

GLOSSARY

An explanation of some commonly-used waterways terms

Accommodation bridge

A bridge, usually of simple construction but sometimes ornate, that permits access across land through which a canal was cut.

Aegre

see Bore.

'Ampton boat

see Wharfe boat.

Balance beam

The projecting beam that balances the weight of a gate of a lock gate and by which the gate is opened and closed.

Barge

An oft-misused generic term which encompasses a range of canal and river vessels with a beam roughly twice that of a narrowboat.

BCN

Generally accepted abbreviation denoting the Birmingham Canal Navigations, an extensive network of narrow canals spreading through the Birmingham and Black Country and forming the heart of the national canal network.

Blue brick

Known in the Black Country as *toccy bricks* these were made from clay found in the Staffordshire area and baked in the hottest part of the oven to produce a brick of great strength that was impervious to water and thus ideally suited to canal applications.

Blue top

Type of vessel from the final days of commercial bulk carrying in the 1950s and 1960s in which the traditional cloths covering a narrowboat hold were replaced by hard blue covers which were removable in sections (see also *Cloths*). Blue tops were of bluff construction and did not prove universally popular with boatmen.

Bollard

Point at which a boat may be tied, usually made of wood, metal or concrete and often scarred by the abrasive action of numerous ropes over a long period.

Bore

A natural phenomenon in which a combination of lunar and tidal effects on a river result in a wave effect travelling upstream. On the River Trent it is known as an *aegre* or *aegir*. The most famous bore in the UK is that of the Severn which occurs to various intensities several times throughout the year. Other rivers such as the Parrett have bores but to a lesser degree. The phenomenon is not restricted to these shores and in Brazil, for example, it is known as *pororoca*.

Bowhaul

Pulling a boat by means of a rope attached to the bow. Usually accomplished by one or two people when working an unpowered vessel through narrow locks. On river navigations such as the Severn, with heavier boats and a current to work against, it was undertaken by teams of bowhaulers.

Breast post

see Mitre post.

Bridge Hole

Area beneath bridge through which a boat passes.

Butty

A term usually given to an unpowered narrowboat operating in tandem with a powered narrowboat to form a 'working pair'. A fully laden unpowered narrowboat on a Midlands canal could typically carry something in the order of 30 tons. The motor would carry around 5 tons less due to space taken by the engine thus giving a total payload of around 55 tons.

Canal Mania

A period of around 75 years prompted by the opening of the Bridgewater Canal in 1761 which saw an explosion in the construction of canals across the country. As railways superseded waterways the impetus for the latter slowed and the last major new canal to be opened was the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal (now part of the Shropshire Union) of 1835.

Chalico

A mixture of tar, cow hair and horse dung used to infill the gaps between planks on the hull of a wooden narrowboat.

Cill

The bar of masonry at the bottom of a lock against which the gates close.

Cloths

Used to cover cargo in the hold of a narrowboat. Putting cloths over is referred to as 'clothing-up.' (see also *Blue top*)

Composite

Narrowboats were originally of wooden construction but as wood became more scarce metal became the norm, first cast iron later steel. Composite construction was a compromise between the two methods in which the sides of the hull were made of metal and the bottom wood.

Contour canal

A method of construction usually associated with the engineer James Brindley in which the canal followed the contours of the landscape, thus reducing the need for locks and other artefacts. Later engineers such as Thomas Telford favoured a more direct line that consequently introduced the need for tunnels, aqueducts and the like in order to traverse changes in levels of terrain.

Cratch

Plank supports at the fore-end of a narrow boat. The *deck cratch* is at the point where the fore-deck terminates and the cargo space begins; the *false cratch* is situated a short distance rearwards of the deck cratch.

Cut

Vernacular term for a canal, or artificially cut channel.

Day boat

Originally describing a boat which was used only during the day on short trips around the BCN, and which therefore did not have a family living permanently on board. Many were double-ended, perhaps with a small cabin at one end, and the rudder could be hung at either end to save turning around in a confined space. Day boats were common around the BCN where much trade was confined to the locality and they were known colloquially as *Joey boats*. With the advent of powered tugs they were lashed together in a line with the last boat having a rudder. Nowadays the term Day boat is more used to describe a small narrowboat available for short-term hire.

