

REFLECTIONS ON THE SURFACE

ILLUMINATING THE SEVERN'S HISTORY

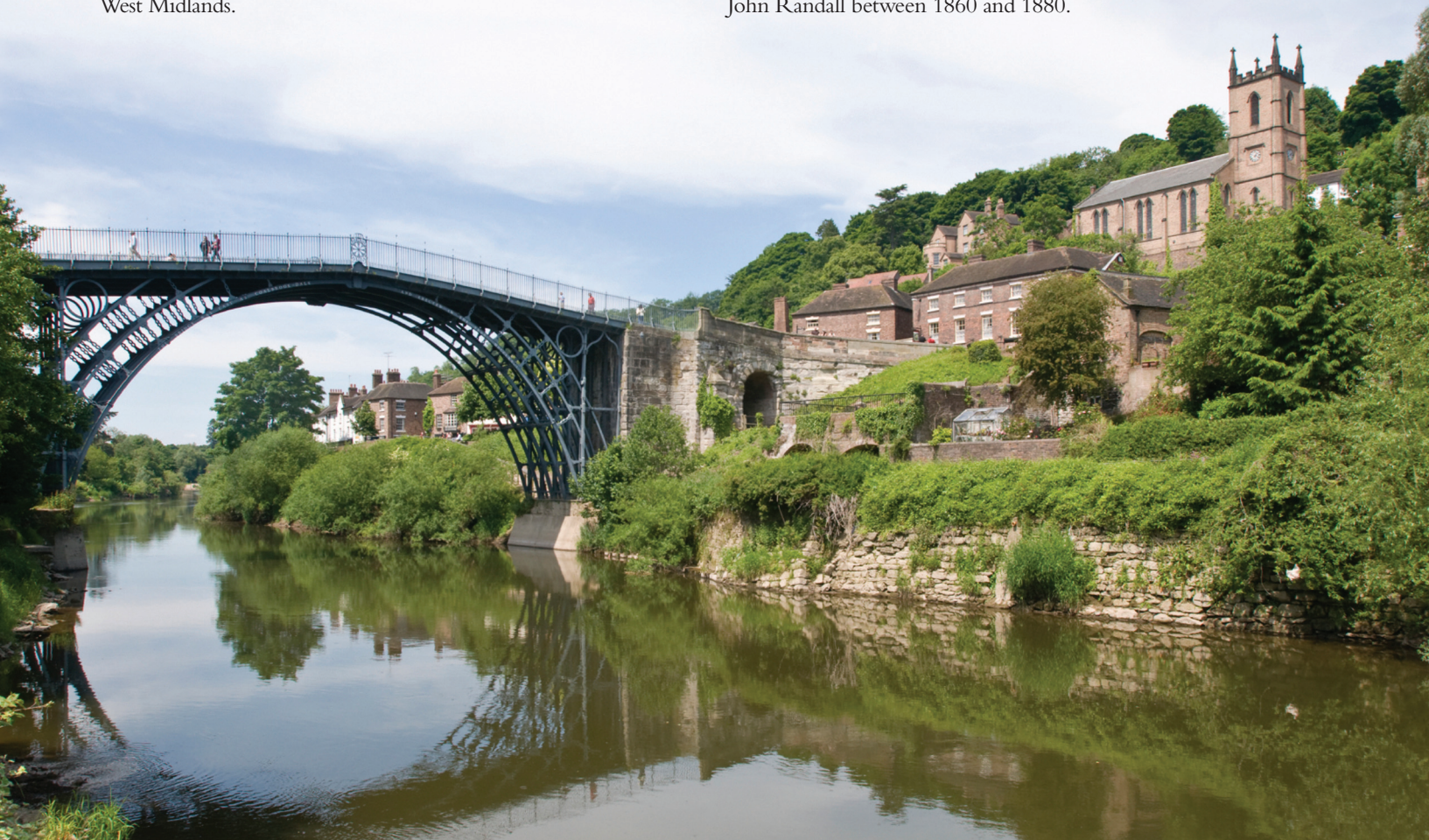
Barrie Trinder

The River Severn has powerfully influenced the history of most communities in the West Midlands. Barrie Trinder's *Barges and Bargemen: A Social History of the Upper Severn Navigation 1660-1900* was published in 2005. Here he describes how, in the course of forty years, new sources revealed more about the river navigation, and how new thinking came to make its history clearer.

