

Barbara Astles

My Father, David Alfred Evans was a British Waterways lock keeper and lengths man for practically all of his working life. This job made him responsible for the good working of the lock mechanism at Rumps Lock and the tidiness of a length of canal side some few miles long.

In those days 1940's – 1950's, the canal boats were used to carry coal and salt and other goods and the boats would be queuing up all day and night to get through the lock and onto their destinations. The noise firstly from the horses and later in the 60's from the engines could be heard all night and the lights of the boat cast beams of light on the ceiling of the bedroom and you could follow their progression as the reflections moved. These barges housed the whole family and now it is hard to believe that so many people lived, ate and slept in such a small space. The boats were decorated and painted with flowers, motifs and names as also were the horses. It was the time that these people would knock on the door if they had run out of sugar or tea etc, this included knocking in the night too of course, the house went with the job so this was seen as normal.

My dad grew many flowers and vegetables and had a greenhouse full of lettuce, tomatoes cucumbers etc as well, he also kept chickens that kept the family very well supplied with eggs. Many of these goods were also given to the families on the boats.

A Lengths mans job was that he was responsible for a length of canal, the lock and a length of canal to the next lock and someone else would be responsible for that, I mean he could take two or three locks, I don't know to be honest. He was responsible for keeping the locks in working order and also keeping the canal tidy, keeping the sides of the canal in good condition and this was done mainly with a scythe, there was no tools as we know today, the grass had to be scythed all the way along these few miles and the grass kept low, basic farm working tools were used for that, all hand tools no mechanical means. Obviously when they came to do the lock they would have proper engineers to do that but he would say this wants doing to the lock.

Canal terrace wasn't just a stopping place that used to be a proper working environment; people from the farms would bring the goods to be put on the boats. There was an office and next to the office were the stables for the horses to stay overnight on the canal side. As a child I can remember being round there and looking back now, it was more of an area organisation of the waterways and that's where perhaps the officer would be. I can remember going past there and seeing people working, it was really an operational area for the canal. The canals were being used day and night not like now, you see a few canal boats that people use as holidays, in those days they were queuing up at the locks, it was one after another all of the time because there were no motorways, the canals were the motorways. The boats would be queuing up, four, five, six at a lock 24 hours a day, you had to learn to sleep through it, 'put, put, put', that's the diesel engine, you had to learn to sleep through it.

In the mornings you would hear the siren go from the salt works, you could hear it all over the town, it was really loud, a few minutes after the siren went you would hear what sounded like an approaching army, there would be hundreds of them all walking down Seddon Street towards the middle of the town and they wore rough working clogs.

