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## The Tug Boat *Sharpness*

Photo: Colin Scrivener



*Sharpness* with Stan Clover towing an Avon tug and a mud hopper 1970. There appears to be three Silver Swords mounted on the front bulkhead.

Mr. W.F. Hoburgh lived at the Bridge House, Stoke Prior Wharf. He was an engineer and manager of the Worcester and Birmingham and Droitwich canals and was instructed to have the *Sharpness* tugboat on the Worcester Canal in the latter part of 1908. It was about the time he was to retire (owing to age) from his position as engineer to the Sharpness & Gloucester and Birmingham Navigation Company, Worcester and Birmingham Section.

At that time there was a proposal to tow boats up and down the 5 mile pound, Astwood to Offerton, to save the horses and donkeys the long haul of towing the boats. The animals to work from Diglis (Worcester) to Offerton and back to Diglis; animals also to be stationed at Stoke Prior and Tardebigge for the haul up and down the large flight of locks. There were stables built at Offerton Lock No. 15 to stable any animals that had to wait at night to haul boats that came down late in the daytime. They were towed down the next

morning by the animals, to Diglis.

However, the scheme never materialized, even a winding hole was partly constructed on the outside bank of the canal above Lock No.16 for the tugs to turn round. Another winding hole was planned to be constructed below Lock No.17 at Astwood. These jobs were going to be finished by 1910 and the tugs to be towing boats before the end of the year. Work was started to improve the height of the Dunhampstead Tunnel (which you can see today at the Worcester end), but was never finished, the other end being in a very bad state today

The tug *Sharpness*, together with two other tugboats *Worcester* and *Birmingham* was to be used for the job of towing boats on the 5 mile pound. The three tugs were all oil powered, whereas the tugs at Tardebigge and Kings Norton were steam powered: *Birmingham*, *Gloucester*, *Worcester*, *Stoke* and *Droitwich*. However, these tugs were used more or less in towing in

the Tardebigge, Shortwood and Kings Norton tunnels, especially after the steam tugs began to age, the first two having been in use since 1876. (I could go on but I am writing about the **Sharpness** tug boat.)

I remember her coming up the 30 locks from Gloucester, first time up. She looked grand - more like a yacht than a tug. This was early 1909. I had a ride on her from Whitford Bridge, Lock No. 27, to the bottom of the 30, Lock No. 29. She was not a heavy tug like the steam tugs, whose draught was 4' of water, whereas the **Sharpness** only drew about 3'. Her first engine was a Dutch engine, single cylinder, heavy flywheel. It started on petrol then over to paraffin oil. She had a heavy cast iron, 4 bladed propeller and could move very fast when on her own in deep water, 6 to 7 miles per hour on the River Severn. She was used on the Severn for a time, towing mud flats from the river dredger. She was also tried out towing loaded salt barges from Droitwich to Hawford on Severn. She also towed in the tunnels on the summit level, Tardebigge and Kings Norton. She was a bad boat to tow in the long tunnel, her exhaust would give you sleepy sickness if she had 6 loaded boats, hence the construction of the fan in the middle air shaft in the Kings Norton tunnel, to draw the fumes out of the tunnel.

There was about 30 cwt of iron scrap ballast in her stern and fore end to make her heavier for towing. She was used a great deal for ice-breaking in the locks and on the summit level in the winter of 1915-16 and was used on the Kings Norton - Birmingham length to break ice. With 8 weeks frost she worked the length morning and night, 7 days every week as long as the frost lasted, a Mr. P. Boulton of Tunnel Cottages, Kings Norton, being the river tug man.

She had a nice fore end cabin with a cooking oven range. We used her once as a dormitory boat and four of us slept in the cabin at night when we were repairing the waterhouse rooves of the Severn & Canal Carrying Co., Bridge Street, Birmingham. We used her again Shortwood to Tardebigge, towing rafts made up of larch boles or trunks (trees) which the canal authorities had brought from the Hewell Estate. We had several trips with these rafts until something happened in

the engine, the bottom of the crank case fell out, after a loud bang, in Shortwood Tunnel. It appears that a bolt had worked out and dropped into the bottom of the case, leaving no clearance for the crankshaft. The whole of her engine was taken out, the crank case stripped down and a large fire was built round it to get the cast iron well hot before the piece was welded in place, making the engine usable again.

