



THREE MILES PER HOUR

THE SHEFFIELD AND SOUTH YORKSHIRE NAVIGATION

*Even in a busy city, the canal is a place to discover, to slow down and dream.
Hole & Corner set off at a steady 3mph along a stretch
of the 2,000 miles of waterways cared for by the Canal & River Trust,
taking in the people, the history and the changing landscape...
not to mention the time to dream and reflect*



Stainforth, South Yorkshire, 20 April, 2016

Names given to the great barges rise like smoke from the pages of an album of old photographs: *Mayflower*, *Ladysmith*, *Serenity*, *Gratitude*, *Goodwill*, *Forget-Me-Not*, *Syria*, *Progress*, *Confidence*. During the last War they might have carried wood pulp, grain – arrived by ship from Canada and America – egg powder, or sand from Keadby bound for Redfearn's glassworks at Barnsley.

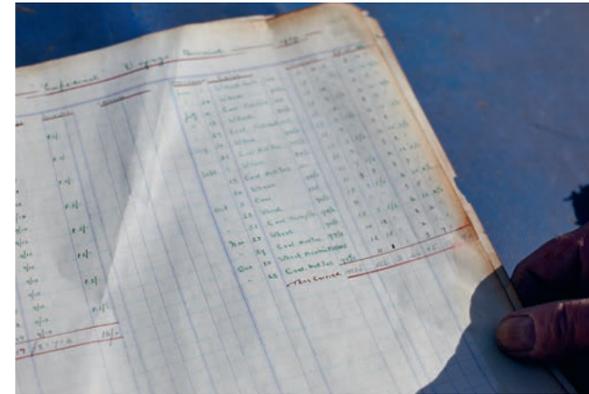
In 1939 Victor Waddington, a legendary figure in the history of the 20th Century South Yorkshire Waterways, carried 3,000 tons of coal a week on his barges from Rotherham to Blackburn Meadows power station below Tinsley Locks. Stephen, his eldest son, still oversees the family boatyard at Swinton, but he stopped running boats eight years ago after one got stuck in a canal dredged by an outside contractor. This magnificent site stands as a testament to an all-but-vanished era: the vast saturnine hull of *Progress* looms from within its ancient dry dock; paper invoices from the 1930s and 40s, fastidiously made out in copperplate red and black ink, lie in cardboard

boxes; nails once used to build and repair timber boats are ranged like sleeping armies in row upon pigeon-holed row.

Mike Abson, a gentle – and now retired – Humber River Pilot from 1976-2001, eases *Vulcan*, his gleamingly restored pea-green dredger (built in 1865 as a steam-driven towing barge) out into the wide open waters of the Stainforth & Keadby Canal. The sun is shining like a great benediction, a scattering refraction, dancing in staccato bursts along the vessel's wake.

Spring is arrived; hawthorns blossom along the emerald banks. A man walks his Great Dane (or is it the reverse?), waving to us as we pass. There are fishermen, and there will be kingfishers, flashing blue and green from their waterside hideouts. Herons and swans escort us to Swinton, some 15 miles up river and canal. Horses graze the fields lining our route; magpies stand sentinel on galvanised metal fencing sprung from grassed-up mounds of silt.

On a day like this, in a place like this, with a sharp chill wind to cool your tired eyes, you will breathe deeply and



Previous page:
Union flag; Stephen Waddington looking towards the Sheffield and South Yorkshire Navigation. Left: Waddington at the boatyard set up by his father, Victor, in 1923. Revered on the waterways, for 70 years Victor ran a tight ship. On seeing a nail on the floor, according to Stephen, he'd have said to his workmen, 'If that'd been a Woodbine you'd have picked it up!' Right: A gongozler* at Swinton





A water extraction unit at Tata steelworks, between Aldwarke and Kilnhurst on the River Don



thank your lucky stars that you are here. You will meet kindness and good humour and generosity. I am a stranger welcomed with stories and jokes and songs.

A week ago I had read a poem by Philip Larkin at the funeral of my mother, and now fate decrees that Mike's wife Sue, who nursed the great poet during his final illness at Hull Royal Infirmary, is here on this boat, bringing cups of tea, balanced like a tightrope walker along the narrowest of decks – for this was no barge built for pleasure boating, it was made to haul and dredge. But the great days are over – the power stations and coalmines and steel works all but gone. A new role is sought for this grand and beautiful monument, this post-industrial Venice of the North.

We pass a gleaming new Lidl, which Mike remembers as an engineering works, its boiler-suited workers once stood by these waters on their fag breaks. A long-gone dry dock is pointed out to our left. Mike coasts his boat



Top left: Indigo, one of Keith Culshaw's spaniels, at the entrance to Kilnhurst flood lock in the background
Left: Stephen Waddington's address book
Above: Keith Culshaw's Sheffield barge, *Valiant*, approaching Kilnhurst flood lock



Left: The A1 crossing the River Don at Sprotborough.
Above: cars salvaged from the navigation: 'They'll put a brick on the accelerator and a broom handle on the clutch and let them go,' says Graham Barras, lock keeper, on the dumping of cars in the canal. Their roofs are crushed by passing barges



to a deep excavation filled with bushes and trees and vegetation. All is silence.

The present pays its unspoken respects to a past of ingenuity and craftsmanship; here are the ghosts of men who for generations worked these waters. And now the beds are silting up. The propeller churns clouds of mud until we move out and along once more. On a day like this you cannot – serenaded as we are by birdsong and leaves in bud – believe this place to be haunted. But look at the photographs and speak to the men still living who knew these waters as children, when boats loaded with timber and coal moved in state, and memories rise up.

Keith Culshaw, 34, lives on his Sheffield-sized, 61.5ft barge, *Valiant*, with his two lively spaniels. He bought the boat, once Waddington's, 10 years ago. We meet at Ickles Lock, just west of Rotherham. From the driver's seat of his white van, Graham Barras, lock keeper on these waters for 31 years, delivers a word-perfect rendition of George Formby's classic wartime song, 'Our Sergeant Major'.

We make our way sedately down the navigation. At Rotherham lock we stand patiently between the law courts and a gleaming new apartment block. A clutch of gongoozlers* surveys our progress from a footbridge above our heads. A lad in a grey hoodie drinks from a bottle of red wine: 'Where are the vineyards? Aldi!'

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*Gongoozler: 'An idle and inquisitive person who stands staring for prolonged periods at anything out of the common'. – H.R. De Salis, *A Handbook of Inland Navigation*, 1901

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