

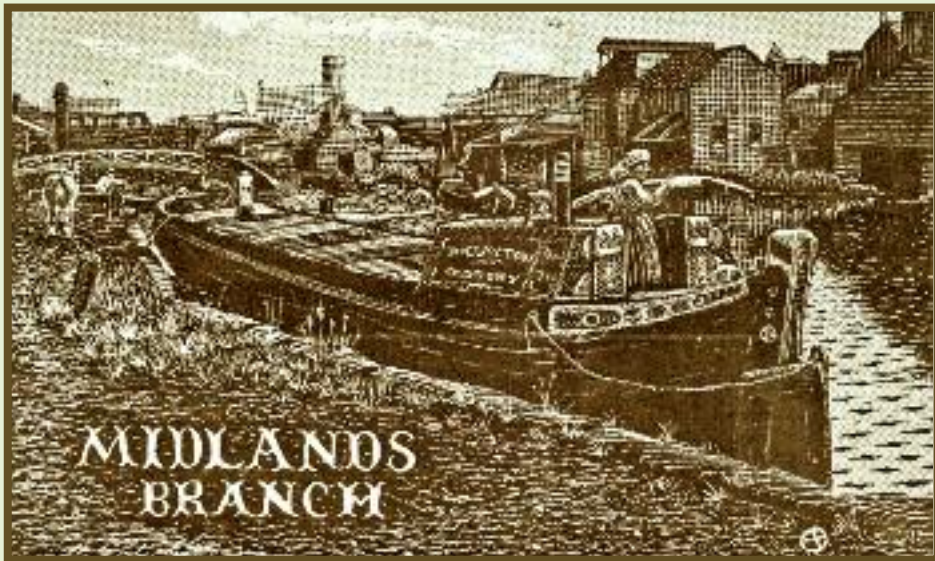


Dudley Tunnel 1960 in Retrospect

By Ebb

*I remember Ebb, that is Ken Ebblewhite, although I never got to know him. He moored **Ohio** on the Erewash Canal, and was about when I had my first boat in 1966 and also moored at the bottom end of the Erewash. He was a man of military bearing and was missing an arm. Despite this he produced these wonderful lino cut drawings many of which graced the front cover of *Navigation*, as this example. He later acquired a Leeds & Liverpool Short Boat *Bertha* and travelled about with a caravan dropped in the hold for accommodation. This was the boat which John Liley later renamed *Arthur* and used for his travels in France.*

Ed



Flipping through the pages of **Ohio's** log book I noted the record of our journey to participate in the fabulous protest cruise which took place on the 23rd October 1960 and which probably saved the tunnel from closure. An account of our eventful trip may be worthwhile placing on record, so I propose to inflict it on you.

At about 3.00 pm on Wednesday, 19th October, after provisioning and victualling **Ohio**, (Mrs E always prepares for the possibility that we will touch both the Equator and north and south poles and be away for at least 2 years), we cast off and headed down the Erewash Canal towards Trent Lock. As we approached Sawley Lock the mate quietly reported that we had no cutlery on board, so we wined and returned home for same. We dosed down for the night at Shardlow, it poured with rain all night. In fact it hardly ceased for the next 15 days. At Weston Cliff we met our first major obstacle. A large tree had fallen down the steep bank and completely blocked the canal, just before the lovely stone bridge which bears the date 1776. A cruiser had been abandoned on the other side, where we wanted to be. A BW gang was busy sawing away at the tree and they were not expecting to have a way through for several days. It was 10.00 am and time was precious. However we talked nicely to them and to our relief were able to scramble by at 2.30 pm.

The T&M from Shardlow to Willington was in a dreadful state in 1960, but from then on to the Dove Café was fair. Our faithful diesel was singing away with its joyous plum, plum, plum. By the time we reached Dallow at 7.00 pm and had tied up there were more pums than



plums. I had already tentatively diagnosed a choked injector, and we turned in early to prepare for what the morrow would provide. The pums had evidently been working on my subconscious for I had a fund of ideas to try by first light on the 21st. First of all I removed the heavy cast iron valve cover and there, for all the world to behold (as if they were interested) was the cause of my desecrated plums. An exhaust valve spring had broken up, the tappet ball end had hit the edge of the push rod cup and snapped off. The valve, freed from the inhibitions imposed by the spring and rocker, had been doing a trampoline act on the piston crown. Very often it bounced high enough to be seated by the building up of compression and a more or less normal combustion cycle was completed, hence the occasional full blooded plum. After breakfast, and a decent interval to allow normal folk to rise and shine, I made a sortie into the town and managed to obtain a BMC tappet and valve spring. The former was too small and the latter too strong, but I managed to get them in place without removing the cylinder head and by 2.30 the old girl was plumbing away as if nothing had happened. (she continued to do so for about 12 months until the correct parts were fitted).

Our friend at Wychnor lock warned that the Trent was in flood and the crossing at Alrewas was impassable. Short of physical violence he did everything to try and dissuade us from going on, but having got thus far I was determined not to be deterred. We halted near the weir to prospect and the only evidence of its position was a change in the water surface from smooth to rough, there was certainly no fall. I decided to chance it so, opening the throttle wide we charged the right hand bend into the river. The swirling water took charge of **Ohio's** bow swinging it towards the weir. There was a bump as we bounced off the first post, a pause, and slowly she nosed into the current. In deep water she has been clocked at 61/2 knots and here we were, flat out and standing still! Gradually she started to creep forward and about 15 minutes later we crept round the corner and into Alrewas Lock. About 6.00 pm we tied up at Fradley and after refreshment I set about phoning my helpers of the morrow. Keith Christie would meet us at Fazeley at 8.00 am the next day and Brian Beagley would see us at Salford Junction. We cast off again at 8.50 pm, switched on the headlight and headed south. The stars shone from a clear sky and it was bitterly cold. We were tired when we moored up at 1.30 am at Fazeley.

