



The Beverley Barge Preservation Society

Registered Charity No 1091733
www.syntanbarge.org.uk Tel: 01482 872805/878629

A SKIPPER'S LIFE

THE MEMORIES OF JIM GILLYON – MAY 2008

I became a boat owner, engineer, bookkeeper and employer at 21 years of age, following my father's death. I had to grow up fast and was determined to be the wealthiest boat owner in the area. I got to grips with the paperwork, thanks to Minster Boys' School where Mr Grainger kept exam papers for me. I reached the age of 12 in September 1945 and my schooling carried on until, in January 1946, my dad decided to use me rather than employ a school leaver, so my working career started. At the age of 21 I took on a new role and hired a school leaver 'lad' to help me. I was a workaholic, working all hours of the day and night. Other owners, all aged over 40, thought I was mad!

All little boat owners were the same; it was a way of life for us. We were boatmen rather than businessmen. Some of the older boatmen could not read or write, but they worked hard and got by. The dock staff would write down the name of the boat they had to unload on to a piece of paper for them, and maybe tell them to look for the one with the red funnel.

Flour was transported from Rank's flour mills in Hull to Sheffield. On arrival at the mill the lady Sarah, who drove the lifting gear, and couldn't see us on the barge would shout, "Are you alright, love?". With a journey time of 18 hours we often set off at 1.00am but always hoped to visit the Sheffield cinema when we arrived. During the war the Co-op mill at Wincolmlee produced flour. A load of flour to Sheffield paid 10 shillings (50p) a ton so that was £40 earned and, if I could get a return cargo of coal from Hatfield, I could gross £100 a week. After paying the lad £3 or £4, and deducting my overheads, I'd made a good profit. This was the heyday of barge traffic and we regularly had return loads until the end of the 1950s. We also carried KP nuts to Rotherham for Waddingtons of Swinton; also wheat to Rank Mills at Rotherham.

The first barge I worked on was 'Halls Clyde', often working as a sub contractor to Hodgson's Tannery on Flemingate. She carried 85 tons of product - slightly less than the fleet of 17 Hodgson's barges, each of 110 tons capacity. The skippers employed by Hodgson's were envious of my success and once I'd trained my lad up he would leave to work on a Hodgson's barge at a bigger wage.

Each week wet hides (animal skins) came into Albert Dock, Hull from Rotterdam. This was a mucky and smelly load, but paid well. Afterwards, we swilled out the hold with river water which we pumped back into the Beck, and left to dry out. The hold was then deemed sufficiently clean to carry the next load which may have been cocoa beans, coal and even bread flour.

We used the York/Selby/Knottingley canals to collect open cast coal for Hodgson's boilers from Swillington, outside Leeds. We also brought mined coal (which was better quality) for the local gas works and coal merchants. It was an unwritten rule that the skipper was allowed 2 bags of coal from each load carried. Of course, we used the biggest bags we could find – and a skipper's family always had a full coalhouse!

When 10,000 ton cargos of cocoa beans came into Hull from Africa we transported them to Rowntree's chocolate factory in York, via the Humber, Ouse and Foss. No wonder we considered this load to be a holiday. A pleasant trip carrying a clean, dry, sweet smelling load – bliss! We also carried some cargo to Terry's of York. This would take a man and his lad 10 hours.

Seeds (ground nut, linseed, barley and fish meal) for animal feed loaded at King George Dock and came into Beverley for Barker's Crushing Mills on Crane Hill – a 4 hour trip. (Crane Hill is an area of the Beck and is where the Syntan is currently moored). For the return journey to Hull we left Beverley at 5.00am, arriving at the Dock at 8.00am. Eventually Barkers set up plants abroad and then imported the oil because foreign labour was cheaper. Cotton seed came from Mississippi but was a very light product so we were unable to carry a maximum weight. We also carried steel, pig iron and manganese ore to Rotherham and Tinsley for British Waterways. There was a flight of 12 locks en-route to Tinsley.

When barge traffic diminished Waddington's tended to purchase the redundant boats as they believed that the trade would return as the motorways became busier. But as the trade with barges in the UK moved over to road and rail transport so, still wanting to travel on the water, we upped sticks and in 1979 went to Holland. Our boat was much larger and life aboard took on a more sophisticated way, the accommodation was much larger, more homely and we made lasting friendships with the other crews.



The Beverley Barge Preservation Society

Registered Charity No 1091733
www.syntanbarge.org.uk Tel: 01482 872805/878629

A SKIPPER'S LIFE

LEARNING THE TRADE

Jim was 12 years old when his father, a barge owner, took him out of school to help crew the barge. Between trips he still attended Minster Boys' School and although Mr Grainger, the headmaster, was disgusted at his low attendance, he kept exam papers for Jim who succeeded in keeping up with his education.

Everyone wore a blue gansey sweater and brown cord trousers and many bargees had their ears pierced (reputed to improve their eyesight). Laundry was washed at home but always 'smelled of boat'. This was just after the Second World War and they were allowed Seamen's Ration Books, which entitled them to double rations.

However, when they were away from home this created antagonism. Shopkeepers were very suspicious and considered them to be 'stealing' rations from the locals. Once in South Yorkshire, Jim was sent for a pound of sausages. "Sorry mate, only for customers." was the short reply. His dad was less than pleased, so they returned to the shop but received the same short shrift. At that Jim's dad delivered a few home truths to the vendor, "Now look here, we are working night and day to bring flour for bread to stuff your sausages with!" Sadly the butcher would not change his mind. Their food tended to be tinned stuff, and egg sandwiches, with cooking done in a frying pan on the open stove.

In the severe winter of 1947 Jim well remembers trudging up the line of 12 locks at Tinsley in deep snow, but his dad still shouted at him to hurry up. Jim learned his trade as he and his dad transported a variety of cargos far and wide - for Hodgson's (tanning products), Barkers (animal foodstuffs), Rowntree's of York (cocoa beans), Stainforth Colliery near Hatfield, and Swillington Colliery, between Leeds and Castleford, (coal for domestic use and gas production).

They were sub contractors to Hodgson's, whose cargo was collected from Hull docks. They would leave Beverley on an early tide, maybe at 5.00am, and arrive at King George Dock at 8.00am. Bulk cargo was transferred into the hold in big nets, and could be loaded in 3 or 4 hours, but some cargoes took up to 8 hours to fill the 85 ton hold. If they were at the head of the queue of barges waiting to load, they sailed back on the 5.00pm tide, if not they may have to wait for the early tide next morning. Sometimes a skipper might sail later in the day, then turn his engine off near the docks and drag the barge past his rivals during darkness, to be sure to get an early loading!

Once a cargo was safely delivered, the decks and hold must be swilled clean – especially following a load of myrabolam nuts, which would stain everything purple! This was done with river water, and left to dry out overnight, ready for the next load. If a return load were available it would help the profitability greatly.

Typical cabin layout, shown from above the stove.

Left to right: bedside, buffet & table, lockers & spareside.

