

The Port of Berkhamsted

by 'BEORCHAM'

I have been thumbing through three large tomes, each entitled 'Register of Canal Boats.' Not a very promising source of information, you may think; but these are local registers, covering a period (1896-1907) when the Grand Junction Canal was still an important commercial waterway and Berkhamsted was one of its busy ports.

The railway had not taken all the traffic away from the canal; timber, coal, building materials and other heavy goods still came by water, and the boats did not always go empty away, for Cooper's and some other local firms favoured this form of transport. And we still had a boat-builder's yard, started by John Hatton before Victoria was queen and continued by the Costin family into the present century.

The 'Grand Junction' was as

great an attraction then as it is today. Children never had to wait long to see a wide boat or a pair of narrow boats rise or fall in the locks. How quickly the professionals, with plodding horses, were on their way again! One seldom went far along the towpath without having to press against the hedge for a horse to pass by. There were some steamers, too, chug-chugging along for the whole valley to hear.

WATER GYPSIES

The boatmen and women were almost a race apart, as tough as nails, with strange accents, sharp tongues, hot tempers and a liking for old-fashioned dress—the men in tight-fitting jackets, corduroy trousers and black hats or caps; the women in tight-waisted and often elaborately ornamented dresses, with amply-pleated ankle-length

skirts. Water gypsies indeed, always in a hurry, yet theirs was the slowest means of transport.

And it was a life of contrasts—unlimited fresh air by day, hot and cramped quarters at night. It was because living conditions were often bad, and educational opportunities so limited, that local authorities were required to appoint inspectors of canal boats. At Berkhamsted the job was done by the surveyor, who, for a few extra pounds, inspected upwards of 100 boats a year.

TINY CABINS

Besides reporting minor infringements of the Canal Boats Act, such as illegible lettering or lack of a proper certificate of registration, the inspector was on the alert for such major offences as exceeding the number of persons authorised to sleep in the tiny cabins. Most of the boats had only one cabin (aft); fore cabins were rare and very small, nearly always limited to one adult or two children under 12 years old. There were obvious problems when the children grew up.

Berkhamsted Council was one of

the 'registration authorities', and in the ten years covered by the three volumes already mentioned, some 300 boats were registered locally. Name, number, owner, master, customary route, type of cargo, mode of propulsion, dimension of cabin(s), permitted number of occupants—what more could one want from the registers other than photographs of the boats and the crews?

Few of the owners whose boats were registered at Berkhamsted were local people. W. E. Costin Ltd., the boat-builders (their yard was between Raven's Lane and Castle Street) owned several boats, one of which, Alice, was later owned by Mr. W. Brooks of Berkhamsted. Another boat, Nautilus, was owned by Miss S. A. R. Bedford, of Station Road, and traded between London and Braunston.

MANY CARGOES

Little originality was shown in naming the boats: Albert, Annie, Lizzie, Ruby, Enterprise, Perseverance—these are names one finds everywhere. Someone named a boat Admiral Broke and then changed the name to Jellicoe. Horace Smith-Dorrien, the General who was born at Haresfoot, was the name of a boat owned by Emanuel Smith, of Brentford, and the master was yet another Smith—Charles.

Almost all the vessels are described as 'Wide boat drawn by horse' or 'Narrow boat drawn by horse.' In addition there are three barges, two 'oil boats' and a few 'fly-boats worked in shifts.' Surprisingly few vessels are described as 'drawn by horse and steam.' An unusual entry is 'Narrow boat (steam tug).'

The question, 'Nature of traffic in which the boat is accustomed or intended to be employed', produces a variety of answers: Timber; rags and paper; general cargo; dry goods; flour; corn and flour; bricks, gravel, sand and manure; manure and general traffic. Some elderly readers may recall the stench of the boats which returned from London with manure for the farmlands of Hertfordshire.

LONG VOYAGES

'Route along which the boat is accustomed or intended to ply' is another good question. Here are some of the routes: Paddington-

Braunston; Paddington-Coventry; Staffordshire-London; Brentford-Birmingham; Basingstoke-Braunston; London-Manchester; London-Berkhamsted.

Cabin sizes varied considerably. If I have done my homework correctly, the smallest was 4 ft. 11 in. high, 8 ft. 6 in. long and 6 ft. 3 in. wide; this was for two adults and two children — preferably thin dwarfs. Far more spacious was the after-cabin of a barge called Humber: 7 ft. 3 in. high, 7 ft. 9 in. long and 10 ft. 6 in. wide. This was to accommodate not more than two adults and two children, but in addition Humber had a fore-cabin

6 ft. high, 5 ft. long and 10 ft. wide, for one adult and one child. The ideal vessel for a growing family!

Cramped the cabins certainly were, but they were ingeniously furnished to take advantage of every square inch. Many of the water gypsies bought expensive furniture (specially made, of course) and ornaments that would bring joy to any antique dealer of today. How gleaming was the brasswork, how colourful the external decorations. The very special canal form of folk art extended to the buckets. It was roses (and castles) all the way...

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