Nevertheless we rose early and after Keith had parked his Landrover and found us some milk we departed at 8.30 am towards Birmingham. By now, Fate's pattern of an incident per day was becoming evident. Keith whipped up very smartly the two bottom paddles of one of the Curdworth Locks when I was about 20 yards away, and the main result was that our stove travelled the whole length of the boat. This somewhat delayed us and Brian had walked all the way to Minworth top lock in the pouring rain wondering where we had got to. At the bottom of Aston 11 we caught up with Ray White of Willow Wren who was starting up the flight alone with his motor **Crane**. This was our opportunity to show the pros what we were made of, so with Keith setting the locks, Brian working them and yours truly steering, we set out to harass Ray all the way up the 24. At 5.10 pm, soaked to the skin, we tied up alongside **Crane** at Farmers Bridge to find that Ray had washed and changed and was waiting for us!

Next morning, Sunday October 23rd, was rally day and the weatherman had laid on a raw, cold, dry, misty day in place of the usual rain. Ray was going to the rally so we thumbed a tow to Tividale where Ray backed **Crane** into the arm and we returned the deed by towing him to the bottom of Brades where that rally was assembling. The story of the rally is told in the Navigation for November 1960. Suffice it to say that **Ohio** was (I believe) the only narrow boat conversion able to get through the tunnel so David Hutchings asked me to push the joey boat, loaded with about 90 members, through the tunnel. I had also 30 passengers aboard **Ohio**, and apparently the only person daunted by the experience was a journalist who was taken below suffering from an acute attack of claustrophobia, and in the relief of which he consumed most of my bottle of brandy!

Back at the top of Brades Locks I was mooring up for the night on the Old Main Line, when Mr King, who then resided at the now defunct lockhouse, advised me to moor inside the



arm as "X" passed by every morning early and would certainly wash me adrift. Sure enough at first light I was awakened by the joyous thunder of Bolinders in full song. Opening the hatch I was just in time to see 2 Thomas Clayton motors, one strapped close behind the other, both engines flat out and "X" steering the leading boat. Apparently the routine was for "X" to rise, light the stove and put the kettle on, kick the motors and set off from Oldbury down the Main Line. By the time he reached Horsley Fields Mrs "X" had risen and had prepared breakfast. Then "X" dropped astern down 5 locks with one motor, loaded with tar at the gasworks, returned and did the same with the other motor and then off to deliver where required. Brian, who had kindly offered to see us down the 21, arrived at 8.00 am. At the top lock was the first of "X"s motors already loaded. I engaged his wife in conversation and asked her if she recognised my boat (which was ex Thomas Clayton) and she said its lines were familiar. When I told her it was the **Ohio** she was delighted and told me that she had been born on her.

We met the second motor as we went down in the pelting rain. Brian left us at Autherley and during lunch Sam Lomas joined us for a cuppa. We held on hoping that the rain would cease, but it only steadily worsened. At 4.00 pm we set off again with the rain whipping in from our port quarter and I recollect using a dodge which I had learnt in my distant motorcycling days - closing me left eye and squinting over the bridge of my nose with my right eye. Fortunately I am equipped with what is tantamount to a flying bridge. We were glad to tie up at Gailey at 6.45 pm.

Next day, Tuesday the 25th, was comparatively fine but cold. All went well until Penkridge lock. We could not get in until we had shifted masses of floating weed. The chamber was full of decaying duckweed and this held up **Ohio** twice (daylight visible under her bottom!). Penkridge wasn't finished with us for we collected a foreign object on the propeller which could not be removed by the usual means. So we backed up **Ohio** to a low part of the bank and yours truly stripped to the waist and got busy with wire cutters and hacksaw. After about 20 minutes I cleared about 10 yards of barbed wire and contracted something approaching frostbite in the process. At 7.00 pm the lock keeper at Colwich persuaded us to moor up for the night - no doubt thinking we might lose our way in the dark!

Wednesday was wet again, and from Fradley onwards Mrs E's apprehension grew as we neared Alrewas. At Bagnall she informed me that she was not crossing the Trent with me. As **Ohio** descended in Alrewas Lock she said "I hope you realise you have only 3 minutes more to live". As I left the lock she jumped aboard saying "I may as well go down with you". The water below the weir now appeared higher than that above and the river ran bank high. But a strong flow ran into the cut and by keeping well under the left bank it was easy. We stopped for a meal at Burton at 7.00 pm, then pushed on to Stenson in the dark. Next morning, October 27th we reached Shardlow by 11.45 only to hear that the Trent was over its banks and quite impassable. We stayed on **Ohio** until November 1st when, during a slight fall in the water level, we sneaked down the Trent and scraped under the footbridge at Trent Lock before another surge of water blocked the lock entrance.
Surely a voyage to remember

This article was published in Navigation, the Midlands Branch IWA magazine in June 1970

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