Historians of the West Midlands have always recognised the importance of the River Severn navigation, yet its significance has often been clouded by cliché – it is not helpful to call the river the ‘M1 motorway of its day’ and no single body of documents illuminates the history of the Severn Navigation. This article attempts to show how our understanding of the navigation has increased, through the opening up of new sources but also through the re-casting of the ways in which we think about the river and its relationship to the economy of the West Midlands.

Investigating the Severn

This is in part a personal story, but it owes much to colleagues and students. In 1965 I was appointed by Salop (now Shropshire) County Council as an Adult Education Tutor, charged in particular with investigating the history of the Shropshire Coalfield, the chosen location for a New Town. The Severn Navigation was a part of the agenda. Its history was outlined in Charles Hadfield's *The Canals of the West Midlands* (published in 1966), but most of what was then known drew on accounts written by George Perry in 1756, Charles Hulbert in 1836, and John Randall between 1860 and 1880.





Broken anchors on the cast-iron memorial at Benthall to trowman Eustace Beard - evidence that he worked on the River Severn.

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The Port Books Project

The Port Books project of the 1980s was based at the University of Wolverhampton and supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust. It made accessible a digital version of the port books of Gloucester, which has been the basis for a succession of studies and illuminated many others.

The Gloucester Port Books project at www.ahds.ac.uk

Uncovering the Evidence

In the summer of 1965 I was exploring with a friend in the Ironbridge Gorge and came across in the churchyard at Benthall the cast-iron memorial to Eustace Beard, trowman (Severn boat owner), who died in 1761. Later I found references to Beard in the accounts of the Coalbrookdale Company and realised that it might be possible to analyse the history of the Severn by indexing all those who could be identified as working on the river.

The many references to bargemen in the accounts of the Company, and in due course in other sources, were duly registered. One of the 1851 census books for the Severnside part of Broseley detailed households where the head was 'absent on a voyage to Gloucester' and, as census data became more easily available, every worker on the Upper Severn from 1841 was identified, including some crews sleeping on boats.

The study of probate records was pioneered in Shropshire by the late Alec Gaydon in Volume VIII of the *Victoria County History* which appeared in 1968. The transcription of inventories for the Coalbrookdale Coalfield was a logical means of enlarging understanding of many historical topics, including the Severn Navigation. In due course inventories for all the riverside communities in Shropshire were transcribed, mostly by adult education research classes, as were those of Bewdley, by members of the Bewdley Historical Society. A research class in Bridgnorth, led by Malcolm Wanklyn, brought together data from probate documents with topographical evidence from estate records and material from Chancery Court land cases.

