big ships on the river and you needed support, they would drop you off at the locks coming back into Ellesmere Port basin then you were on your own again. When you had horse you needed the tug more than anything to pull you about, so that's how that was done.

Your horse was that important you didn't get over attached to it you would stroke it and say well done when you had done a big trip but don't forget without your horse, before they went motorised there was no living, that was your living. If dad said to mother 'can I have a shilling to sup the horse up?' That shilling would buy him some hay for the horse and a pint, that's what he means 'supping up'. He would say to mother have you got a shilling to sup the horse up because where ever you go you had to pay for the stable and she would say 'I need a shilling to feed these kids' and he would say 'never mind the kids, yourself or me the horse is your living.'

We had no more space on that boat than anybody else, mum used put two at the foot of the bed and she would have one behind the pillows and she would have one behind her head and she would have the youngest of all on the side bed with his gear connected so he wouldn't fall off, his reigns you call them. If dad didn't feel like going to bed he would stay up all night on the coal box, he would have a cup of tea before he went to bed and his fag and that would be it, he wouldn't take his clothes off that night because he wanted to get away in the middle of the night. We slept in the fore cabin because that's what fore cabins was for, it was for the horses gear and corn and for us girls and so you could sleep a few in there. The slide would go off any time in the morning 'get em off – lets go' and away we went again.
