

Food on the Move

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The title of this piece 'Food on the Move' is not all-encompassing. On the contrary it focusses rather narrowly on the way of life of the canal boat families who used to carry freight on the inland waterways of Britain. A way of life which had, by the mid 20th century, become something of an anachronism, existing as it did in a world of fast new motorways and increasing consumerism. Its heyday, when the only competition was horse drawn wagons and later the developing railway system, was fairly short - probably no more than 70 years. Nevertheless the nomadic existence of the canal families whose destinations were determined by the cargoes they loaded into the holds of their boats continued until the end of the 1960s when it was finished off by the big winter freeze-up of 1968/69. Even so one or two contracts survived a while longer. In 1981, we, Tam and Di Murrell, unloaded the last regular freight to be carried by traditional canal narrow boats on the English canal system. This was 50 tons of crude lime pulp destined for the marmalade and lime juice producers L.Rose and Sons at their Hemel Hempstead wharf in Hertfordshire on the Grand Union Canal.

Except that we were not born to the boatman's way of life. Johnny-come-latelys we were; forever 'trainees off the bank' to the people who could trace their family connections to the waterways back through several generations, yet our slight involvement gave us an appreciation of their lives. These were the born and bred canal folk and proud of it. Marrying always within their own community, their children rarely attending school, this was a close knit society whose contact with the outside world went hardly further than the wharves where they loaded and unloaded their boats, the canalside shops where they bought their staples, and the pubs which provided the space and setting for their get-togethers. Uneducated and largely cut off from the rest of the world they spoke a type of 'patois' amongst themselves; many of the words they used were corruptions or mispronunciations of words they had only heard and could never read. This too served to isolate them from the mainstream.

Life on the boats could be very hard and involved the whole family working long hours, often in the pitch dark, fog and ice. Most 'gongoozlers' - those so named in boatman's parlance who stood and watched the boats go by - would only see them when the weather was fine and then the boatman's life seemed idyllic. Especially when that passing pair of boats was well looked after.

The cargo, loaded into a hold which took up almost the full 72 foot length of the boat, was neatly covered by a tented black tarpaulin. At the very stern nestled a small cabin, the permanent home of the boatman and his family. These cabins were so smart on the outside; the name of the carrying company painted in decorative style on the cabin sides; doors, water cans and dipper covered with colourful motifs of roses and castles; the brass hoops on the chimneys and the portholes burnished to a shimmering gold. The huge wooden rudder of the unpowered butty boat was ornamented with multicoloured geometric designs and the whole topped off with a pure white horse's tail or length of plaited cotton rope scrubbed to pristine brightness. It's no wonder that memories of the painted boats have taken time to fade.

And what of the interior of these tiny cabins? Envisage a space, a space hardly that of a small potting shed: some 7 feet wide, 10 feet long and rather less than 6 feet of standing room. To live in an area of that size is hard to imagine but perhaps, you might think, with a minimum of belongings one person could manage for a while. In fact this was home, where a whole family must wash and sleep and cook and eat and parents raise their children. The first time I ever saw the inside of one I was amazed not only at the compactness of the interior but the design which provided a fold out double bed, a cupboard with door which when latched down became a table, a side bed which provided seating for three, a box for storing coal which was also the step up out of the cabin. Tiny they were but with more storage space than one would have thought possible. But size was not the true wonder of the authentic boatman's home. What took the breath away was the richness and colour which assailed the eye as one stepped down into the cabin: such quantities of crocheted lace and shining brass; a table cupboard decorated with paintings of roses and castles; the festoons of ribbon plates adorning the scumbled cabin walls, whilst centre stage sat a gleaming cast-iron black leaded range, the pivot around which all boat life revolved.

In the early days movement of freight was undertaken with horse-drawn boat worked by a master and his mate. Wives and children normally lived in homes ashore. By the mid 19th century increasing competition for freight traffic from the railways meant a separate home and wages for a mate had become untenable. Families moved aboard and the labour of working the boats was shared between them. In the early 1900s life became a little easier with the development of the diesel engine, for then it was possible for the family to work the boats more efficiently as a pair. A powered motor boat could tow an unpowered second boat - the butty. To work a pair became the norm and large families benefitted from the luxury of two cabins - one at the stern of each craft. Nevertheless cargoes were expected to arrive on schedule and boats to be ready to load as soon as they had orders. This meant long hours for the boatman and his family, working every day of the week and as often as not going through the night as well.

