

**W**hen the canal reached Market Harborough on 13th October 1809, it changed the town forever.

Being connected to the rest of the country for the first time by a reliable transport system meant that goods, particularly bulk cargoes, could come and go with ease, facilitating trade and boosting the economy (In my previous article 'The Canal Comes to Market Harborough' I detailed some of the businesses that sprang up around the new terminal basin, and along the line of the canal). In the following year, 1810, a new canal, the Grand Union (now Old Union) was started from Foxton to complete a north/south link, and when opened in 1814, Foxton junction became a hub. There were lock-keepers' cottages top and bottom of the flight of locks with stabling, a toll-keeper's house and office, carpenters' and blacksmith's workshops, and, after the take-over of the whole Leicester Line by the Grand Junction Canal Company in 1894, engineers and directors' offices as they oversaw the construction of the world-famous Inclined Plane.

Foxton village had a wharf and forge, run by many generations of the Saddington family; and a horse-and-cart weighbridge survives in the road entrance. 'The Shoulder of Mutton' rented out the paddock in front of the pub for overnight grazing for boat horses, and the

Black Horse was rebuilt in 1900 to cope with the anticipated increase in canal trade from the Inclined Plane. (The modern pub sign depicts a boat horse in full harness).

## 200 YEARS OF THE HARBOROUGH CANAL

By Mary Matts



THE GLUE FACTORY NEAR GALLOWS HILL BRIDGE ON THE LEICESTER ROAD. THE OLD PUB THEN CALLED 'THE NEW BOWDEN INN' IS THE 3 STOREY BUILDING JUST IN FRONT OF THE CHIMNEY.

Where the turnpike (old A6) crossed the waterway at Gallow Hill a brickworks was established by Daniel Hamshaw, proprietor of 'The Bowden Inn' at the base of the hill (now opposite Macdonald's roundabout). Remains of the kilns, which were fed from above directly from the boats are still extant. Soon afterwards another building, which may have originally been a wharfinger's house was opened as a pub, variously called the 'New Inn', 'Union Inn', or 'New Bowden Inn.' The site later proved ideal for the re-location of Robert Hubbard's tallow works, to counter complaints concerning smells from his premises in Mill Hill in the town. Bones and carcasses were brought in by boat (and later by rail from East Langton Station). The old pub, Victorian manager's house and other buildings have survived many changes of ownership, from the Grand Junction Bone Mills, to the more recent Croda Colloids, and currently J.G. Pears, but the works still perform essentially the same purpose - the only example of industry on this stretch, both then and now. Those walking the towpath might notice some pipework going into the canal; this was for abstraction of water to use in the processes, after which it was returned, warmed, much to the delight of fishermen, as, combined with an ample supply of maggots, the fish got very large. Weekend camping parties were common.

Between Gallow Hill and Great Bowden, the canal chopped through some ancient ridge and furrow fields, and until recent years a serrated edge was conspicuous on the off-side bank. Even after modern ploughing, different colour strips can be seen in the earth. Aerial shots feature in archaeological publications, showing the pattern continuing on the other side down to the bypass.

The road crossing near Great Bowden was another obvious setting for development, and the Britannia Inn was on one side and a wharf and cottages on the other, run by the Gilbert family, who had other canal interests locally. Later the pub was absorbed into Great Bowden Hall, whose imposing stable block loomed over the towpath. At the second turnpike crossing, Tom Foster's boatyard became a feature in the early 20th century. On the site of another brickyard, it was an early example of leisure use. Although the canal had been built solely as a working utility, when trade dwindled after the coming of the railways in the 1840s, and more dramatically after the rise of road transport, possibilities for leisure use were explored.



A VIEW OF THE GLUE FACTORY FROM THE CANAL TOWPATH TO THE EAST OF GALLOWS BRIDGE



A VIEW OF THE RIDGE AND FURROW FIELDS THROUGH WHICH THE CANAL WAS CUT, BETWEEN BRIDGES 9 AND 10.



TOM FOSTER'S BOATYARD IN 1909 WHERE LEISURE BOATS WERE AVAILABLE FOR HIRE.

