



Archive Spot

MIXED CARGO

In the Club Newsletter of May 1969 David Blagrove wrote:

"Be down for Thursday" said Leslie Morton over the telephone, "I've got some work for you". Bill Fisher and myself regarded the Tuesday river from our office (a box containing a telephone at the bottom of a telephone pole) and steeled ourselves for action. It was the end of the 1962 season on the Kennet and we had been looking for winter work for our boat **Enterprise**. We had a trip, the last of the season, booked out for 2.15 p.m. just then it was noon and whole panoramas of tasks opened out before us. Our eyes met and agreed. Leslie Morton was in a hurry, I said "We'll be there".

I remember little of the next 24 hours. 52 passengers had to be carried, fed and disembarked. 52 seats removed and stacked in an adjoining yard, 11 tons of ballast had to be stacked similarly, a spare boat moved into position under a bridge for a council contract, stores and gear laid in and accounts made up. We had the help of two stalwarts, a friend of Bill's and Big Pete, whose massive frame always seemed to loom up when either beer or work was going in quantity.

We dropped down river from Kennetside before dawn, saw sunrise below Sonning and, with a fair stream and an almost empty river, came into the Brent on the evening tide. We followed a long train of barges into the Grand Union and had the singular experience of removing a lighterman from the water. In those days there was an iron bridge above Thames Lock and the steerer of the last lighter, who was standing atop a large stack of timber steering with a loodel, chose to leap onto the bridge as the barge went under, run across it and jump back onto the stack. The last part of the performance went awry, and he descended in a veritable avalanche of planks into the cut, from whence we recovered him.

Next day Leslie Morton gave us our orders, clear the last of some planed timber from a lighter, some 12 tons, and take it to Tyseley Wharf, Birmingham. Being keen and full of beans we got the load on by early afternoon so repaired to the office to announce our departure and get our toll tickets. Leslie Morton and Stan, his clerk, were in deep discussion as we entered, quite unwary in our innocence.

Ah just the lads!" the Morton features were studied nonchalance. Stan said "Only 12 tons on a Josher, you must have some dry side". I was about to say that sparrows could drink off our gunwales, when L.M. said "I'm sure we could make a bargain".

It appeared that Willow Wren had a shed full of the giblets of a bygone Bolinder, which they wanted to send to their yard at Braunston. We, it seemed would make excellent scrap carriers on top of our timber. The deal was made. We backed out of the basin and went stern first into the lock, thus eliciting acid comments from Harry Barlow the lockkeeper, and tied up to Willow Wren's own wharf. Soon Stan and Jumbo, the tractor driver, began passing out pieces of Bolinder from the shed, and we stowed. There was a decrepit tractor in the shed and Stan said "That ought to go too". Up the iron ladder to the office he went and rang British Waterways. They'll load it with their crane at Brent Meadow" he said when he returned. "Oh! we'll try and drive it there" he said in reply to my unspoken question. Unfortunately the tractor had a vertical exhaust which had been positioned with devilish cunning beneath a hole in the roof, so that when Stan cranked the starting handle we were greeted by a gurgling noise from the pistons. It began to look as if we might receive a shower bath of diesel, soot and water, but after much effort Stan agreed to give it best. "It's as well really", said Stan "It's not taxed and insured". At this juncture L.M. came in to wish us a speedy trip, then zoomed home in his car. I regret to report that unkind things were said after his departure.

Eventually the problem was solved, Jumbo, myself, Bill's pal (who was still, incredibly, with us), and Alec Purcell, an interested boatman/spectator, pushed the thing up to Brentford



High Street with Bill sitting like a lord at the wheel.

Meanwhile Stan kept a lookout for any stray policemen. Once delivered at Brent Meadow Depot we took the boat back through the lock, hearing more from Harry Barlow en route, to the wharf where the crane stood. On the other side of the basin was a somewhat battered "Ricky" butty, **Southam**. We had noted and remarked on her state. We were not pleased when Stan appeared again and said that as we were going to Brum we might as well tow **Southam** to Lapworth for, I think, Peter Froud.

So, with timber, scrap, tractor and "Ricky" boat we set off at 4.55 p.m. for the Midlands.



Weaver Collection No: 1959

Hanwell Flight which
was locked at 6.00pm

Alas we reckoned without the Waterways lockkeepers. At 6 p.m. we were smartly stopped by Hanwell Locks being locked up. Here Bill's friend left us.

Next night we went to Cowroast, Saturday to Stoke Bruerne and Sunday afternoon we arrived at Braunston. There had been a stoppage at Braunston which ended on the Saturday morning, consequently Saturday evening we met twenty one loaded pairs between Linford and Cosgrove, an experience which, we could not know at the time would never be repeated.



Stoke Bruerne Top Lock

Weaver Collection No: 3638



On Monday morning we wound the tractor off at the Willow Wren yard with their crane. Unlike its modern cousin at Brentford it was hand operated and mounted on railway wheels, we had to scotch its wheels to prevent its trundling over our boat into the cut. Then there was a delay while someone went to fetch the windlasses to work it.

Monday evening saw us at the bottom of Hatton. As we came by Leamington Gas Works we passed Clayton's tar boats loading, so we knew we would be chased up Hatton next morning. All Hatton was against us so at unlocking time next morning I was waiting to draw off the bottom lock. As Bill brought the pair through the bottom gates we heard George Page's Bolinder ponking the tar round the bend below. Irate bellows and a massive column of diesel smoke greeted Bill as he rose in the lock, he just cleared the top gates as George came pounding up the lock steps. We only had a light load, so we cleared the top about six locks ahead of him, and fled towards Lapworth. At the side bridge leading into the Stratford Canal I threw off the cross straps and Bill steered the butty up the arm then bow hauled it up to the first lock. Meanwhile I manoeuvred the motor ready for a quick get away in the event of George's appearance.

Bill climbed up the steps to the Canal Office, David Hutchings was within. Bill began "I've just brought" he got no further. David Hutchings beamed. "Volunteer? good! Shovels in the shed outside, you can put your things in the mess hut" Bill shouted " a boat for you" tore out of the office and down the steps like one possessed. White faced he pelted down the towpath and leapt onto the motor. He said later that another two minutes and he would have been in a Land Rover en route for Preston Bagot or some similar salt-mine.

In the late afternoon we arrived at Tyseley to the amazement of two other Willow Wren captains who were not expecting us until Thursday. While this was going on somebody said "Pagey's a-comin'" and the beat of a Bolinder sounded under the Acock's Green bridge. Tyseley has a long water front and loaded boats travel slowly, so George had plenty of time to give his considered opinion of our ancestry and other matters in a loud voice to the great delight of all the company. His parting words were "Another time I'll run up between you and jam you!" to which Bill replied that likely the fore end of his boat would drop off if he did - many of Claytons boats were wooden and ancient and his was no exception - George shook his fist and clattered off. It was not until six years later that I succeeded in persuading him that Hatton had not been empty and we had not stolen his road. I can truthfully report that now all is forgiven.

We emptied next morning and were ready for orders by midday, only eight days after Leslie Morton's original telephone call. We had come over 180 miles and worked 172 locks, carried out five contracts and thought the sun shone out of our ears.

A week later after an adventurous journey round the "Bottom Road" to the coalfields, which is another story altogether, we met Leslie Morton in the "Admiral Nelson" at Braunston. "I thought you'd got lost" he said.



Weaver Collection No: 1248

Stockton Locks