Important Sources

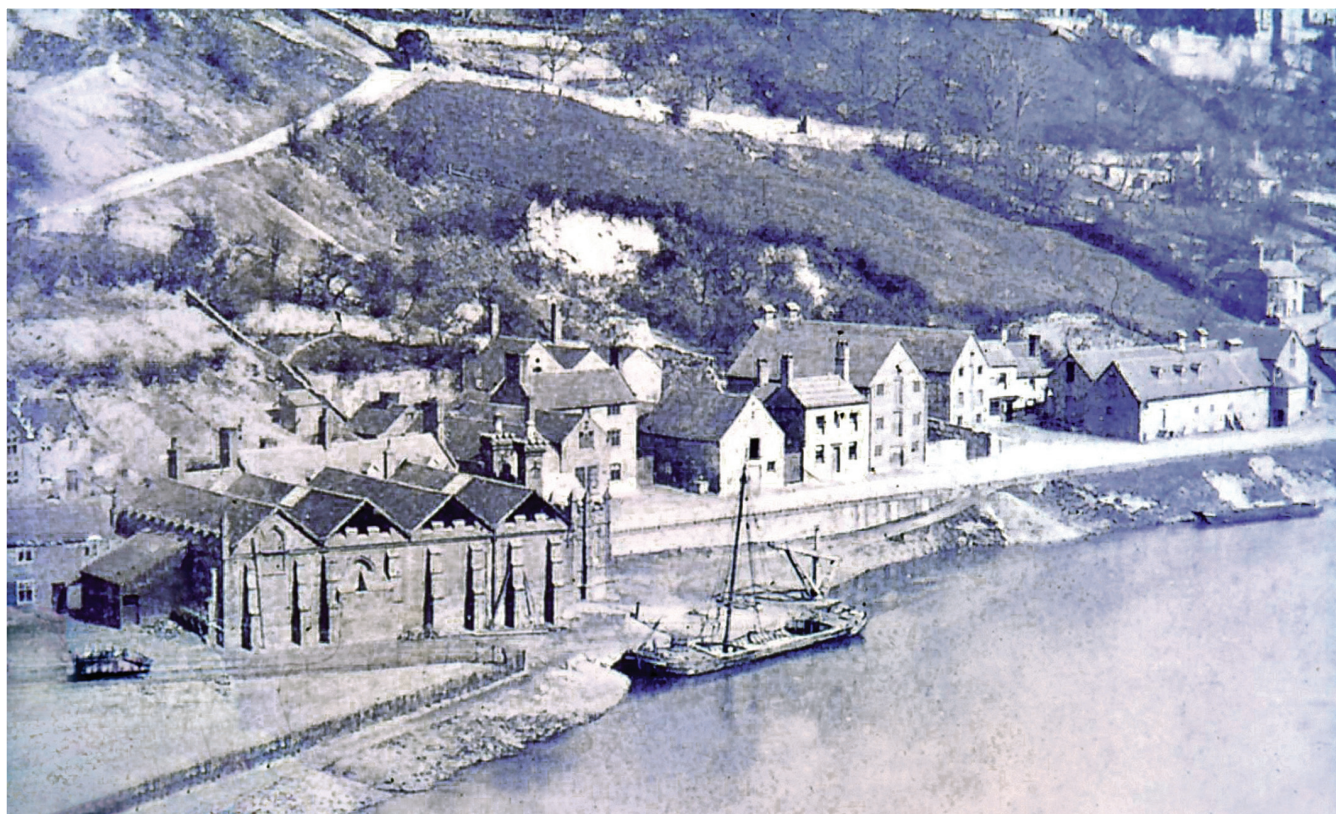
A surprising discovery came with the realisation that documents listed in the Shropshire Record Office as 'Alderman Jones's Notebooks' actually comprised the diary for the 1820s and 1830s of Thomas Beard, a member of a Broseley family of barge owners. The Notebook provides graphic views of a riverside community. Parish registers identify some river workers, and Parliamentary Papers concerning proposals to improve the navigation in the 1780s and the 1830s and 1840s provide evidence of contemporary practices. Newspapers revealed sale notices of waterside properties and barges, as well as reports on coroners' inquisitions following accidents, and occasional criminal cases. The county press in Shropshire from its beginnings until after the end of the navigation was analysed, and samples of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire newspapers were examined.

The records of the Knight family ironworks, now in Worcestershire Record Office, proved enlightening on the Severn, as on other topics. The work of Richard Hayman on the wrought-iron industry identified data about the Severn Navigation in the records of the Botfield ironworks and in those of James Foster & Co. Investigations into folklore by Gordon Ashman showed the role of bargemen in Morris dancing. Recordings made by the oral historian Ken Jones provided insights into the navigation drawn from distant family memories.

Visual sources included the engravings and paintings held at Shrewsbury Museum and the Ironbridge Gorge Museum and I learned much in the 1970s from the collection, now dispersed, of the late S Morley Tonkin which included views of Bridgnorth. Photographs revealed the great size of a vessel moored at Loadcroft Wharf, Ironbridge in the late nineteenth century, and details of small boats moored on the river at Bridgnorth.