Thousands of words have been written about narrow boats and canals yet it is rare to find any mention of how the people who worked the boats lived on a day to day basis. Much is known about inland navigation, the design of craft and the decorative canal art of roses and castles, but where boatmen and their wives obtained their food, what they ate and

how they cooked it are questions rarely asked. Mention of the prosaic, the humdrum, the daily domestic round, is hardly the stuff of learned discourse. Yet it is this knowledge which creates the connections between our own and other people's lives and time. Now it is almost too late to find out. Although a number of displaced canal folk are still to be found living ashore they are an aging and diminishing population. Many left the boats when they were quite young so have little or no recollection of their life afloat.

Whilst not expecting to stumble across a lost world of haute cuisine in any investigation of their cooking and eating habits, by all accounts boat people were known to live well. It was reported in 1877 that the owner of pair of horse drawn canal boats, a Captain Jonah, dined 'on a tempting knuckle of ham, a shapely piece of corned beef, fat and lean admirably blended, a crusty loaf of fresh baked bread, a dish of pickled onions and cucumber and a goodly jug of ale. In the morning there was an unlimited supply of milk fresh from the cow for the children, tea and bread for the skipper and his wife.....' A mention in passing by a manager working for the carrying company of Fellows, Morton and Clayton in the 1920s said, "They feed extraordinarily well" and another manager at about the same time who worked for the Shropshire Union Company said, "They buy substantial, if plain, joints of meat. Their principal food being beef, bacon, cheese and butter; and in most instances they purchase at regular places sufficient to last them for the entire journey. Boat people are noted for living well."

As reported in the 'Standard' newspaper in the 1920s the daily menu attributed by a London firm of canal carriers to their boatmen was:

4.30am - tea with meat sandwiches or a plate of meat.

7.00am - breakfast of bacon.

10.30am - a 'reaver' of bread, meat and bottled beer.

5.00pm - early tea with meat left from dinner.

7.00pm - tea with more cooked meat.

10.00pm - supper with more meat. (1)

The men and women on the canals were well aware that those on the land regarded them as little more than water gypsies. In an interview for a local radio station a boatman was asked where he felt he belonged: was there a street, a village or a town he thought of as home? His response was that his boat was where he belonged and that he was used to being treated with hostility and viewed as a stranger within a few yards of his home. Canal people had many tales of being refused even the most everyday things. One man recalls a butcher refusing to sell him half a pound of sausages on the grounds that he was only 'boat people'; another told how a doctor refused treatment to his sick baby because he was 'off the canal'. Not surprising then that faced with such hostility and suspicion they rarely strayed far from the canal bank. (2)

There were a number of canal side shops which catered specifically for the boat people. Not only did these shops sell general provisions but also stocked all the other needs of the boating population including 2 and 3 gallon watercans which held their small supply of drinking water, windlasses for working the locks, black lead for the range, beeswax for the cabin sides and bolts of cloth for the women to make clothes for themselves and their

children. Such shops were to be found beside a lock, at the top or bottom of a flight or close to a bridge where it was easy to stop. Here the women would have time to leave the boats to be worked through the locks by other members of the family while they quickly shopped for enough to last them to their destination.

Boatwoman Rose Whitlock explained, “ You just had to know how long food would last and plan accordingly” This was at a time when there was no such thing as refrigeration on the boats. Food was kept fresh by covering it in wet cloths and allowing the process of evaporation to keep it cool.

The basin at City Road in London where boats might spend a day or two was fondly remembered by boatwoman Violet Mould, who said, “There was a nice little shopping centre on the top of the tunnel and you’d got time to go shopping while they were emptying you and re-loading.” (3)

The shopkeepers who did know them treated them with great respect, having some knowledge of the harshness of their lives and impressed by their natural dignity and hardworking ways. In an interview for BBC Radio Stoke in 1985 the shop known as ‘Deeming’s’ on the Coventry Canal, long since closed even by then, was recalled by a one-time assistant who said, “ They were as honest a people as ever you could meet. Mr and Mrs Deeming held them in very high esteem. There would often come a knock at 3 in the morning - it would be someone off the boats wanting eight loaves of bread and a piece of uncured bacon.” (4)

Boat people I have talked to tell of the many ways that shop bought items were supplemented. These were, in any case, normally just the basic staples: salt, sugar, flour, suet, bread, cheese, bacon, tea and tinned milk. Much of the rest of their food was essentially bartered, poached, pilfered and foraged. Expertise in all these areas would have been naturally handed on from parents to children. The waterways upon which they travelled and the passing countryside were always keenly observed and the whereabouts of every potato field, nesting site and bramble bush carefully noted.

