

CANALBOAT PEOPLE

LIVES ON THE WATERWAYS OF BIRMINGHAM

Tom Gidlow

From the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries canals provided the economic lifeblood of Birmingham. Here generations of people experienced their lives, and earned their livelihoods, on the water and the towpath.

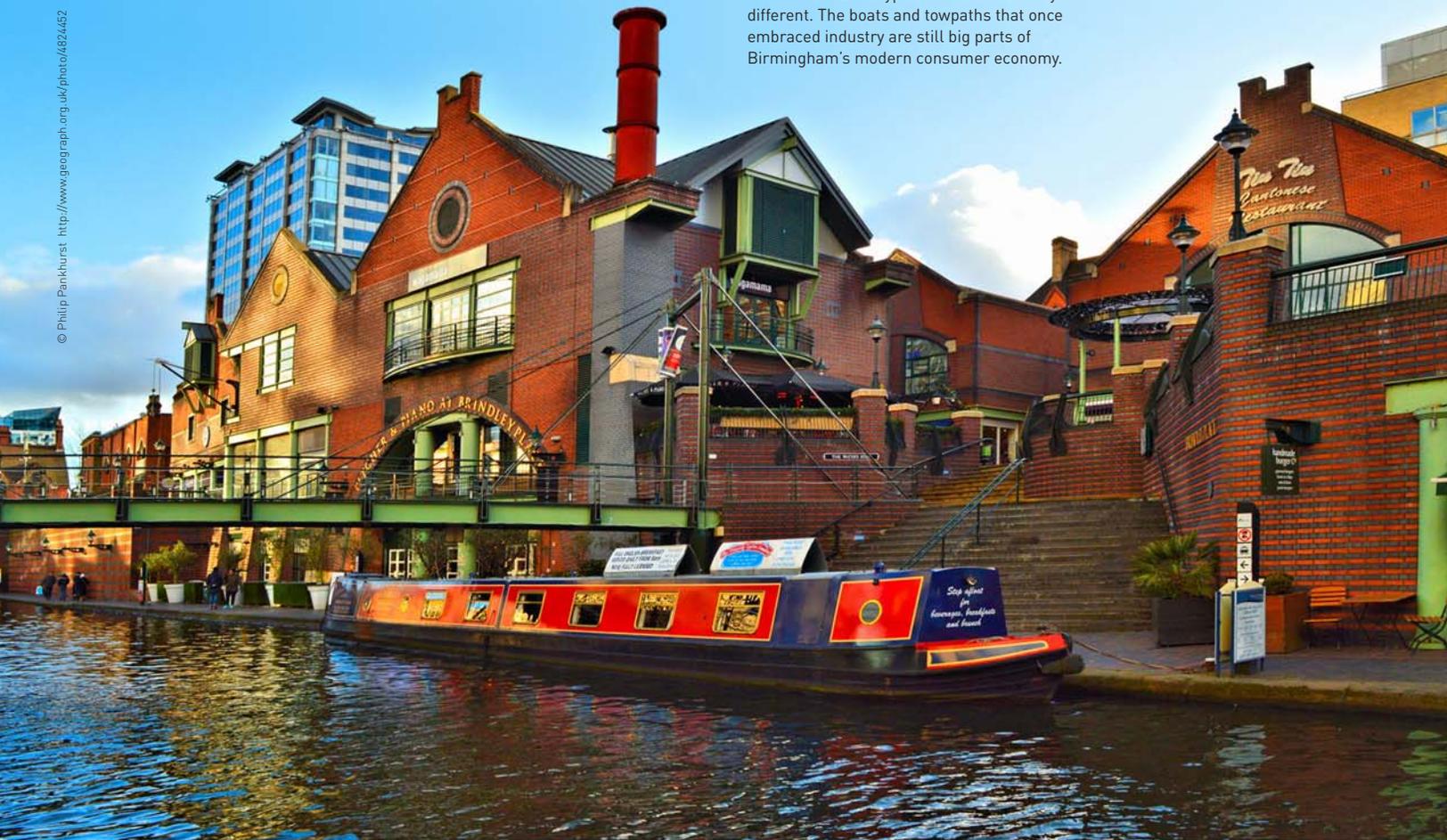
Waterways, Roadways, Railways

Birmingham's geography is defined by a large ridge cutting through it, not ideal for waterways. Yet this was one of the factors that drove their creation. Road travellers were vulnerable to highwaymen, the ridge was difficult to cross and the roads were often of poor quality. Turnpike trusts were just not able to keep the roads in a good enough order to handle the needs of a growing industrial town.

