

Boat People Factsheet

Who were they?

- Many of the original boatmen would have been **ex-farm workers** bringing their families with them as the rural economy became industrialised at the turn of the 18th and 19th century. Peasant farmers were being squeezed off their common lands and many moved into the new industrial cities to work in mills and factories. Some became boat people.

The Boating Community

- Boaters became a very **close-knit** community isolated from the rest of society by the nature of their work. They worked long hours, constantly on the move and most were illiterate. People “on the bank” saw them as outsiders and classed them with gypsies.
- Thousands of families lived and worked on the canals and although always on the move they had regular **close contact** with each other. Boaters met at locks or exchanged a few bits of news as their boats passed. If the boat was tied up for the night near one of the waterside pubs there was a chance to sing, dance and gossip.
- Boaters tended to **marry** boaters, though courtship was complicated with irregular meetings and notes having to be written and read for them, or messages passed by friends.

Working Life

- General cargo boats were often **worked by families**, the children leading the horse or working locks from an early age. For many the boat was their only home. They worked long hours (they only got paid for what they delivered) in all weathers, all year round, often loading and unloading by hand.
- **Fly-boats** were an exception. They were always crewed by men and boys. The pay was better, they worked 24 hours a day on regular routes and went home on their days off.
- The working environment was **dangerous** and there were many deaths, especially at locks, at night and in winter. However during the Industrial Revolution it would have been a better life than working in a factory. Boating families worked together and stayed together, enjoying their outdoor independence and the satisfaction that of working their boat and passing those skills down to their children. Many boaters looked down on land dwellers because they had never travelled more than a few miles from their homes.
- **Boatwomen** had an important role, feeding and bringing up a family in difficult surroundings and also steering the boat and helping with locks. Occasionally women would captain working narrowboats, if they were widowed or during the Second World War.
- A little coal from the cargo found its way into the cabin stove, and food from the woods and fields onto the table. Boaters were warmer and better fed than many industrial workers.

Young and Old

- The **children** attended school intermittently while the boat was waiting to load or unload. There were a few ‘school barges’ provided but mostly children were expected to go to local schools until their boat was ready to leave. Boat children were often treated as outsiders at school and much preferred to be off boating.
- Some towns such as Middlewich had many boaters’ relatives living “**on the bank**”. These were centres for weddings, funerals and family get-togethers. Babies were often born on the boats but boat children or sick adults were frequently looked after by these extended families.

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