Fender

A buffer often made of rope and used to protect areas of the boat from damage or collision in locks, at wharves or when mooring.

Flash lock

An early type of lock found on river navigations which was little more than a set of removable paddles in a weir to assist navigability. When a sufficient head of water had built behind the weir the paddles were released; a boat upstream would be flushed down and a boat coming upstream could be bowhailed through against the current. (see also *Bowhaul*; *Pound lock*)

Flight

A series of pound locks in close succession, for example the 'Wolverhampton 21' flight. (see also *Staircase*)

Fresh, to run

Usually applied to river navigations to describe a rise in level following heavy rain.

Gauging

A means of ascertaining the weight of cargo on a boat by the depth of the hull in the water, for the purpose of calculating tolls. Gauging is first carried out in a dock where the hull is marked at various stages ranging from empty to full. An indication of the weight being carried is thus given by the appropriate mark at water level.

Gongoozler

A word believed to have originated from the Lake District but which now describes an indolent or inquisitive person who stands for long periods watching boats, especially at locks or other such vantage points.

Groove

Vertical indent in bank, usually at either side of narrows, that allows for the insertion of *stop planks* when the canal is to be *stanked*.

Heel Post

The vertical post of a lock gate nearest to its hanging and the axis upon which it turns. It is rounded at the back to fit into the hollow *quoin* in which it revolves during operation of the gate.

Inclined Plane

A device for transferring boats from differing levels without the use of locks, usually by means of caissons of water on wheels running along tracks. Once common around the waterways of the Midlands and southwest in particular, none now survive intact though there are plans to restore the one at Foxton on the Grand Union (Leicester Section). Compare this with the *vertical lift* that transfers boats bodily between different levels without the use of intermediate rails. The Anderton Lift is the last surviving example of a vertical lift from the great canal age; the Falkirk Wheel in Scotland is its modern counterpart.

Interchange

A point of meeting between canal and railhead allowing cargoes to be transferred from one to the other. Long after the demise of the national network the BCN continued to trade successfully and this was due in no small part to its high number of interchanges.

Joey boat

see Day boat.

Josher

Style of narrowboat with a distinctive double curvature of the bows. It was said to be a particular favourite of Joshua Clayton of Fellows, Morton & Clayton (Canal Carriers) from which it may have taken its name; alternately the term Josher is of Black Country origin meaning mate or close friend and may have described the breasting up of a motor boat with its *butty*.

Keb

Long pole with a rake attachment used for retrieving lost items.

Kit Crewbucket

Generic name of a spirit presence said to haunt various canal tunnels across the country and appearing in various forms depending upon the local folklore. The origin of the legend is unclear but the term may be a corruption of the Staffordshire 'buggart' or ghost.

Legging

Technique of lying over the side of a boat on *wings* and propelling the vessel through a narrow tunnel by walking along the sides of the tunnel wall.

Lengthsman

Waterways operative responsible for a certain section of canal.

Leptospirosis

See Weil's Disease

Longboat

A much-misused term erroneously applied to narrowboats, although confusingly in some parts of the Black Country the term is in common usage even amongst boaters.

Mitre post

The furthest part of a lock gate away from its hanging; pairs of gates are mitred to close tightly when shut.

Monkey Boat

A Black Country expression describing certain commercial narrowboats, the man credited with their design being Thomas Monk of Tipton.

Narrowboat

Generic term describing a vessel of typical maximum dimensions not exceeding approximately 70 feet x 7 feet. Presumably in an attempt to control construction costs many locks were built to a size mooted by James Brindley and it was these dimensions that spawned the narrowboat. Although other parts of the country adopted different, often larger dimensions the Midlands canals were something of a clearing house and narrow gauge became the standard. This set the maximum payload at around 30 tons, a vast increase over the days of pack-horse transport but still to ultimately prove short-sighted.

Narrows

Point at which a canal is deliberately reduced in width. This enabled tolls to be collected and could also facilitate the *stanking* of a section for drainage and repairs.

Navvie

Used to describe the huge gangs of itinerant labour that made the navigations; a corruption of 'navigator.'

Number One

A narrowboat operator who also owned his own boat; Number Ones were invariably fiercely proud and were held in high esteem by those who could only afford to work for a canal company.

