



Sweep's Paradise

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By District Inspector
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Before the introduction of mechanically driven canal craft, all horse drawn boats had to be towed through Blisworth and Braunston tunnels on the Northampton Section of the Grand Union Canal. In the early days craft were legged or shafted through the tunnels. But in about 1869 an experimental towage system was tried in



both tunnels. A steam engine drove an endless wire rope running the full length of the tunnel on pulleys - to which the craft attached themselves. This arrangement was short lived, no doubt because of the maintenance difficulties in wet conditions, and in 1871 the first of the steam driven tugs was introduced. This continued in use until 1934, when arrangements were made for the few remaining horse drawn craft to be towed through by power driven carrying craft.

Each tug was 49 foot long, 7ft beam and 4ft 5 ins deep. The boiler and engine were amidships with a cabin at either end, and the fore and after lines and side elevation were similar to the normal canal carrying craft.

It was not long before the problem of soot arose and a special "flue brush" was constructed to sweep the tunnels at regular intervals. Three wire brushes, shaped to the profile of the tunnel and attached to long arms hinged centrally on a trestle line were erected on a dredging hopper boat. The brushes were kept in contact with the tunnel arch by men pressing down on the remote end of the brush arms, and the brushes were so placed on the hopper boat that the soot dropped into the hopper well.

The whole outfit was towed through the tunnel by a tug, and the first time it was operated ten tons of soot were removed. One of these brushes has been preserved by British Transport's Curator of Historical Relics.

When oil engined craft took over, the soot trouble re-asserted itself. These craft were fitted with vertical exhaust pipes through the cabin top, and the exhaust gases hitting the tunnel roof used to bring down the soot over the cabin. The exhaust also had a detrimental effect on the brickwork, there being a tendency for the mortar to come away from the joints.

Because of the pride the boatmen took in their craft, something had to be worked out to overcome the trouble. A semi circular hoop of brass was fitted over the outlet of the exhaust. This highly successful improvement diverted the gases sideways, and these hoops or "cutters" as they are known are still fitted to all motor craft today.

An amusing side light on tunnel tug operation is contained in a letter from one of the tug drivers, dated 8 May 1912:

Sir,

You have asked me two or three times if I reckoned how many times I had been through the tunnel. I started on one tug 24 years ago today, Thursday. I have reckoned it up as near as I can Sir - I have counted six extra days for leap years and I make it up to 69,936 times.

Your Obedient Servant, W J Clarke

Mr Hadlow had carefully preserved this interesting letter, and we thank him for letting us publish it in this magazine.