Charting the Severn Riverscape

On the frontiers of archaeology and geomorphology (the study of landforms), David Pannett illuminated our understanding of the physical nature of the River Severn, showing that the islands on the Upper Severn were on the sites of medieval fish weirs, some of which remained operative in the nineteenth century. The Nuffield Project at the Ironbridge Institute identified and explained riverside sites in Ironbridge, work that was carried further by Stephen Duckworth in his master's dissertation of 1988.



The largest barge to be photographed in the Severn Gorge at Loadcroft Wharf, Ironbridge in the late nineteenth century.

My own understanding was furthered by walking the towpaths of the river, examining small communities where there had once been pubs catering for bargemen and horse drivers, finding bridges carrying the towpath over tributary streams, and discovering places where the towpath had been cut through high ground or surfaced with pot sherds (fragments).

The publications of John Randall (1810–1910) were one of the basic sources for the Severn Navigation. Research on other topics revealed that most of his historical writings originated in articles written for the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* between 1858 and 1859 which were closer to his oral sources than subsequent versions – the first edited version was published in 1862 as *The Severn Valley*. Randall wrote an account on 10 December 1858 of a meal with bargemen at the Harbour Inn, Stanley, which is rich in detail about the working of the river, and in October 1858 he reported on the appearance at Ironbridge of the steam tug *Christiana*, used in the construction of the Severn Valley Railway. Randall's texts provided links to the writings of George Griffith (1812–1883), the Bewdley corn merchant, who also made first-hand observations on the Severn.

River Traffic

In 2004 the records of the trustees of the towpath between Coalbrookdale and Shrewsbury, previously in the custody of Shrewsbury & Atcham Council, were deposited in the Shropshire Archives. Charles Hadfield glimpsed the documents in the 1950s but they had been in effect inaccessible. The collection provides the

only means of precisely measuring the density of traffic on any stretch of the river. Records show that traffic upstream from Coalbrookdale increased during the 1820s, but diminished after the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal's line to Wappenshall was opened in 1835, and declined steadily thereafter.

The documents record averages of 288 upstream journeys per year in 1815–1820, 363 in 1825–1830, but only 80 in 1850–1855. When the river was busiest, an average of only seven vessels a week passed upstream. Coal was rarely carried upstream from Coalbrookdale and traffic consisted mostly of building materials, bricks and lime from the Ironbridge Gorge, and imported softwoods.

The records provide a corrective to over-excited accounts of river traffic generally. When water was low many coal barges were moored in the Ironbridge Gorge, and when levels rose they passed downstream in quick succession, but this happened on only a few occasions each year. The usual pace of activity was slower, and the observer of the river between Bewdley and Bridgnorth, even in 1800, might see the passage of only three or four boats per day when water levels were normal.

The Severn Trade

This might seem a rich array of sources yet none covers the whole length of the river nor the whole chronological span of the navigation. To increase our understanding of the river it was necessary to gain an understanding of the language of those who worked on it, to define terms and to develop an enlightening

