

Locked in his own Heavenly Stairway

Maurice Colbeck meets the canal man who even spends his holidays afloat



Dorothy Burrous

There's a tranquillity about country canals which sets them apart from other waterways. Rivers and streams may rush, gush and gurgle but canals take their time. Their history includes plodding horses led along towpaths by colourful water gypsies once called bargees; their present is haunted

Five Rise Locks

by proprietorial ducks and contemplative anglers.

Everything about them induces a sense of peace and well-being - at least, it does in me. So I wasn't at all surprised to find that Barry

Whitelock is, to all appearances, a happy man. He is the keeper of the 225-year-old Leeds-Liverpool Canal's Five Rise Locks at Bingley, whose titanic components of timber, stone and iron make modern structures look flimsy. And his job, he says, is also his hobby.

Even Barry's surname, Whitelock, seems to chime in with his work. Canal buffs had assured me he was related to a famous family of Whitelocks operating on the Grand Union Canal. He isn't - which worries him not a jot, for Barry is very much his own man.

Much of his job satisfaction arises from his fascination with the structure designed by the Leeds-Liverpool's first engineer, John Longbotham, of Halifax, and built in the 1770s by four local stonemasons whose names are recorded on a plaque at the Top Lock house. "It was pick and shovel, block and tackle in those days," muses Barry. Yet if the four returned today to the scene of their labours they would find the locks little changed.

Documents concerning the early days were lost when the Leeds-Liverpool's head office at Wigan suffered bomb damage in the war, but there's little danger that the pioneering times will be forgotten. Some years ago there

arrived a visitor from the Science Museum in London who wished to make a scale model of the locks. "I got my wellies on," said Barry, "we drained all the locks off and measured it all up with a tape measure." It sounded a mammoth task to me, but Barry obviously took it in his stride.

What impressed the visitor most about the Five Rise? "The height of it," said Barry. The Leeds-Liverpool, he added, had the largest number of "staircases" in the country - the Five Rise, four three-rises and three two-rises on this waterway."

SURPRISED

Officially he begins work at 7.45am but he is often there an hour earlier "to keep on top o' things". When necessary he's quite prepared to work a seven-day week. I was almost surprised that he could be persuaded to take holidays - until I learned that he spends them cruising England's canal network in an ancient narrow-boat called *Adder*, which has a 60-year-old semi-diesel engine that he activates with a blowlamp and a kick-start. He has navigated the Grand Union Canal from end to end, as well as exploring three-quarters of the Thames. "Going under Tower Bridge was the highlight."

A bit of a busman's holiday? "You've got to be interested in boats," he retorted, "to look after this lot all day. In the middle of summer, when the locks are open from eight to eight, I might be working a 12 hour shift."

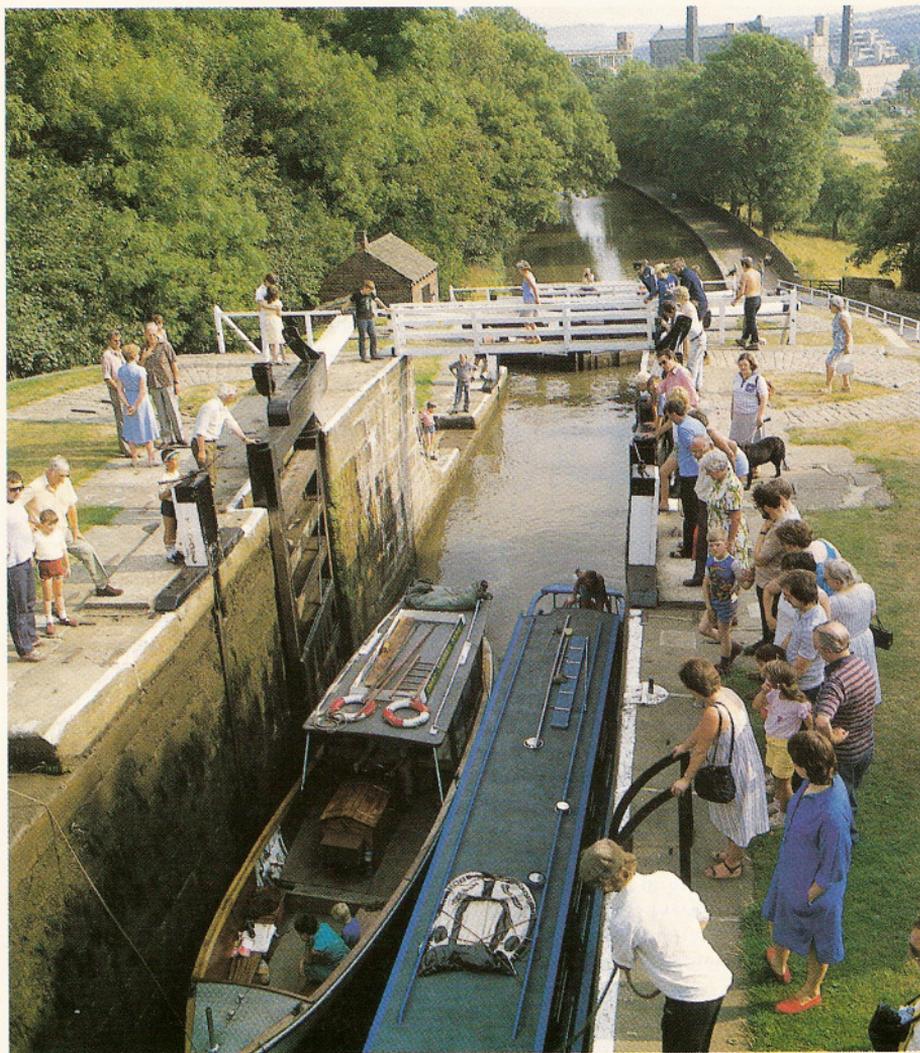
Such a day finds him checking water levels, "because the canal is man-made and man-regulated. We feed so many gallons of water in from reservoirs and that has to be recorded every day. After that, I've 18 miles of water above my head-gates here, so I can get all the rubbish coming down from Gargrave and Skipton, and I've that to clean out. I might be lucky and get none, or it might be two or three barrow-loads.