As canals developed they influenced local demographic and

economic change. Chris Upton has pointed out that canals did not only serve to transport goods, but as business ventures they were also responsible for bringing in a lot of capital to the city.¹ Many of the Lunar Society members benefited from this. The canals also defined how Birmingham was built up: because factories and workshops required canal access to thrive, a lot of working-class districts formed around these waterways. This means that a lot of the people living around the canals were poorer workers.

The modern Brindlyplace once looked very different. The boats and towpaths that once embraced industry are still big parts of Birmingham's modern consumer economy.



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Cargo

The arrival of rail meant people and goods could move across the country at a much greater pace than before, but canals were better at moving very heavy cargo.

The size and shape of narrowboats were constricted by the necessity to go through locks. They had a compact cabin at the back for living, leaving the rest of the boat as a hold to maximise cargo space. In 1858 a journalist, John Hollingshead, described a boat he sailed on, *The Stourport*, as being around ten yards long, seven feet wide, and five feet deep. These dimensions were standard, and meant the crew was confined to a limited living space.²

Although many goods were carried on the canals, the staple cargo was coal. Industrialisation was built upon the vast stores of energy in this fossil fuel. Canals brought coal into Birmingham, often from the Black Country. Typically, most boats carried a load of around 20 tons.³ Surviving loading tickets serve as a historical source and



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Farmers Bridge Locks c.1961.

show a lot of coal was unloaded around Farmer's Bridge, near to the modern Sea Life Centre and National Indoor Arena.⁴ This increased ease of transportation meant the market price of coal plummeted, a large factor in industrialising Birmingham. By 1790 a standard load of around 20 tons would fetch about £1.⁵



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Men working on an ice boat near Conduit Colliery on the Birmingham Canal Navigations c.1920.

