

Horse Boating Factsheet

The **towpath** –the towing path for horses pulling boats. Wide enough for two animals to pass, and with no obstructions to the towing rope.

Minimum **crew** for a horse boat has to be two people, one to steer the boat and keep it in the deep water, and one to drive the horse to make sure it doesn't stop, and to clear the towropes and horses of boats coming the other way.

Canal Horses

- Canal horses did not need to be particularly big, but they **had to be tough** to work very long hours – 12 to 14 hours a day was not uncommon. Proper 'Shire' horses were generally too big for many Midland canals and were only in use on the bigger barge canals. Fifteen hands high was about the maximum to get under all the low bridges. (A 'hand' is 4 inches (about 100mm) and is the standard way to measure the height of a horse at the shoulder.) Mules were employed a lot (a crossbreed between a horse and a donkey) and occasionally pairs of donkeys working side by side.
- The **hooves** of all animals working on a hard towpath had to be protected with iron horseshoes, fitted by a skilled blacksmith (a 'farrier'). Horseshoes wore out and had to be replaced and refitted every four or five weeks.
- **Blinkers** -- broad leather patches on either side of the horse's head bridle to stop it seeing sideways, or being distracted or frightened. (They also stopped the horse from looking round to see if the driver was there or not.) Blinkers are now regarded as old-fashioned and less necessary.
- **Stables**. Very important for a hard worked canal horse to have a warm dry stable at night – to be well rested and avoid catching cold, and for the harness to dry off overnight. Everywhere that boats stopped for any length of time had to be provided with stabling – canalside pubs, warehouses or the boatmens' own houses.
- **Horse feed** – Hard working canal horses had to be fed plenty of high energy food regularly during the day -- crushed oats mixed with chopped hay was the usual basis. They could feed going along by using a special canal 'nosetin' which was hung over their head so that no valuable travelling time was wasted. The nosetin could also be used like a bucket for the horse's drinking water.

Harness

- **Harness**, sometimes called 'the gears' on the canal, the general word for the whole set of straps, ropes, collar and bridle necessary for a horse to pull a boat or barge (or a cart or wagon).
- The **collar** – transferring the push from the horses shoulders to the pull on the trace ropes and towline. The collar must be well fitting and comfortable to stop the horse getting sore and being unable to work. Collar must be kept dry, and might be taken into the cabin at night to dry off.
- **Traces** – the pair of ropes (or chains) on either side of the horse that transfer the pull from the collar to the single towrope. The front end of the traces are hooked on to the 'hames', the iron frames that are strapped around the collar, at the back they are attached to the ends of the spreader bar.

- **Bobbins**, sometimes called 'spoles' (spools) -- wooden rollers fitted on the trace ropes to prevent chafing on the the horse's flanks, because the harness is always pulling slightly sideways towards the boat out in the middle of the canal. Some boat harness has light chain traces covered in a leather tube to protect the horse.
- **Spreader bar** – the wooden bar at the back of the horse harness that holds the trace ropes apart, and stops them squeezing in on the horse's flanks. If it has a single hook in the middle for the towline it is called a 'swingletree'.

Towline

- The towline for a horse drawn narrow boat is about **90 foot long** (30 metres or so) made of cotton of about 5/8 inch diameter (say 15 mm). If it was any shorter it would tend to pull the boat into the bank and the back of the horse towards the water. It is relatively stretchy, which helps the horse when starting off, and it has to sink to the bottom of the canal when it is slack so that oncoming boats can float over it. Towlines would wear out and have to renewed every three weeks or so from rubbing on the towpath, on the lock-sides and through the bridges.
- The towline is attached to the boat's **towing mast** by a simple spliced loop at the end of the rope hooked over the 'luby', an iron peg on the top of the mast. This is designed to hinge backwards so that the rope slips off easily if the towline gets snagged round something and the moving boat's momentum might start to pull the horse backwards, a very dangerous situation. The other end of the rope where it is attached to the horse harness also has to be very easily detached in case of an emergency, often a simple knot at the end which jams into the bight of a loop of rope from the spreader bar.

Technique

- **Meeting** another horseboat coming the other way – Two ways.... Either one horse slows or stops for a moment and as the boat catches up the towline goes slack and sinks into the water – the oncoming horse steps over the rope on the towpath and the boat floats over it and travels on, OR the taut towline is lifted over the oncoming horse and the other boat travels under the towrope. This is quicker but quite dangerous as the tight towline might catch on the boat or disastrously on the steerer...
- **Rights of way** – An empty boat gave way to a loaded boat coming the other way, and an uphill boat (working against the current) had right of way over a downhill boat. (Not sure what happened on summit levels...)
- **'Baccering'** is the term used for a horse working by itself, pulling the boat along without anyone driving it. This could only happen on relatively quiet canals when the boat had right of way, but it gave the driver a chance to ride on the boat and have a meal whilst going along, and perhaps smoke a pipefull of 'bacca' too.

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