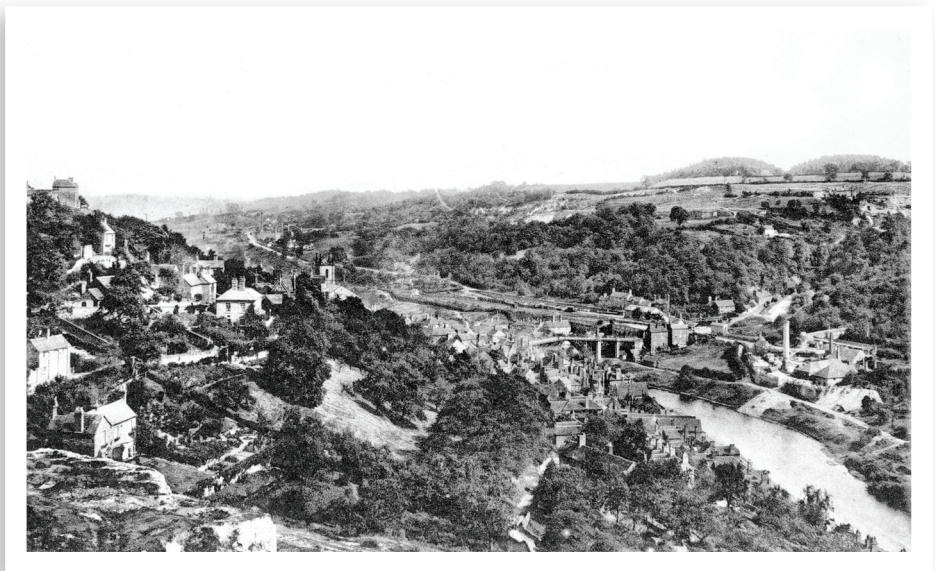
framework for discussion. It proved helpful to recognise the natural divisions of the navigation which was reckoned to stretch 178 miles from the medieval weir at Pool Quay to the estuary.

The Gloucester Port Books revealed much about the network of trade that extended through and across the river below Gloucester, sensibly defined as the Estuary. This trade was analysed by David Hussey in *Coastal and River Trade in Pre-Industrial England* published in 2000. The section between Gloucester and Stourport, along which locks were built in the 1840s, is reasonably called the Middle Severn. The Upper Severn was defined as the river between Stourport and Shrewsbury, where navigation was constrained by varying levels and where the towpaths were constructed between 1772 and 1809.

Above Shrewsbury the sparsely-used river as far as Pool Quay was defined as the Uppermost Severn. It was also important to appreciate the significance of the Severn's tributaries, particularly the Wye, and to measure the influence of the canals opened between 1772 and 1835 along the whole length of the Severn, from the Montgomeryshire Canal at Pool Quay to the Gloucester & Berkeley Canal at Gloucester Docks.

The navigation consisted of many trades, and the history of the commercial river was not one story but many. Between 1660 and 1730 port books portray the upstream trade in shop goods: tobacco, wine, grocery, mercery, drapery and millinery wares and saltery goods. These goods were carried to the Upper Severn chiefly by the trows (cargo boats) of the Bewdley owners – especially the Beale family – which fortnightly sailed downstream from Beale's Corner to meet the spring and neap tides at Gloucester.

Anecdotal evidence from newspapers shows that the shop trade continued into the first years of the nineteenth century. As late as 1808 a Shropshire clergyman observed that 'the Severn navigation provides all foreign articles of consumption from Bristol' but by that time the situation was changing. Some valuable imported goods had always been conveyed by road from the port of London to the West



Ironbridge Gorge, origin and destination of many journeys on the Upper Severn. Late nineteenth century photograph.

Midlands, but after 1800 that trade increasingly passed to canal carriers. This is confirmed by the accounts of goods handled at the canal wharf at Wappenshall near Wellington after it opened in 1835, although groceries were still being taken by barge from Bristol to Worcester in the 1830s.

The Bewdley vessels, and some from further upstream, carried traditional 'transit' cargoes: 'Manchester packs' (textiles), 'Staffordshire crates' (ceramics) and 'Birmingham hardware'. These are terms used consistently from the seventeenth century to the 1830s to refer to goods, for home or overseas destinations, moved overland to ports on the Upper Severn for conveyance downstream to Bristol and the Estuary.

In one of the first analytical studies of the Gloucester port books Malcolm Wanklyn showed that the role of Shrewsbury in these trades diminished from the early eighteenth century. From the 1770s goods were transported to the river by canal rather than by road, and it was only with the opening of mainline railways that the trade was wholly lost to the navigation.

The Coal Trade

Coal was the most visible cargo on the Severn. Most was conveyed from the Ironbridge Gorge to destinations upstream from the Estuary, movements that were not revealed in the port books. Occasional cargoes of Shropshire coal were taken to Bristol, and Coalbrookdale records show that in 1756 some Dawley coal was hauled up the Wye through the Forest of Dean to Monmouth.