Brockhall Spinney on the Grand Union Canal is frequently mentioned as a place where pheasant and partridge could be poached. Here the birds roosted in trees which leaned so closely together across the canal they almost formed a tunnel through which the boats must pass. The headlamp on the fore-end of the motor could be tilted up to shine on the roosting birds. Mesmerized by the light it was apparently an easy matter to hook them down as the boat passed beneath them. Then they would be quickly dispatched and prepared for the pot. When the boats were moored, pheasants could be caught by securing a raisin to a fish hook on the end of some line. Having swallowed the raisin the hook became lodged in its throat. Ducks too, would be lured to take a piece of floating bread wrapped around to a fish hook. At the other end of the line was tied a heavy stone. Once the bread and hook was swallowed the poor duck would then effectively be drowned by the boatman dropping the stone into the shallow water near the bank. Not cricket I grant you, but effective ways of feeding a large and hungry family.

All boatmen knew how to set traps, many kept ferrets, some would always travel with a gun to hand. With this they could shoot a rabbit or hare even while they were underway steering the motor boat. The booty would be brought in close to the bank allowing the dog or one of the children to jump off and retrieve the dead animal. Interestingly, though many such pursuits were common enough amongst poor country folk, boatmen were often seen as the most rapacious and savage. The Grand Junction Canal was constructed in the late 18th century. Near Watford in Hertfordshire it passes through the Cassiobury estates of the Earls of Essex. When the canal was being surveyed, the fourth Earl was a member of the board of The Grand Junction Canal Company. He stipulated that where the canal was to pass through his estates it should be landscaped into a series of broad sweeping curves. This was ostensibly to give it the natural look of a meandering stream. In fact by building cottages for his gamekeepers on each turn of the waterway he was able to ensure that his men had a clear view in both directions. Thus was his game and livestock to be protected from the marauding boatmen passing through.

Although most of what was carried by canal was the usual bulk cargoes of grain, coal, aggregates and domestic rubbish, much fresh produce, processed foods and other goods, even fresh milk in churns were also moved by canal boat. Petty pilfering of the cargo was regarded as a boatman's perks. To be loaded with tins of ham or corned beef, HP sauce, sugar, chocolate chip or dried dates meant there was always something useful to eat or swap with a passing boat laden with house coal that could be used to fire the range. Although the boats were checked at many places along their route to ensure that the same amount loaded arrived at its destination small depredations were unlikely to register in the weight gauging process. East India Pale Ale came in big wooden barrels. The canny boatman would make sure that the last barrel loaded on to his boat had the bung facing downwards. Into this a narrow glass tube would be inserted and a few gallons drained off into a jug. It is said that one of the most popular loads carried was the Guinness brewed at Park Royal in London destined for Birmingham.

I was much taken by the description Jeannette Smith, herself from a boating family, gave me of how her grandfather went about securing food for their table. When the boats were moored up, perhaps waiting to load or empty, held up by a stoppage or an enforced day off, out would come his fishing rod. Beside him on the bank her grandfather would place a tin. As he caught the fish they would be immediately gutted, placed in the tin and smoked. She said he would then nip across into the fields and lay a few snares for rabbits. She recalled that he always returned with a few wild herbs, berries or mushrooms and sometimes with rather less than wild cabbages, carrots or potatoes. When the fishing was over he would collect the rabbits he had caught and with the smoked fish, swap them for eggs, tomatoes, butter, onions or whatever else was available from the nearby canalside houses, lock cottages and farms. Jeannette does not remember ever seeing money changing hands but said that by the time they arrived back at the boats her grandfather would have a good and varied selection of fresh food for her gran to cook.

Violet Mould, whose family worked for the carrying company of Fellows, Morton and Clayton, recalls that they always had a fishing net to hand 'because you could get eggs with that - swans' eggs were good.'⁽⁵⁾ Jeannette also mentions in passing that her great

grand-grandfather was sent to prison when he was caught shooting young swans for the pot.

