

Tom Howard Recalls – A Visit to the Humber Arm

You may remember from articles in S&News last year how Tom Howard enjoyed a nostalgic day in 2002 when he made a trip along various parts of the line of the Shrewsbury and Newport Canals, visiting places he had not seen for half a century or more. Tom, you may recall, was born aboard the horse-drawn narrowboat Boscobel whilst moored at Tyrley top lock, not far from Market Drayton on the Shropshire Union Canal. Son of a local canal family whose father had a boat based at the Norbury Junction repair yard he spent much of his childhood on the boat as his father worked on repairing the bridges or transporting clay for puddling the banks. He then went on to spend much of his ninety years on or near the Shropshire canals including some very special times associated with the Shrewsbury and Newport canals in their closing years. Even now he lives at Brewood, just a stone's throw from his beloved Shropshire Union Canal.

Tom now follows this up with further recollections from his walk down memory lane.

“In my visit back to the Shrewsbury Canal after all those years I went down to the Humber Arm and met with Mandy and John, the owners of the cottage. They made me and my son very welcome and invited us to look around. We first went to the engine house, now without its roof. I think it was a lifetime since I was last in there. There were rails running through it as far as the bridge but these are no longer there. Of course the trains were all steam powered then and the engine was as big as those you used to see on the main line. The train used to go up to Lilleshall and come back with a load of coal or bricks and, as I recall it, was locked up in the engine house each night.

It was always very busy down the Arm and there might be six or seven boats in at a time. But in the period I am talking about it was also a time when neglect was setting in and I recall there were three boats sunk in the arm just rotting sat on the bottom.

Remember, all the boats were pulled by horse or mule. Mules were always considered the best as they would struggle on for hours and wouldn't tire the way horses did. Sometimes to help the mules and to speed up the journey we would harness a pair to the boat. The days were very long – sometimes eighteen hours at a stretch. In a single day we would often set off laden from Norbury, work the seventeen locks and get down to Arnold & Sons yard at Longden Wharf, unload and get back up the seventeen to reach Norbury before we saw our beds. This wasn't so bad in the summer but in the shorter days we had to travel in the light of the paraffin bulkhead lamp so you can guess we knew every bend in the canal and the detail of every lock like the

back of our hands.

Speaking of beds, when we were working the boats our bed was sometimes little more than a couple of planks and was often cold, cramped and very uncomfortable so a long hard day helped to make sure you managed to sleep okay. It was certainly a difficult time but having an upbringing like that stands you in good stead for later life and might help to explain why I am still here at 90- odd. In the summer there was less demand for the coal and so the boat people would take their mules and work on the nearby farms. We certainly had to be a Jack of all trades.

I was the second youngest of six lads and one sister. We all did our stint on the boats though my eldest brother, Charlie, wasn't so keen to start with and went to work on the land. The canal water must have been circulating in his veins like it was for the rest of us though as he went on to work the boats in Wolverhampton when he was older. Like most children we started work proper when we were fourteen and up to then mother always tried to ensure we were properly schooled and went to church. Our school was at High Offley which was very handy for the canal.



The End of the Humber Arm (photo Tom Manning c1950)

Getting back to my recent visit to the arm, I had my photograph taken on top of the bridge facing Kinnersley aqueduct or what some people called Duke's Drive.

Here there used to be a wooden building which acted as a grain store for boat people.

The tow path carried on under a bridge to where there used to be some

stables but these are no more. The path continued to the top end of the arm where there was a well which was mostly used by boat people. You can still see a similar one to this on the green at Norbury Junction opposite where the inspectors house used to be.

I remember that the well water at the Humbers was only about eighteen inches from the top and when I spoke to the couple at the cottage about this they told me it had been filled in but they occasionally had water seeping out of the ground. In my time we would collect our water from here with the metal water cans just like the ones you see in the pictures and that holiday boaters display on their boats now. We used to decorate the water cans, cabin doors, mops, masts, horse shafts and so on, all with the traditional roses and castles. No-one really taught us how to do it but it was a kind of relaxation when you had some time to spare and there always seemed to be someone in the family who would pick up how to do it and could help you make your boat more personal and like home.

I also mentioned to Mandy & John that there used to be a chapel there not far from the cottage but this had been demolished many years ago. I was then invited to look at what we used to call the ticket office. I remember you had to have a chit or ticket for the amount of coal or bricks you had on your boat how long/weighing load and I wonder if the children of today would be happy to work at unloading the boats as we did and catching two bricks at a time without pinching their fingers. When Mandy and John took us in for a cup of tea I noticed the same fire grate still there in what had been the office.

I really enjoyed my visit to the Humber Arm with my son. I'm not really sure if I'll be around to see the re-opening of the Shrewsbury and Newport canals all the way back to Norbury but I feel I will be able to rest easy knowing that at least folk are now trying to bring it back to life and it really will happen one day" Tom is an enthusiastic and very special member of the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals Trust. Do look out for him at future Trust events and he will fascinate you with stories of his life and times on the S&N.