

'Ow Things Was

Chapter Nine Building Boats by the Mile

More reminiscences from Blossom:

I have heard it said that at the height of boat building on the BCN that boat yards like Joe Worsley and Ken Keay built wooden boats by the mile and just cut them off to the required length!

Unfortunately for me, the building of commercial craft had all but finished and as yet the building of custom-built boats for leisure purposes had not yet started to any great degree. As a result I did not get much chance to observe the generations of boat building skills that had built up around the many Black Country boat yards. Apart from a couple of visits to Ken Keay's dock at Birchills, Walsall, and later on visits to Walton's boat yard at Deepfields, Coseley, there were no other BCN yards building working boats. At Ken Keay's yard work mainly consisted of repair work to existing craft, while at Walton's yard father and son boat builders had set up a business building wooden 'cruiser' style narrow boats built to Joey boat traditional building techniques using oak sides and elm bottoms.

My only direct contact with traditional boat building/repairing came about in 1967, when I had the pleasure of assisting in the replacement of the elm bottoms and kelson on a 70 foot motor boat on the dry-dock at Norbury. It all started with myself and two of my school chums Phil Ritchie, better known as 'Ritchy' and Harold James Smith, known to us all as either 'H.J.' or 'Miffy.' However not in front of his mother who we loved winding up by calling him Jim to which his mother would respond "His name is James." She did tend to be a bit posh, which resulted in Miffy bearing the brunt of much ridicule made even worse by the fact that his parents owned a 25 foot fibreglass 'nobby boat' kept at Ashwood Marina on the Staffs and Worcester, and he had a canvas canoe and a small fibreglass dingy and outboard engine. Quite often his mother would say to James "why don't you and your pals come out with us for a cruise on the boat". This would usually be followed by



muffled sniggering from Ritchy and I, then as soon as his mom had her back to us the taunts would start. How he ever put up with us I don't know but put up with us he did and our friendship lasted for many years until such things as work, marriage, house mortgage, babies etc, etc finally saw the three of us going our own ways.

Bottoms Up and off to Norbury

Anyway as I said, it all started with the three of us being asked if we would like to go on the boat to Norbury and help replace the entire bottoms and kelson during our school holidays. I am sure there is no need for me to tell you the response! And so it was that most of the evenings in May, June and July were spent cross-legged in the hold of the boat getting the sides ready for docking. This consisted of spending hour upon hour using a chipping hammer to remove thirty odd years of rust and paint and corrosion, followed by a few more hours of wire brushing and finally two or three coats of red lead paint. (If it's red lead paint, how come it's bright orange! something that's always puzzled me) And so it was, with clothing packed along with all other really important items like soap!, toothbrush!, pyjamas! Now come on mom real boatmen surely didn't wear striped pyjamas? We were stowed and ready for off.

We left Tipton and headed off towards Coseley where we were going to pick up the timber for the bottoms from Walton's boat yard. At the canal side at Deepfields, Coseley there was a father and son boat building company who used the side slip at Alfred Matty and Sons yard. Geoff and XXXXX Walton were now building new cruiser style



narrow boats with elm bottoms and oak sides to the specification of the old wooden Joey boats that they used to build. They were so solidly built that even today (2007) there are still examples around the system that were built in the 1960's. The timber we were collecting to undertake the work consisted of pieces of elm seven foot long, three foot wide and three inches thick for the bottoms and fifteen foot lengths of oak twelve inches wide by six inches thick for the kelson. These were manhandled aboard up planks and stacked neatly in piles with spacers between them.

The next couple of hours boating saw us travelling the five or six miles to the top of the Twenty One locks. The last couple of miles being through the heart of Wolverhampton's industrial centre where the canal was flanked on both sides by foundry and forge. The very air was tainted with the smell of heavy engineering. This type of surrounding was, and still is, one of the reasons that I fell in love with the BCN. Passing open doorways or glassless windows where through the darkness, molten metal could be seen being poured or white hot billets of steel being pounded into shape. Where out of the darkness a person, who seemed to take his very appearance and colour from his surroundings would appear as the boat passed to herald a wave, nod or smile or perhaps a "How do" only to once again disappear into the gloom when once the boat had passed, a bit like the cuckoo in a cuckoo clock! This part of the trip being nothing new as I had travelled to Wolverhampton and down the '21' on several previous occasions but up until today had always either gone up or down the Staffs and Worcs canal. I had, along with my cousin from Wolverhampton, visited Autherley Junction many times on our bikes spending hours chatting to, or should I say listening to Sam Lomas as he talked about the canal in the 'old days' when towpaths were mowed, bridges painted white and boats were on the move. Today was no exception, for as we entered the six-inch stop lock, out came Sammy with his cheery greeting and a quick chat as the waters levelled. Soon we were off onto new territory, to me anyway, the high embankments and narrow cuttings of the Shropshire Union. The

Friday evening saw us tying up at Brewood where a gradual slope led from the towpath up to three brick steps to the road bridge and a pub on the opposite side called 'The Bridge' I think, anyway it was in here that we spent the night until a few pints later and closing time, saw us making our way back in total darkness. I can remember taking the first three steps, but it was the fourth step that wasn't there that did the damage for at this I went head over heels down the slope and straight into the canal, much to everyone's amusement and only to end up crawling into my sleeping bag under the cratch still half dressed and soaking wet! And that's how I woke up very early the next morning very cold and still very wet.

Later that day saw us arriving at Norbury junction and after a quick word over at the boat yard, we were soon making the ninety degree turn into the arm leading down to the dry-dock. The arm, in fact, was the start of the Shrewsbury and Newport Tub Boat Canal and the dry-dock had been built on the site of the first lock chamber. Below the dock was a short pound still in water then the rest of the canal had been severed by a fairly new cutting across the channel at right angles, in the bottom of which was a ditch which drained off water from farmers fields, which at the time were full of potatoes. (And that's another story) At this time, 37 years ago, it was still possible to follow the muddy canal bed and channel for some miles and the towpath, although overgrown with grass and weeds, the bridges and other engineering features were all in very good condition. I've never been back and have often wondered what, if anything, still survives of this canal apart from the isolated bridge in a farmers field alongside the A5/Shrewsbury bypass. As we made the 90 degree turn into the Shrewsbury and Newport tub boat canal Cliff jumped off under the bridge 'ole to announce our arrival "teck 'er steady down to the dock at the end Bloss"

By the time the boat was in the dock Cliff and the fellow from the boat yard had walked down to oversee the docking process. Stop planks were dropped into the stop plank grooves, left over from when it was a lock, and with the boat being held out in the middle of the dock with a rope on each corner, the water.....