From the 1920s it became the norm for a family to work two boats as a pair. It was on the butty that the domestic life of the family took place. A boatwoman's daily round of cooking, childcare and housewifery was unceasing even when the boats were under way. Then she would also have to steer the butty, work locks and help with the loading and unloading.

This account from Violet Mould gives an idea of how important the family home on the butty was and the pride taken in it: "We used to stand a vase of flowers against the water can, some we'd picked along the way. When the brass bands were done on the chimney and that, it used to look all right. We had three brass rings, not too much, and a brass rod over the range. The ticket drawer had a brass knob and some crochet work around the bottom. We used to call that 'needle-bobbing.' I used to put the tiller under my arm or against my hip, and me dad used to shout back from the motor, "Keep the boat straight - you ain't needle-bobbing again are you?"

I had a lot of them hanging-up plates. I used to have a nice brass lamp with a glass globe on it and a bow of red ribbon round. There was a row of plates down the back of the range. We didn't make any more dust from the range than we could help, so it didn't take you too long to keep it nice.

When you went on a new boat in the dock, you see, there'd be iron knobs and everything, but you had to bring all your brass with you from the other boat. You had your own range. There was always a stove in the cabin but it would be a straight up one, like a bottle stove, you know, and you couldn't cook on that. So you took that out and back to the dock and put your own cooking range in. We used to have a Larbert range - it was a nice range. You bought all your own things onto the change boat if your'n was going onto the dock. It used to take us about half a day to change over. But we was always pleased to get our own boat back!" (6)

Until the 1960s and the introduction of paraffin and bottled gas stoves, all the cooking was done on the small coal-fired range. One of the most popular 'The Guidwife' came complete with oven and a flat top where teapot and kettle maintained a permanent presence. Coal for the fire was tipped in through a lidded hole on the top of the range. With lid removed and the fire well-stoked, water could be quickly boiled when a pan or kettle was placed directly over the hole. To bake in the oven required the skilled use of a damper which would direct the heat around it. Even so it was only possible to bake the kind of food that did not require too delicate a temperature control.

Jeannette told me, "When I was boating with my grand-parents, my nan, just before she went to bed would make a huge pan of porridge with water and salt and leave it on the back of the range to cook overnight for the morning. This would last us for a couple of days." Solid and unyielding, sliced into thick pieces eaten with a little more salt sprinkled sparingly on top, it was the only breakfast she remembers ever having when they were on

the move. Often it would be the only food eaten between their 6am start and when they tied up for the night some 12 to 14 hours later. A far cry from the description of boatman's fare in the 1920s.

Meat and vegetable stews which could gently bubble all day on the top of the range were the norm. Any meat left over from the stew would be put into a large metal dish with lots of gravy, covered with a thick layer of suet pastry and either baked or steamed. Jeannette told me that she still makes what her dad calls 'trouser leg pudding'. This is a suet dough flattened out and liberally spread with pieces of bacon, onion and herbs, then rolled up like a Swiss roll. The ends are sealed and the whole pudding steamed for three hours in a muslin cloth. Her nan always used a cut-off trouser leg she kept especially to hold the pudding. Once inserted and the trouser leg folded around the it, both ends would be tied tightly with string, the whole immersed in a pan of water and left to simmer away.

Dorothy Hartley in her wonderful treatise 'Food in England' mentions and shows a drawing of what is called the bargee's pail. She compares it to the medieval cauldron, which despite the belief that this was simply a large pot to hold joints of beef in copious amounts of broth, was, in fact, a whole cooking system. The cauldron was filled with boiling water in which sealed earthenware pots of meat and vegetables were cooked alongside puddings of cereals or beans wrapped in linen and suspended in the water.

A wooden perforated board was dropped in so that the pots could rest upon it. Below this board would be laid a piece of bacon sealed inside a flour and water paste, tightly wrapped in a linen cloth. Once filled with various pots and puddings the lid would be fitted over the cauldron, sealed with a flour and water paste and the whole top tied tightly with a strip of linen. Mrs Hartley describes this as an early form of pressure cooker.