Packet boat

Express passenger narrowboat pulled at great speed by teams of horses. Packet boats had priority over other traffic and it was not unusual for crews to cut the towing ropes of other vessels that impeded them.

Paddle

Watertight shutter that can be raised or lowered, usually by means of a *windlass*, to let water in or out of a lock or other water-controlling device. Lock paddles are either *gate* or *ground* depending on where they are mounted.

Piling

The use of steel, wooden or concrete shuttering to reinforce banking and walls.

Pound

The stretch of water between two locks.

Pound lock

Gated chambers separated by intermediate pounds of water capable of raising or lowering boats between differing water levels. The Exeter Ship Canal of 1566 was the first canal in Britain to use pound locks in place of the more primitive *flash locks* or navigation weirs. (see also *flash lock, narrowboat*)

Puddle

Type of clay used to line a canal bed to render it waterproof. In rural areas puddle would be firmed in position by farmers driving their cattle over it.

Quoin

see Heel post.

Ram's Head

Wooden rudder post of a narrowboat, traditionally bound with a Turk's Head knot and horse's tail.

Riser

see Staircase.

Roving Bridge

A bridge carrying the towpath from one side of the canal to the other, also known as a *snake* or *turnover*.

Scorchers

Bricks or cobbles laid in rutted fashion, especially around locks, to offer more grip for horses' hooves.

Sluice

See Paddle.

Snake bridge

See Roving bridge.

Staircase (riser)

A combination of locks in which the top gate(s) of the one lock form the bottom gate(s) of the next. Also known as *risers* the construction technique allows for a steep change of levels to be traversed in a shorter space but does introduce problems of water supply and speed of navigation. The only staircase on the BCN is the pair on the Gower Branch but other, larger staircases include the three at Grindley Brook (Llangollen Canal) and the five at Bingley (Leeds & Liverpool).

Stank

To shut off or close a section of canal usually by means of *stop planks* and *grooves*.

Stop lock

A *pound lock* having a fall of typically just a few inches and used as a means of controlling water. When a new canal company sought connection to an older, established canal the proprietors of the latter would often insist on a stop lock to prevent the newer usurper 'stealing' precious water supplies.

Stop planks

see Stank.

Summit level

The highest *pound* of water in a canal and thus the one to which the main supply of water for working the locks must be delivered. With few exceptions, all canals are summit canals; a rare exception is the Montgomery Canal which has a *sump* in the middle and its two highest points at either end.

Sump canal

see Summit level.

Toll

Fee payable for using a waterway, usually based on the weight of cargo being carried. Around the BCN tolls were collected in characteristic octagonal toll offices situated canalside or at convenient *narrows*. Most of these toll houses are now lost although examples survive such as at Birchills.

Toccy brick

see Blue brick.

Towpath

The path at the side of a canal, originally for the use of towing-horses but nowadays increasingly finding alternate uses as walkways and cycling routes.

Trow

Sailing vessel of the River Severn with a characteristic D-shaped transom and built to carrying various weights depending on the area of use and available water depth. Once common along the river and its reaches, only *Spry* survives.

Turnover bridge

see Roving bridge.

Vertical lift

see Inclined plane.

Weil's disease

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection carried in rat's urine that may contaminate slow-moving water such as canals. After direct contact with the urine or polluted environment the bacteria enter through skin abrasions or via eyes, nose or mouth. Often an influenza-like illness occurs which resolves in 2-3 weeks. A few cases develop jaundice, when the condition is known as Weil's Disease. (*for information only – this is not a medical text – if in doubt seek medical advice*)

Weir

Overflow for maintaining levels and running off excess water.

Wharfe boat

Also known as an *'Ampton* or *big boat* this was an oversized narrowboat, having a larger payload but too long to negotiate BCN locks, that was used solely only the Wolverhampton level. None are believed to survive intact.

Wind

To turn a vessel around to face the opposite direction. It is more properly pronounced *wi-nd*, not *w-eye-nd*, and is thought to originate from the days of unpowered boats when the manoeuvre was assisted by the vessel being blown by the wind.

Winding hole

Wider area of waterway in which a vessel can *wind*.

Wings

Wooden boards used for *legging*. A fully equipped narrowboat would carry two pairs, one short pair for use in narrow tunnels and another longer pair for broader tunnels.

Windlass

Key for operating paddles especially at locks.

Working pair

see Butty.

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