

When I started boating in 1941 the snow was deep on the ground and there were no women skippers. When I left the water for the bank this summer, practically the whole system of inland waterways had been covered by amateur boatwomen trained by two of my early 'mates'. An advertisement for the first of these brought applications in a number and variety that surprised me: they ranged from ballet-dancers to moneylenders and from sailors to 'service-dodgers'.

**Woman Owner-Skipper. Oxford graduate.
Wants help to run motor barge in canal,
river and estuary with general cargo.
Work of national importance; share of
small freights. Write Box 5287**

It was two years before I attained the competence and social standing of a professional boatwoman, and my experience was gained at the cost of long hours, some spent in the heavy work of handling cargoes, anxious moments at the tiller, and exposure to all weathers.

The romantic features of boating have already had their share of publicity, but details of the work done by boats and boat people are usually left behind the curtain of obscurity, which veiled the canals and everything to do with them until AP Herbert published his *Water-Gypsies*. In four years our *Heather Bell* carried more than 7,000 tons of cargo. She took slack to Worcester, spam to Nottingham, sugar to Wolverhampton, and flour to Tipton, sauce to

Wigan, coal to Oxford, copper and aluminium to Birmingham, shell-cases to the Potteries, grain to the Mersey, and RAF stores to the Bristol Channel. Each cargo had its own peculiarity, and each canal its rule of the road. On some 'cuts' boats keep to the right, on others the left, on some empty boats must give way to loaded ones, and on others uphill takes precedence over downhill traffic.

Our usual round trip started with loading 352 sacks of flour at Worcester for Tipton. In the first fifteen miles there are 36 locks. If these were against us, we had to draw them off as well as fill them, which meant double work for us both. Novices used to complain of having been made to run half way to Birmingham. At the top lock we would thankfully take the shining handles or 'windlasses' from our belts where we carried them and stow them in the cabin for ahead of us stretched a 15-mile 'pound', with three tunnels, the last 1½ miles long. There is no lighting in these tunnels, so we carried a headlamp. If another boat had just gone through, her smoke reduced visibility sometimes to 15 feet, which made steering difficult, as the boat is 71 feet long.

At the Bar Lock we would give our tickets to the toll-clerk, hear the latest boating news, fill the water-can and perhaps stop for the night at a tie-up. These recognised stopping-places which usually boast a lock, a shop, a village inn (the 'boozer') and a stable, are often called after lock-keepers, some still alive, some living in the memories of old boatmen, and others long since forgotten: at Gill's, Parkerses, Dick's, Denny Merrill's Mother's lock, live the families who have given their name to the place, but 'Ammonsens' is no longer kept by a Hammond.

At Tipton the flour was unloaded in a couple of hours and then we set off for Cannock Chase for slack. Here we made friends with the day or 'Joey' boatmen who have homes ashore, and never go far from the collieries. I have been glad to know the Black Country, which looks at its best from the water, and its inhabitants – kind people with a good sense of humour.

Another trip we often did was to go empty to Sharpness for grain. We locked down into the Severn at Worcester, keeping a good look-out for the petrol tankers which ply up and down the river, and whose crews are always ready to give us a tow: their 160 horse-power was a big help to our 10 if we were trying to reach a tie-up before dark. In the summer the river is lovely, though you have to be careful to avoid the shallows: in the winter, there is sometimes too much water for comfort, especially if you run across the tide as well, because the Severn is tidal as far as Tewkesbury.

At Gloucester, we locked up into the Docks and Berkeley Ship Canal with its low white bridges rather like those over Dutch canals. Sixteen miles further on in Sharpness we loaded bulk wheat from the silo, and if we had time we would brush up our French, Norwegian, or Dutch with the sailors there. In Sharpness before D-day there was a grand array of ships, all flying the B flag: 'I am loading or discharging explosives'. We were glad to hear that of the sixteen ships, which went to Normandy sixteen came safely back.

Fog, wind and ice were our worst enemies. It was on a foggy December evening in 1941 that the *Darleydale* – the biggest tanker on the river – ran into us. We sank in 8 feet of water in 8 minutes, having luckily salvaged enough blankets to spend the night in

moderate comfort on the floor of a Gloucestershire cottage. Fishers History of Europe stood up well to its three days immersion.

At Whitsuntide or in August we used to go down the Shropshire Union Canal. If locks had to be repaired, they were generally done then, and boat after boat took her place in the queue waiting for the work to be finished. Those were blissful days with time to paint, shine the brass, scrub the cabin, or de-carbonise the engine at one's leisure, and afterwards to yarn with the boat people or play the accordion, knowing for once that there was no more work to be done. Then when the 'stoppage' was over, everyone set off again in a mad hurry, often going all night to make up for lost time. Twice we went 'fly' like that from Ellesmere Port to Wolverhampton: thirty-three hours non-stop, with about an hour's sleep each.

Day and the fields of Cheshire changed slowly into night and the sandstone cuttings of Shropshire. Dawn came at the top of Audlem locks, and the first boat we'd meet would say: 'What, you two girls been night 'owlin' again?'

I shall miss the cut and all my friends there: but it is a community that does not change and it is nice to know that Big-Mouthed Bella, Sam and Flo, 'Stickemup' and Soapy Joe, young Ada and all the rest of them will probably be about when I go back every now and then.