Another time her cylinder was cracked through being frozen. The fitter made a neat job of studding a patch on this. After all this she was used again on an emergency job in towing fly boats direct from Tardebigge to Birmingham. Generally two boats, light loaded from Gloucester had a special tug up the river, then a good horse from Diglis and a change of horse at Stoke Prior. The locks were quickly filled up by using the block pulley and line peg. When the lock was full, start the horse, force the top gate away from the head quoin and put the tiller in to stop the gate from closing up again. In this way the lock filled up so much quicker.

At Tardebigge top lock the **Sharpness** would be waiting to tow them into Birmingham. 16 - 17 hours Gloucester to Birmingham (summer time). I remember seeing the driver having a lot of work to get the engine to start on some frosty mornings. I had seen him in a last effort get a piece of 10" diameter round iron well hot in the blacksmith's forge, take a plug out of the cylinder head and put in this red hot iron to get the cylinder and surrounds nice and hot all round. Then he would put the plug back in when it was hot enough and start the engine up. She would go off with a bang. Her hull would shiver and vibrate in a proper dance when the engine started up in a racing motion. The driver would say humorously "that will take the cold shivers out of her". It always seemed to do the trick. This was when she had her original engine, however this engine was taken out of the boat in the middle 30's and never repaired.

The boat lay for some time in the basin at Tardebigge. Eventually another engine was obtained and put in her, but not a marine engine. It was an engine out of a motor lorry. This engine drove the boat along alright in low gear and a smaller propeller, but burning



petrol made it a costly boat to run. However, with that engine she used to do some ice breaking in the locks and on the summit level, but was not so heavy a boat; some of the ballast had been taken out of her.

We took her to Stourbridge Locks with our material and stoppage repair gear in early 1950. Again she was used extensively on the Stratford on Avon Northern Section, the ten mile stretch, when the canal was being dredged again after lying dormant so long (the canal I mean and not the **Sharpness**). She was always in use somewhere or other until she was declared no longer fit for canal work. I think she well deserves her retirement in a pleasure pursuit by her present owner. It would be nice to read

of her travels and journeying record after she was discarded from maintenance work on the canals after so many years.

By the way, her shelter for the steerage well in her days of tunnel towing was comprised of iron, 7/8 ground iron, bent to tunnel roof shape and bolted into the stern deck on opposite sides. Also in the side of the engine room sides. Four of these iron shaped rails were then connected to a timber rail 10'2" x 4", shaped rawls bolted through timber to the opposite rail. This formed the support for a tarpaulin sheet that was fastened on; rolled up secure in fine weather, unrolled down the sides for wet blustery weather.

*George D. Bate, MBE. 53 years service, Worcester & Birmingham Canal. 1915 - 1969*

## Easter Celebrations at the National Waterways Museum Ellesmere Port 10 to 13 April 2020

Michelle Kozomara writes:

The annual Easter Boat Gathering at the museum is a very special time of the year and we're looking forward to seeing many of you again this year.

The 2019 event was memorable with beautiful weather which we can thank BBC's Matt Taylor for bringing whilst he broadcast the Breakfast weather bulletins from site. This brought record visitor numbers to the event and now we're scratching our heads as to how we can build on the success of 2019 and bring something different?!?

Working with interested parties, we're hoping to create a floating garden to lead the flotilla on Good Friday and similarly we will present a wellbeing garden within the grounds of the museum. Watch this space for more detail!

At the Waterways Museum Society meeting on Friday night Ian McCarthy will be giving a talk with the intriguing title of "What! Start again? – Well Yes". An illustrated talk about his life and times on the canals as a volunteer, share boat owner and codger of boats. Starting from the nineteen sixties to the present day. What has changed and why, and most importantly how we make sure it is all passed on to the future, in a better state than when we found it.

Saturday night's headliners will be the Port Sunlight Sea Dogs bringing 'shanties & songs of river & seas' with support. Tickets are available online via the link on the website. I would encourage you to purchase your tickets now before details are released on Facebook in the next couple of weeks.

Over the weekend you can also look forward to award-winning musician Phil Underwood who will be sharing his traditional and contemporary canal songs, and Graham Bellinger will be there with his eclectic repertoire plus much more... Children and families can enjoy creating their own music together with acclaimed musician and story teller David Gibb and get creative with LEGO Masters winner, Steve Guinness.

**If you haven't completed your boat entry form** there is still time to register your boat. The form is available at [canalrivertrust.org.uk/nwm](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/nwm) or by telephoning the museum on 0151 355 5017. The boating team will appreciate your details in advance to help them with their planning.

Welcoming you to the event is an important part of our season launch and we are looking forward to a memorable weekend.