Such movements were unusual and were balanced by the upstream trade in anthracite and the culm (anthracite slack) from West Wales used by maltsters in West Midlands towns. The Shropshire ironmaking companies were involved in the coal trade, and it is chiefly through their records that the pattern of trading became apparent.

Barge owners collected coal on credit from wharfs in the Ironbridge Gorge, sold it to customers downstream, and were frequently indebted to the coal-producing companies. From 1793, when the Shropshire Canal was opened, three agents handled the trade in coal at the canal/river interchange at Coalport, but company records show that coal continued to be loaded onto barges further upstream. References in various sources show that coal barges were easily distinguished.

Much of what was written about long delays in the navigation caused by low water referred essentially to the coal trade. It might be viable to lighten the load of a vessel carrying general cargo to enable it to pass shallows, but a coal barge could only operate



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Beale's Corner, Wribbenhall. Trows loaded at the quays to sail to Bristol and other estuary ports.

profitably if fully loaded. When water was low barges waited for long periods, sometimes for many months, and when there was a flush as many as 80 vessels, according to one source in 1784, might leave the Severn Gorge in a morning.

Understanding the Vessels

Bringing together the many sources and learning the language used by boatmen made it possible to develop an understanding of the vessels used on the Severn and the ways in which they were deployed. Those who owned barges on the Severn were distinguished by the prefix 'owner', 'a kind of hereditary title unknown to Burke and Debrett' as a writer remarked in 1890. The principal owners worked 'sets' of vessels of various sizes. When a Bridgnorth owner retired in the 1790s arrangements were made to sell his 'set of trows, barges and other vessels... as complete a set of vessels as any upon the Severn'.

www.historywm.com



Stourport, start of the Upper Severn and staging point to more distant destinations.
Picturesque Views of the Severn, Thomas Harral, 1824.

Probate inventories and press notices of sales of vessels showed there were many variations in their size and construction. Whenever trows were distinguished from barges they were larger and more valuable, and when employed with precision the term meant a vessel that when necessary could navigate the treacherous waters of the Estuary. 'Barges' did not usually venture below Gloucester.

Most of the principal owners also had 'boats', the small vessels that are

portrayed in images of the river at Bewdley, Bridgnorth, Ironbridge and Shrewsbury. The accounts of James Foster & Co show that canal narrow boats regularly carried cargoes from the Stourbridge area upstream to the company's forges at Hampton Loade and Eardington. In addition, papers relating to proposed improvements of the Middle Severn in the 1830s suggest that



A busy Severnside quay in the eighteenth century. Trade with Bristol was a significant part of commerce for the Upper Severn region.
Bristol Docks and Quay, c. 1720 (oil on canvas), English School, (18th century)/© Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library

narrow boats took grain and timber from Gloucester docks to Birmingham and the Black Country, via Diglis or Stourport, before the Severn Commissioners began to build locks in 1845.

Understanding the Watermen

An increasing awareness from the 1970s of the significance of custom in social history proved helpful in understanding the Severn. Watermen dressed distinctively in flannel frocks. A hierarchy extended from owners who worked sets of vessels, through men who operated single coal barges, to the watermen who were their crewmen. All asserted their superiority

over horse drivers who from the closing years of the eighteenth century led the beasts that pulled vessels upstream, and were the successors of the equally despised bow haulers who previously dragged the vessels from the river banks.

There is considerable evidence of group solidarity amongst river workers. At the annual May Day wakes on the Wrekin watermen traditionally fought with miners. When the river could not be navigated in the winter of 1861 watermen sought sustenance for their families by Morris dancing. Bow haulers showed solidarity, in raising rates for haulage in 1755, in opposing river improvement in 1786 and in resisting the use of towing horses at Worcester in 1832. Analysis of an attempt by the Coalbrookdale Company in 1805 to 1808 to run their own fleet of vessels – which ended ignominiously when traffic was returned to an established owner – suggests that the river-working community could effectively protect its own interests.