Tom Foster operated rowing boats and skiffs which could be hired out, and proved very popular. Nowadays we take it for granted that we can jump in our cars and go wherever we want; before the 1950s car ownership was restricted to the well off, and ordinary people could only go as far as they could walk or get public transport, so places like this were perfect for an outing. Several local people have told me they did their courting in Foster's boats! (Percy Preston had a similar operation at Foxton). A clubhouse, tea room, croquet lawns etc. turned the site into a mini pleasure park. Its last incarnation was as a transport café (Uncle Tom's Cabin) before becoming a garage, behind the site of which is currently the Greenacres Travellers' Park.

Near the top of Logan Street, the railway which was supposedly the canal's great enemy, took advantage of the water supply; a system of pipes routed under the town streets led to the station to supply the steam locos. The control valves and weed filters are still there, beneath concrete slabs in the towpath. Water for agriculture and industry was a large revenue source for the canal companies from the start, and remains so today (for instance 5 million gallons of water a day are pumped under the London towpaths to cool electricity cables.)



DRAINS CONTAINING PIPES THAT RAN DOWN LOGAN STREET AND FED THE RAILWAY ENGINES ON THE HARBOROUGH RUGBY LINE



THE DRAINED HARBOROUGH BASIN IN THE 1970S SHOWING TRENERYS WHARF NOW REPLACED BY NEW BUILDINGS.

This was also the home of Woodford's Woodyard; in contrast to the larger Hoptons (later Trenerys) in the Basin, who traded in timber for construction, a rather ramshackle premises and family business specialising in the likes of firewood, fencing and pea-sticks. They also rented the towpath as far as Bowden for grazing their horses and a few cows, sheep and goats. There were gates at intervals to contain them, and as a boy Roly Woodford would have to go and round them up, using an old 10-bob 'market' bike with no tyres.

In the basin Pugh's Dairy and stabling were situated in Union Row, between Wharf Cottage and the Union Inn, and in the 1930s the large warehouse was Austin Hill's Felt Hat Factory, but the principle premises remained the timber yard. This cargo was ideally suited to

water transport: when a ship docked at Tilbury or Boston, 15 or 20 pairs of narrow boats each loaded with 16 standards (about 40 tons) could be expected at Market Harborough. It is clear why the locals welcomed this opportunity for casual work, unloading and stacking the "deals, battens, scantlings, smallboards, mahogany, teak..." and sometimes coffin boards.

By the mid 20th century commercial traffic on the Leicester Line had virtually ceased. With little industry of its own, competition from rail and road, and demand for midlands coal much diminished as most processes (and households) went over to gas or electricity, the canal gradually fell into a state of semi-dereliction. Reed and water-lilies covered the surface, and the bottom got much too near the top.

Canals were considered out-moded remnants of a past age, to be dismissed, and all too often used as rubbish dumps. What saved them was the arrival of the 'leisure age'. After World War II was the first time in history that the ordinary people had a bit of leisure time and a bit of spare money. They were looking for things to do, and old working boats were lying around unused, and could be purchased very cheaply. A few people did this, and – slowly – the potential for our national network of waterways began to be appreciated. The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) was formed in 1946, under the auspices of LTC (Tom) Rolt, whose account of travels in 'Cressy', his converted working boat ('Narrow Boat') is credited with having kick-started the 'Second Canal Age'.

The IWA decided to hold a campaigning rally of boats to bring to the public's attention the possibilities of waterways for both pleasure, and as transport arteries. Market Harborough was chosen as being off the still commercially active main line of the Grand Union, and in the centre of England. Boats of every type converged from all over the country; 20 to 30 had been expected: 120 arrived. The week-long Festival included film shows, a theatre production written by and performed in by Peter Scott (a key organiser), photographic competitions, fancy dress, a Festival Queen, cricket match, trophies, and fireworks. The basin was packed with craft and an estimated 50,000 people attended. The event was pivotal in the on-going history of canals.

In the 1950s the passenger trip boat 'Linda' started operating from Market Harborough, and later moved to Foxton. By 1958 a new bridge for the trunk road was needed to replace the old hump-back at Uncle Toms. The Ministry of Transport wanted the easiest and cheapest option



'LINDA' THE FIRST COMMERCIAL 'TRIP BOAT' TO OPERATE ON THE HARBOROUGH ARM IN 1958.

