

A Job Nobody Wanted

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“They wouldn’t get men to do it nowadays’. That was a canal man’s recent comment - no doubt he was right - on the task of legging a boat through a tunnel. It was an unpleasant, but necessary job in the old days of horse drawn craft when a boat had to be got through a tunnel that had no towpath.

But what was the job really like, what did it involve? Only a few of the real old timers among us have first hand experience. Mr E Humphrey Green, aged 88, of Basildon, Essex, has kindly sent us a cutting from the *New Penny Magazine*, published about 70 years ago, in which a journalist describes his experiences when he “had a go” at legging a laden barge through Maida Hill Tunnel on the Regents Canal. It makes interesting reading:

You lie on your back, put your feet against the sides of the tunnel and push - push till your teeth are almost breaking in your mouth. till your braces burst, unless you have previously loosened them, and the buttons fly off all your garments. You move your feet as the barge moves, one foot at a time, pushing the while with the foot that is stationary.

Said my friend who made the arrangements: “You may get rubbed off on your way through. If you do, it will be all over for you, for nobody will know anything about it until you are missed at the other end.”

“What a horrible death!”

“There’s another thing - the leggings always harder after the water’s drawn off for the current sets in strong against you then and you’ve often got to hang on like grim death to keep your barge in its place.”

Next day about noon I stepped on board the *Fancy*, laden with sixty-five tons of maize for the General Omnibus Company’s depot at



Paddington. Besides the captain, or steerer, there was another man aboard, whom he had picked up lower down, to help him to leg through the tunnel. A lot of such men hang around the towpath on the chance of getting a legging job. They are paid a shilling for this, which is allowed to the captain by his employers, and is called legging money. The legger's lot is not one that I wish to make you envy.

It took us about 2 hours after leaving Hampstead Road Summit Lock to reach the entrance of the tunnel. On the way we had passed through the Zoological Gardens.

"There's the tunnel, Frank", shouted the skipper to his legger, "take the tarpaulin up off some of the sacks, else we'll get stuck onto it if we lie on it."

He then tied up the tiller and we went forward. Each one got on his back on a sack near enough to the edge to allow his feet to reach the side of the tunnel, and in a slightly slanting position - that is with the feet inclining towards the stern, so that our pushing should result in a forward motion. I lay down beside the captain on the left side of the barge and imitated him. Here the movement was the left leg over the right, just as if you walk sideways with your right side foremost you will find that your left leg will pass in front of your right.

After a few minutes, on seeing how it was done, I groped my way across to the other side of the barge and asked the legger to give me his job, assuring him that I would not seek his legging money but would, on the contrary, increase it. Nothing loath, he got up from his sack, and, throwing off my coat and loosening my braces, I took his place. Here, the movement of the legs was right over left, just the reverse of the movement on the other side and just the same as in walking sideways with the left shoulder to the front. Thus I legged on, the heavily laden boat seemed to me to be making no progress.

"Who invented this way of driving a boat?" I asked.

"I dunno, but whoever he was, he ought to be condemned to the job forever," said the legger.

Meanwhile, I was bursting into a state of perspiration, and the chill wind of the tunnel

fell pleasantly upon me. My foot slipped now and then, for the bricks were worn smooth with years of footing and tons of leather. Still we were making progress, but how slow! how ridiculously slow, and in what a barbarous fashion for these days of advance and invention. Presently our speed increased and I was congratulating myself at the success of my efforts in propelling a 65 ton load.

"There's something behind us" said the captain, "that's what's driving us forward."

This turned out to be a tank barge, empty, yet it was disturbing the water in front of it to a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile, and sufficiently to help us on.

We were now about halfway through and I was getting exhausted. My shirt had wriggled up over my shoulders and I was otherwise in a most disordered condition, my thighs were aching and my legs sometimes refused to move. I had been working too hard. I was now unable to keep the barge off my side of the tunnel and I called on the legger to relieve me. The experienced legger takes it quietly. He knows its a hard job and a long job and reserves himself.

"Come on then guv'nor, let me get down" said the legger.

"I drew in my feet and proceeded to rise, but could not get off my knees. I was quite giddy and clutched the tarpaulin to prevent myself from falling. The tunnel seemed to rise up in front of me, the end pointing like a telescope to the heavens. The legger assisted me away from my critical position and left me to recover as best I could.

"They're drawin' off water below," I heard the skipper shout. "We'll never get her through. Hang on Frank! Don't let her go back!"

So the skipper and the legger lay on there backs, with their feet firmly planted against the brickwork, satisfied to keep their boat at the point they had got it up to.

In half an hour we were able to move again and soon heard the rumble of the traffic of the Edgware Road which runs over the upper end of the tunnel. I left my companions at the Harrow Road and with stiffened limbs sought the nearest conveyance for home.