

Fly-boat Factsheet

Saturn is a restored canal **fly-boat**. From about 1850 to 1920 fly-boats were the express craft of the waterways, the UPS or DHL of a hundred years ago. Running non-stop, day and night, they delivered the important and perishable goods, around the clock around much of the UK waterway network.

Why were Fly-boats special?

- Fly-boats worked to a **regular schedule**. For instance fly-boats left Ellesmere Port at the same time every day for Birmingham, the Potteries, Llangollen, Shrewsbury, Welshpool, Newtown and Trench (Telford).
- They promised **assured regular deliveries**. Customers knew exactly when goods would be picked up and when they would reach their destination. They would also drop off and collect goods at many intermediate points. Some like Rednal were request stops where a signal was set to tell the boat a load was waiting. This service was developed in the 19th century to match that beginning to be provided by the railways and fast road carriers.
- **'Fast boats'** – it was discovered in the 1830's (when a Scottish passenger boat tow horse bolted and was able to keep running for miles!) that towing speed could be more than doubled with little additional towing effort if boats rode their own bow wave – a bit like 'surfing'. In 1847 the SUCC claimed that a single horse was able to tow 22 tons at 10mph! But high speed depended on the depth of canal and the ability to 'catch the bow wave', and can easily be disrupted by other craft. Much fly-boat travel was not at these speeds!

How were Fly-boats different to other canal boats?

- Fly-boats needed expensive resourcing so were run by the **big canal companies** like the Shropshire Union CC, Leeds and Liverpool Co, Grand Union CC or big carriers like Pickfords.
- **Items of cargo** could be booked by anyone to any stop, not contracted by a single provider to a fixed destination. Some fly-boats linked up with other river or road carriers to extend the pick up and delivery areas.
- **Crews** were a specially selected 'elite' and earned more. Fly-boats worked through the **night**, the crew working shifts, grabbing sleep when they could.
- The **cabins** were simpler, more basic, not like Saturn's 'family' back cabin today!
- Boats were **specially built**, finer lines, lower capacity, sometimes built for just a single route.
- Fly-boats were given **preference** at locks, on the towpath and when loading etc.

Shropshire Union Fly-boats

- The Shropshire Union Railway & Canal Company became the best-known operator of extensive fly-boat services. Because they were **owned by a railway Company** (LNWR) and their canal network probed deep into other railway company's territory (GWR), the fast fly-boats remained an effective form of competition right through to the First World War.
- The Shropshire Union fly-boats were distinguished by a **black roundel** on the white top bends at the bow.
- Shroppie Flys were all **horsedrawn wooden narrowboats**. Because of their long pointed bow and stern the hull sides have only a short length of straight planks. The cross section is well-rounded. They never loaded to the tonnage of a general carrying boat, and 15 to 18 tons was about average. Saturn's iron knees show the elegant shaping along her length.

- **Horses** were specially selected and changed regularly, often given better stabling etc. Horse fly-boating meant much organization to deal with the changes of animal, a chain of stables, a reserve of horses, and horse-keepers on duty night and day.
- **Crews** were 'Company men', 3 or 4 employed men and often a boy, no families aboard.
- **Routes.** The No. 1 fly was the Birmingham to Ellesmere Port, with two trips a week, leaving Birmingham at 5.00 pm on Saturdays and Tuesdays. Arrival at Ellesmere Port was at 10.00 pm on Sundays and Wednesdays, a 29-hour journey, the turnaround time being four hours, for the departure was at 2.00 am. Arrival back at Birmingham was at 10.00 am, and the only night off was Friday. There were other fly services from Ellesmere Port to the Potteries, Shrewsbury, Trench, Newtown and Llangollen, with intermediate calls.
- **Cargoes** were miscellaneous goods including perishables such as vegetables and cheese, small items or part loads, discharging and loading at intermediate points as well as the termini. Fly-boats carried a small tonnage and were expensive to operate but the goods paid a higher toll.
- Saturn was a **Cheese fly**. An important part of the carrying trade of the Shropshire Union Company in Cheshire and Shropshire was cheese, made on individual farms but delivered to local canal depots for rapid transit to Manchester for home consumption, and to Ellesmere Port for export. Cheese marketing fairs were held at Market Drayton, Nantwich and Whitchurch on alternate weeks, where designated cheese boats were promptly loaded and dispatched overnight. Other boats collected cheeses from other company warehouses, and the other regular fly boats would load cheeses as part of their mixed cargoes, transshipping into specific cheese boats at Barbridge. Fresh cheese could not be stacked more than two high without damage, so the cheese boats were fitted with a special set of numbered floorboards and bearers to create two extra levels. This meant that a cheese fly could load 17 or 18 tons, where an ordinary boat could only carry 6 or 7 tons. When off-loaded, these fittings had to be dismantled and stacked in the hold, to allow the boat to load any general back cargo, for delivery anywhere on its way to its next regular collection point.

Why preserve a Fly-boat?

- Fly-boats represented the **pinnacle of the art and craft** of wooden narrow boat construction. They needed a tailored combination of fine lines, light weight, fast performance and great strength. Saturn is now the last remaining Shropshire Fly, a beautiful living and moving example of hundreds of years of developing skills.
- Keeping Fly-boat Saturn afloat and in good condition helps to ensure that **wooden boat building**, repair and maintenance skills are still being practiced.
- Keeping Saturn on the move also allows over two hundred years of **horse-boating skills**, heritage which was almost lost, to be regularly practiced and remembered.
- Saturn's history is closely entwined with the **heritage of the areas** around the canals she visits, and the people who live here. She is a reminder to today's young people of a very different world not so long ago; local heritage on the move!

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