– a lowered crossing that would effectively cut the moribund canal off at that point. Fortunately, Gerald Barlow, MH Urban District Council Surveyor (and a boat owner) argued strongly that navigable headroom should be retained, and so the town got a reprieve. However, the modern bridge is the narrowest, lowest (and ugliest?) on the section.



THE OVERGROWN CANAL BEFORE IT WAS RENOVATED AFTER THE 2ND WORLD WAR.



THE 'OLD UNCLE TOM'S BRIDGE (NO 12) SPANNING THE OLD A6 ROAD.



THE 'NEW' UNCLE TOM'S BRIDGE SPANNING THE A508 FORMERLY THE A6. THE 'UGLIEST' ON THE HARBOROUGH ARM.

1964 saw the arrival of Anglo-Welsh Narrow Boats, managed by Giles Baker, in one of the redundant warehouses. Old wooden working boats were cut down and converted for holiday hire, and soon the demand was such that sister company Harborough Marine started building new craft, first in wood, and later in steel. By the early 70s hire fleets were burgeoning all over the country, and at the peak a new hull was completed in the workshops every 10 days, and a finished craft in 5 weeks. Over 100 people were employed. Two other town firms, Springer Engineering in Mill Hill and Fernie Steel in Fernie Road, were also building large numbers of boats for this expanding market.

In the 1960s 'Vagabond' replaced 'Linda' plying between Foxton and Harborough, Tony Matts started Foxton Boat Services, using ex-commercial craft for 'canal camping', and C.N. Hadfield, Leicestershire County Planning Officer published 'The Quiet Way Through Leicestershire' a seminal work that detailed the canal and its possibilities.

The 1968 Transport Act designated the navigations into three categories: Freightways, Cruiseways and Remainder Waterways, which were to be filled in or just left as drainage ditches. It was strongly rumoured that the Leicester Line would be remaindered, but, due in no small part to the business interests and campaigning by the newly formed Old Union Canals Society, became a Cruiseway, otherwise I would not be writing this article, and you would not be reading it.

Apart from the drought year of 1976 when it was forced to shut, the canal rapidly came back to life again, with improved dredging and maintenance, and a steady flow of boats. The old de Trafford Estate whose charming wooden boathouse use to sit in the corner, became The Woodlands a prestige housing development, with lawns sweeping down to much-coveted private moorings. After many years lying empty and threatened with demolition, Great Bowden Hall and stables were converted to residential use.



MRS ANNE FANE, DAUGHTER OF LORD BEAULIEU, AFTER MARRYING CANAL ENTHUSIAST AND EX NAVAL OFFICER JOHN CROSSLEY SPEND THEIR HONEYMOON ON THE CANAL.

By the 1990s Trenerys had closed, and other premises were vacant. British Waterways commenced a major improvement programme that included almost doubling the water space, encouraging new businesses and constructing waterside apartments. No longer associated with dead dogs and shopping trolleys, a canal was now desirable on your doorstep. Another hugely successful Waterways Festival in 1996 marked the 50th anniversary of the first, with a repeat in 2000 for the Millennium, when the sundial sculpture was installed to commemorate the timber traffic.

The 21st century has witnessed considerable expansion of the Foxton site to cater for the huge numbers of visitors, and prepare for the anticipated restoration of the working Inclined Plane. In the town basin there are new enterprises in all the old buildings and the Canaltime hire fleet attracts year-round customers from all over the globe. So the canal that opened up our little market town to world trade is still performing that same function and will, hopefully, continue to do so for the next 200 years.



THE INLAND WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION 50TH ANNIVERSARY RALLY HELD AT HARBOROUGH BASIN ON 3RD AUGUST, 1996.



THE RE-DEVELOPED HARBOROUGH BASIN TODAY WITH THE NOW WELL KNOWN SCULPTURE AFFECTIONATELY KNOWN AS 'FRANK THE PLANK' WHICH COMMEMORATES THE ONCE INDUSTRIAL QUARTER. IT IS STILL A BUSY AREA BUT FOR MAINLY LEISURE REASONS.

**Acknowledgements**

Research by members of the Old Union Canals Society, and personal memories of persons too numerous to mention.