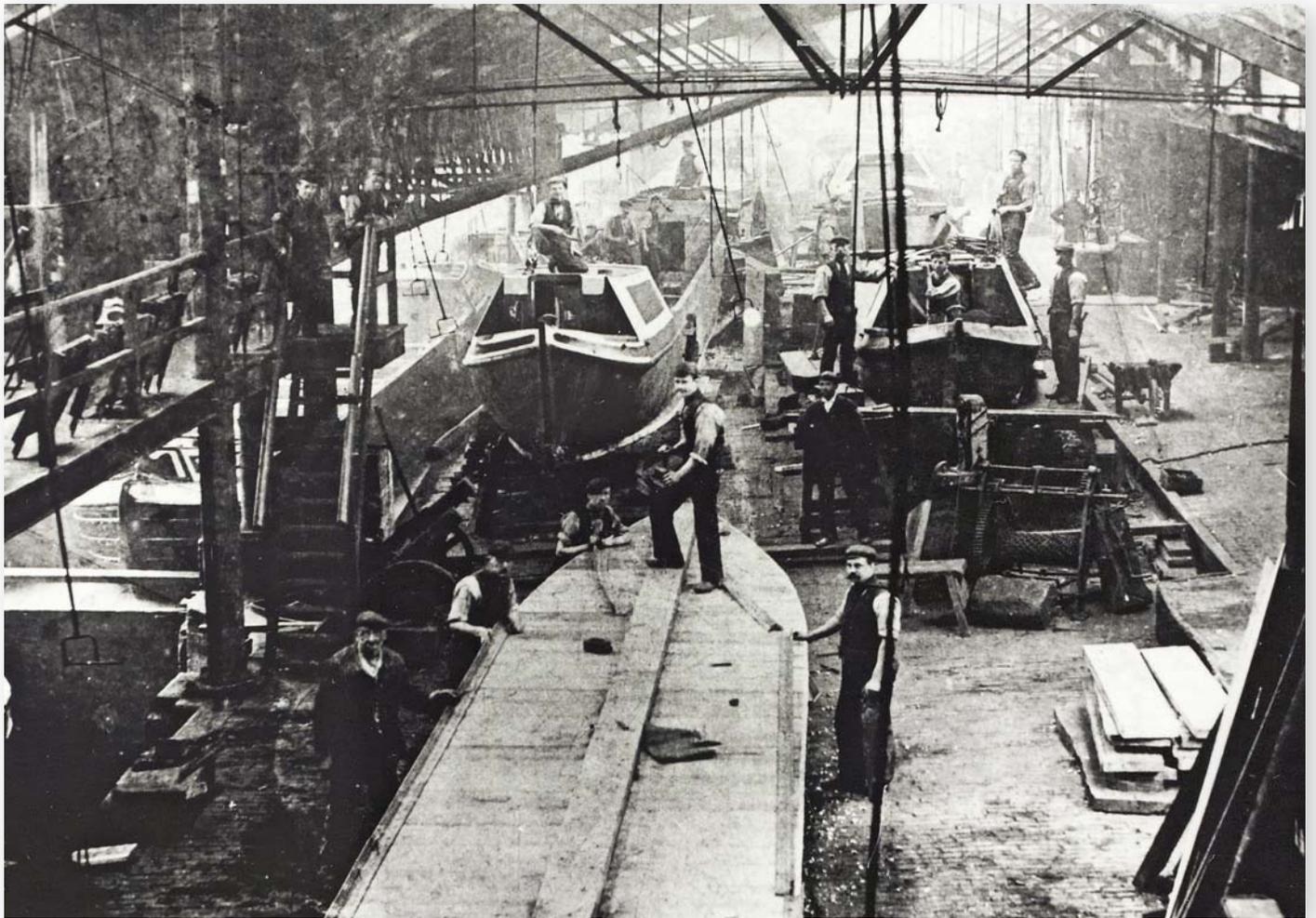
Ice

Rising global temperatures mean that the layers of ice we experience now are thin in comparison with the past. Ice historically posed a huge problem for those living afloat.

Boaters were very often paid by the trip or by the cargo. This meant there was no guarantee of a wage: if ice stopped boat movement, income stopped as well. Many boat people had to turn to charity for support to survive during winter weather.

Boating companies in Birmingham, and across the country, employed ice boats and their crews, and the ice was broken using human and horse power. A path was created by rocking the boat repeatedly, pulling and pushing it through the ice, as depicted in the image.

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Workers in a Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd. dock warehouse c.1897.

The People

The canals of Birmingham provided not only the lifeblood of industry, but were also a means of securing a livelihood for numbers of people. As many of them were poor, and left few records, their stories are lost to history, but it is possible, however, to describe the people who lived and worked on the canals. The complex navigation network required diverse skills and expertise to run efficiently.

Canal companies made money through the tolls the boaters paid for using the routes. Toll houses tended to be located at bottlenecks such as locks, where tolls could be more easily extracted. Manual labour was common. George Parkes earned money in 1872 greasing the lock mechanisms and at the same time sixteen-year-old Francis Mellor helped to manage docking.⁶ Whereas some people had a job for life, others experienced more sporadic work. For example, George Fletcher did not start working for Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN) at Tividale until 1863 aged 30, and by 1872 he was working in Selly Oak.⁷ However, Mr. Flavell, who in 1872 was working alongside

Fletcher, was aged 61 and had worked for the BCN continually since he was 15, advancing to the position of Chief Toll Collector.⁸

Upward mobility was possible. Captain Randal of *The Stourport* was 60 in 1858 and had spent around 50 years afloat. Randal is described as a man deeply proud of his boat, his employment and the fact that he had managed to save £200 over his life. In conversations with a journalist he confidently stated that he could have been Lord Mayor of London, if only he could read or write.⁹ Like Chief Toll Collector Flavell, this is indicative of how someone could rise up through the ranks to earn a reasonable wage on the canals.

Skills could be passed down through families. William Bells started as a machinist at Snow Hill Wharf in 1829, and was later joined by his son Thomas. When he died, his job was taken over by his daughter Mary. In 1903, 74 years after William was first employed, his granddaughter Emily Bells started work as a machinist aged only 10.¹⁰ Official apprenticeships were not the only way of learning a trade.

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The Smethwick top lock, lock house and toll house.

Wages

Wages in a boat like *The Stourport* were likely to set a buyer back around £30 in 1776.¹¹ Equally, historian Stanley Broadbridge estimated that, in the late eighteenth century, a boatyard with a staff of 86 would cost around £50 per year to run. What is interesting about Broadbridge's guess is that he presumed loading and unloading would be free. This task was often fulfilled by the workhouse poor, who received no pay for their work – evidence that many workers on the canals were not lucky enough to be paid.

Canal companies often owned other amenities that people would use. For example, George Groon, in the later nineteenth century, earned £1 8s per week as a toll

agent at the Smethwick locks. However, he only ever received £1 7s 8d, as his rent was deducted by the company. Alfred Silvester was a toll clerk alongside Groon, and his pay was deducted by 1d (to £1 6s 11d) as a charge for coal.¹²

A gender pay gap was present on the canals. As an experienced machinist, William Bells (the grandfather) earned £1 10s per week, and his son Thomas earned £1 5s. However, when Mary (William's daughter) took over William's job, she only earned 15s weekly. Wage increases did push Mary's earnings to 18s after 1891, and 18s was also what Emily (William's granddaughter) earned when she began in 1903.¹³ However, pay differences within the same job remained.

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Young People and Apprentices

This photo of boatyard workers in 1920 shows a wide age variation in the workplace, which included children entering work much earlier than is now acceptable.