This medieval form of cooking - a single sealed pot holding several different components and cooked over an open fire or on a brazier - survived almost unchanged for centuries; the bargee's pail being a direct descendant. Observed on a barge on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal in the 1950s and described as follows: the large pail held an old 7lb sweet jar and a stone bottle which had once contained spirits. The bottle was filled with tea. At the base of the sweet jar was a layer of chopped turnip, then some pieces of pork. These were covered with batons of parsnip and rounds of carrot. The jar was filled with water to just cover the vegetables and brought gently to a simmer in the pailful of boiling water. Pastry made with pork fat and flour, was rolled out and half of it gently laid on top of the simmering vegetables. By the time that had risen nicely, a thick layer of peeled and sliced potatoes would be ready to go on top. Covered with the rest of the pastry they would be left to gently steam between their two blankets. Finally, on the top of the second pastry layer, there would be spread some sliced apples and a sprinkling of sugar. These layers of pastry and fruit would be added as the whole pail bubbled away and the contents of the jam jar were cooking. At this point a cloth would be tied firmly over the jar, the bottle of tea slipped into the pail beside the jar and the whole lot left to simmer away for a couple of hours. (7)

This method of cooking would have been more common on the wide beam barges of the

north-east than the family worked narrowboats of the midlands and south. These northern barges were crewed by a couple of men who would only stay on board for the duration of the trip. The living cabin with little more than a couple of bunks and an upright stove was located at the fore-end of the barge whilst the open steering position was at the stern. Here the men would often have a brazier of hot coals beside them on the deck. The bargee's pail once prepared could sit happily on top of the brazier. The boatman steering his craft was warmed by the heat of his fire and able to keep a watchful eye on his dinner.

It is clear from all the conversations I have had that the steaming of suet puddings both savoury and sweet and the stews of meat and boiled bacon were the staple meals in the boating families diet. Bread and cheese or bread and dripping with copious amounts of tea kept them going throughout the day.

But nothing was simple in the boatman's world, not even getting something to eat when they were underway. When the boats were loaded a 90 foot towline would separate the motor and its hungry steerer from the butty where the meals were prepared. Then food could only be passed across from one boat to the other at a lock. If they were traveling on long lock-free pounds the only opportunity to get food from one boat to the other would come when two bridges were fairly close together. Then someone could step off the butty, run along the tow-path plate of food and mug of tea in hand, to reach the next bridge ahead of the motor. As it slowed in the bridge-hole the food could be passed up to the steerer. Then as the butty came through, the delivery service - probably one of the children, would hop back on board.

When the boats were empty, in some places they could travel abreast of each other but more usually the butty would be towed tight up behind the motor, its stem resting on the motor's stern fenders and held on two short crossed straps. Now the meal must be taken up and over butty cabin roof, along the high set of top planks above the hold and down onto the fore-deck. From here it could be handed across to the motor steerer.

I remember, years ago, sitting in the cabin of the "Bude", Tom and Ellen Humphries' butty, talking to her about the harshness of boating life. We 'trainees' had learned a lot about boating from them as we were the last two pairs of boats employed on the 'lime juice run'. Ellen had just put some apples to bake and was reaching for the Bird's custard powder. I said something to the effect that even making custard was tricky in the confines of the tiny cabin and without fresh milk. Laughing at my ignorance, she put some custard powder in a bowl over which she poured boiling water from the kettle. This she stirred vigorously until it was thick, viscous and bright orange in colour, then she added a tin of what she called 'condemned' milk. "You could use 'dilapidated' milk if you've got some sugar but I prefer to use the 'condemned' for custard. See me duck - there's nothing to it!" she said, giving it a final stir.

It was delicious and as I too came to rely on condensed and evaporated milk when we were boating, a baked apple pudding at the end of a long day would always be served with custard made the canny boatwoman's way.

NOTES

- . 1. Harry Hanson, *Canal People*, (David and Charles, 1978) p154
- . 2. Arthur Wood, *On the Cut*, (BBC Local Radio tape cassettes, Radio Stoke, 1985) tape 1.
Homes on Boats
- . 3. Euan Corrie, *Tales from the Old Inland Waterways*, (David and Charles, 1998) p92
- . 4. Arthur Wood, tape 1. Homes on Boats
- . 5. Euan Corrie, p92
- . 6. *ibid*, p93
- . 7. Dorothy Hartley, *Food in England*, (Macdonald, 1954 - Futura edition 1985) pp37 - 38