"Then I check my gearing and also make sure there has been no vandalism during the night." That very morning, in fact, vandalism had indeed been discovered, which was why Barry was talking to Eddie, the carpenter, when I located them at the foot of the Five Rise. It only happens once a blue moon," said



Simon Warner

Bingley lock-keeper Barry Whitelock



Simon Warner

Barry, and this time was nothing very serious: some railings had been broken by the mindless element that gets its kicks that way, and Eddie was cheerfully fitting new ones.

Besides helping with general maintenance Barry logs every boat going through the Five Rise. During the school summer holidays the number averaged between 80 and 150 a week. He also has charge of the Five Rise's smaller brother, the Three Rise, where he performs similar functions. "I open up for business

Busy times at Five Rise

about 8am. If there are no boats waiting to come through I get my mower out and cut the grass" - and very well his charges looked in their trim green mantles.

"Opening for business" seemed a rather academic exercise at the time, because a section of the canal had been drained at Kildwick for repairs, "and that cuts off my water supply from the reservoir. The water comes in just

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below Holmbridge at Gargrave through two little arches underneath the towpath. We feed water from the reservoir into a beck, and we've got to send so much compensation water down the beck for the fish" (of which there is a surprising variety, including bass, bream, roach, gudgeon, trout and carp).

"Further down we have a weir which diverts the water from the beck into the canal, but we've got to send down water for the fish in the river as well. That was a condition when the reservoir was built in the first place."

Apart from anglers, who can apparently sit within yards of each other while remaining silent as the fish, towpath people are a chatty lot, always ready to pass the time of day and often accompanied by equally sociable dogs. Just how many two-footed visitors, I wondered, avail themselves of this amenity?

COUNTER

Barry was delighted to produce exact figures from a pedestrian-counter at the foot of the lock, which on the day before my visit had clocked up 154 people. "And that," he reminded me with some pride, "is in November ... On a summer Sunday there might be six or seven hundred.

"Mid-week you get people using the towpath to get to work. It's also used as a main shopping route from Crossflatts into Bingley, instead of the main road. School parties, sometimes as many as five in a day, visit the locks in midsummer. And we get quite a lot of ramblers who make a circuit of the Leeds-Liverpool, maybe from Shipley up to Bingley, and then they might go over Ilkley Moor."

Most visitors, naturally, are primarily interested in the locks, and the question most often asked is, "When is there a boat due?" It seems the fascination of watching a boat climb the Five Rise staircase is still undimmed despite the passing of two centuries.

Canals may appear placid, but emergencies can happen even here. Once a boat passenger

fell and broke her leg on board, which meant that an ambulance had to be called. Not long ago, arriving for work at 7am, Barry found a narrow-boat tied up to the towpath and a distraught woman knocking on the door of the old lock house. Her husband had just had a heart attack on their boat. Happily, help reached him in time and he has made a good recovery.

Very few people fall into the water, but - also this year - Barry went to the aid of a young woman who was hanging between a boat and the coping stones below the Three Rise. She too was hauled to safety through the efforts of Barry, her husband and a friend. As yet no emergency has required Barry himself to go in the water. "That's seen as a last resort," he said. Vigilance - keeping an eye on the public - is apparently the first safety rule.

Britain's industry no longer depends on her waterways, though a surprising amount of freight is still carried on some of the bigger waterways like the Sheffield and the Aire and Calder. But what a legacy for leisure-seekers and wildlife has come to us from those 18th-century pioneers who first thought of linking England's east and west coasts by means of man-made waterways! "Only yesterday," said Barry, "I saw two kingfishers, two goosanders, and we have foxes, deer, a pair of herons, black mink, stoats and squirrels."

Born in Shipley in 1958, he has been working on the canal for 17 years, and not even winning the national lottery, I gathered, could persuade him to change - "I'm set in my ways," he says, with manifest enjoyment.

Indeed you could say that the Five Rise Locks were born in enjoyment. As the *Leeds Intelligencer* reported of their opening: "This joyful and much wished-for event was welcomed with the ringing of Bingley church bells, a band of music, the firing of guns by the neighbouring militia, the shouts of the spectators and all the marks of satisfaction so important an event merits."



Prophet of Doom

When in the Grosmont area, a driver stopped her car on a very steep hill to ask an old lady at her garden gate: "Is this hill dangerous?"

"Not here it isn't," was the reply, "it's doon at t'bottom where they all kill thersens."

Refuge from Waterloo Lodge MA 122, 1993