Varieties of Severn History

Analysing the Severn Navigation involved many approaches to its history. It was a study in transport history, making it necessary to be aware also of the roads that delivered cargoes to

the river and, as they were improved, took it away. Canals of various kinds influenced the river: tub boat canals delivering minerals to the river in the Ironbridge Gorge, the narrow canals that in the long term proved rivals for traffic, the Gloucester & Berkeley Canal that shaped patterns of trade on the Middle Severn. Early railways took coal to the river and mainline railways brought about the decline of the navigation.

The Severn is also a study in economic history, analysing what was carried and how barge owners operated their businesses. In addition it is a study in urban and landscape history, asking questions about all the settlements along the river, and a social history examining the people involved in working on the river, the language they used, their customs and their material culture.

It is not possible to divide the history of the navigation neatly into clearly-defined chronological sections. The coal trade from Shropshire was established in the reign of Elizabeth I, benefited by the construction of early railways and tub boat canals, remained substantial until the 1850s and declined to nothing by the 1890s. Bilston coal, carried on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, appears to have been competitive with Shropshire coal in the lower Severn Valley in the nineteenth century.

The trade in merchandise was established by the mid-seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth was dominated by the Bewdley trowmen. It declined completely by the 1840s. The Severn was an integral part of ironmaking in the West Midlands, with iron carried upstream and downstream to and from numerous furnaces and forges, from the seventeenth century until Charles Pugh, the last carrier of pig iron on the Upper Severn, gave up the trade in 1869. Lead ore was carried downstream from mines in Shropshire and North Wales, and there was a substantial upstream trade in non-ferrous metals. Fireclay was carried downstream and ball clay and china clay moved upstream.

There was, until after 1850, a regular pattern of trading in agricultural products centred on fairs featuring hops and cheese. By the 1870s only a small carriage of bricks remained on the Upper Severn, while the Middle Severn traffic was principally in imported grain and softwoods carried by narrow boat from Gloucester Docks to Birmingham and the Black Country.



Bewdley vessels carried 'Manchester packs', 'Staffordshire crates' and 'Birmingham hardware'.
Picturesque Views of the Severn, Thomas Harral, 1824.

Conclusion

The picture of the navigation that emerged from 40 or so years of research is complex, but necessarily incomplete. It will doubtless be amended by future generations. It is possible, if unlikely, that new sources may be uncovered – the records of the trustees of the towpaths below Coalbrookdale would be particularly valuable and it is virtually certain that

Chancery cases have more to reveal. Digitally-aided family reconstitution may uncover patterns of relationships among bargemen that current historians have failed to notice. Archaeology, the examination of riverside buildings, wharfs and sections of towpath, still has much to reveal. A broader understanding of the Severn Navigation has emerged from the study of sources that became available between 1965 and 2005. It is to be hoped that in coming decades this understanding may be broadened and deepened. ●

Barrie Trinder is best known for his studies of history in Shropshire. His most recent study, *Britain's Industrial Revolution: The Making of a Manufacturing People*, was published by Carnegie Publishing in 2013. Visit his website at www.trinderhistory.co.uk

Further Reading

All the works and articles mentioned in this piece, and many more relating to the River Severn, are listed in the bibliography of: Barrie Trinder, *Barges & Bargemen: A Social History of the Upper Severn Navigation 1660-1900* (Phillimore, 2005), in which the contributions of the many individuals and groups who have added to the study of the river are duly acknowledged.

The River Severn is Britain's longest river, running from the Welsh Mountains through Shropshire and Worcestershire down to the Severn Estuary. For more information visit:

The Canal & River Trust website at www.canalrivertrust.org.uk.

The World Heritage Site at Ironbridge. See the Ironbridge Gorge Museums website at www.ironbridge.org.uk. During 2014 a new home will be built at Ironbridge for *The Spy*, the last remaining Lower Severn Trow.

The Gloucester Port Books project at www.ahds.ac.uk