The concept of apprenticeships poses an issue for historians, as an historian searching exclusively for written sources may only find official apprenticeships. However, these were more often than not for wealthier people at this time in history, and only for males. A lot of on-the-job learning took place, which has been overlooked. 'Apprentice' was not always a word that was used at the time; however, young people were often unofficially trained in vocational tasks.

Captain Randal sailed with his crew of himself, two men, and a 'youth'. The 'youth' was learning on the job as well as securing an

income. The same was true of families who were raising their own children on boats. Unfortunately, we know about these children's involvement in their parents' work from newspaper

accounts of accidental drownings.¹⁴

Official apprenticeships did exist, however. In 1872 the BCN had 64 official apprentices on their books, usually aged between fourteen and eighteen. Most official apprenticeships lasted for less than four years, and apprentices often earned less than others of their age in regular work. In 1872, for example, Benjamin Althrod earned 12s per week at

the age of 15. At the same time, however, the BCN employed boys as young as ten who earned £1 3s.¹⁵ In the long run though, the return was greater for apprentices.



A group of staff at Worsley boatyard on the Birmingham Canal Navigations, 1920.

Dressed to Impress

Until the consumer revolution in the twentieth century, most clothing was solely practical. Therefore, any hint of elegance signified membership of an elite class. Clothing did not need to be practical for manual labour.

In the photograph, taken around 1894, workers were wearing the waistcoat and flat cap combination. These men are clearly mostly labourers. On the back row towards the left two men are visible wearing aprons, indicating that they may well have dealt with hot metal: the apron served as protective gear and was widely available. On the left at the front two people were dressed differently. The man's blazer suggests that he was the owner, as his clothing is not practical. Likewise, the boy's frills tell us that he is likely to be a son of the owner, not of a worker. Much as poor children would learn on the job in unofficial apprenticeships, children of the new middle class could learn to run the family business hands-on, from an early age. This lace collar would not have been considered feminine. At that time it was normal to dress boys and girls in a similar way and for children, lace indicated wealth and not femininity.



Staff members at the Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd. dock c.1894.

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Daily Life Afloat

Life aboard a working boat combined home and work in the same space. Boating was more than just a live-in job; it was also a livelihood and business. This was the case even when the boat itself was owned by a company, such as the Grand Junction Canal Company, owners of *The Stourport*. The captains of the vessels received their pay from the company, and it was their responsibility to hire, pay and feed a crew.¹⁶

Boat crews were always short on living space, since the minimum crew of a boat would be a man and a youth.¹⁷ Crew living quarters were confined to the back and since the design goal was to maximise cargo space, these areas were very small. Crews lived, slept and cooked there. Aboard Captain Randal's vessel his crew of four made this work using shifts. Whereas the boy wearing lace in the earlier picture shows how attitudes to femininity have changed, two men sharing a bed on sleep



Boatman, wife and family.

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rotations aboard show us how ideas of what is acceptable male behaviour have changed over time too.

Creature comforts were limited, but a curious type of tea was drunk by most boatmen. The limits of victualling (loading a boat with supplies) took their toll on the tea. The drink was seemingly always an odd flavour and weak, but was made palatable by sugar, although this was often damp. Apart from this tea, boat crews tended to drink only water. Whereas other local employers, such as Chance's Glassworks, were concerned about the alcohol intake of their employees, boaters tended not to drink beer or spirits.¹⁸ ●

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- ³ National Waterways Museum, BW145/2, (Birmingham and Fazeley Loading Tickets), 1790.
- ⁴ National Waterways Museum, BW145/2, (Birmingham and Fazeley Loading Tickets), 1790.
- ⁵ National Waterways Museum, BW165/7/1/14, BW165/7/1/15, BW278/81, BW279/81, BW280/81, BW281/81, BW285/81, BW286/81, (Birmingham and Fazeley Loading Tickets), 1790.
- ⁶ National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.116.
- ⁷ National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.120.
- ⁸ National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.120.
- ⁹ Hollingshead, pp.9, 21-2, 28.
- ¹⁰ National Waterways Museum BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.126.
- ¹¹ Library of Birmingham, CAN/15, Dated 1776.
- ¹² National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.116.
- ¹³ National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), p.126.
- ¹⁴ Hollingshead, pp.10, 31.
- ¹⁵ National Waterways Museum, BW78/59/382, (BCN Staff Book), pp.10-11, 116.
- ¹⁶ Hollingshead, p. 16.
- ¹⁷ Library of Birmingham, CAN/15, 1776.
- ¹⁸ Martineau, H., 'Birmingham Glass Works,' *Household Words*, Vol.5 (Mar, 1852), pp.32-38, p.36; Hollingshead, pp. 22, 24.



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