

Mendip

Mendip is a composite (steel sides and wooden bottom) motor narrow boat, famous as home to 'Chocolate Charlie' for many years

After the Second World War, Fellows, Morton and Clayton (FMC) ordered six steel motor boat hulls from Yarwoods of Northwich which were delivered in 1947. No. 5 was *Mendip* so she was one of the last two 'Joshers' ever to be built to a unique design of which had hardly altered from the 1880s. The boats drew their nick-name of 'Josher' from Joshua Fellows, who produced the original design.

As FMC Fleet no. 361, *Mendip* suffered from inordinate delays in her fitting-out at Saltley, probably because of the uncertainties of the impending nationalisation of the canals. On 18/11/48 FMC went into voluntary liquidation and on 01/01/49 *Mendip* was sold to the British Transport Commission (Dock and Inland Waterways Executive), later to become today's British Waterways.

Fitting out continued at the ex-FMC boatyard at Saltley and finally, in October 1949, the boat was commissioned as *Mendip*, fleet no. 137. She was allocated to North West Division, Southern Carrying Fleet. The same month she was registered with the Birmingham Urban Sanitary Authority as an accommodation unit. The cabin, which could sleep 3 adults, measured 8 ft 4 ins long x 5 ft 9½ ins wide, with a height of 5 ft 3½ ins.

In February 1950 records show that *Mendip* was inspected at Weston Point. Fred Morton was her master however, within the year, 'Chocolate Charlie' had taken over as master. His association with the boat was to last for more than 30 years.

When 'Chocolate Charlie' (Charlie Atkins) first became her master, *Mendip* carried chocolate crumb between the North West and Birmingham. The crumb was carried from Cadburys of Knighton on the Shropshire Union Canal (Market Drayton) to Bournville at Birmingham. The journey, carrying a 25 ton load, involved 50 locks and took 14 hours. In a normal working week, Charlie would manage to do two round trips.

Charlie was born in 1902 into a boating family at Moss Pool Lock on the Newport Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal. He learned his boating skills on the Shroppie Flys until, at the age of 17, he took over his own boat, the horse boat *Skate*, working for the Chester and Liverpool Lighterage Co. He then worked for Midland and Coast for 12 years before joining FMC.

On a bleak and snowy night at the end of December 1951, 14-year-old William Bellingham was drowned at Wheaton Aston lock on the Shropshire Union Canal. Charlie, then aged 50, was the last person to see him alive and, using a long rake, recovered his body from the lock. William's family worked for Thomas Clayton (Oldbury) Ltd.

When the chocolate crumb trade finished in 1962, Charlie and *Mendip* joined the British Waterways' Anderton-based fleet. Trade was in aluminium ingots from Manchester to Wolverhampton, and feldspar (a basic pottery material) from Weston Point to Stoke-on-Trent, with a return load of coal to Seddon Salt at Middlewich. Later, grinding sand was carried locally for I.C.I.

In 1964 *Mendip* was leased to Willow Wrens. In November 1967, when the manager of Willow Wrens formed his own company, the Anderton Canal Carrying Company, Charlie and *Mendip* joined them until 1974. Her last load was transporting concrete piles used to reinforce canal banks at Calf Heath.

Once *Mendip* and Charlie had finished their working lives, they moored up at Preston Brook. It was during these years, with the rising interest in canals, that Charlie appeared in various television programmes which earned him modest national fame. In 1976, he was reverently described in a national boating magazine as follows: "At 74, he still has the same tanned, weather-beaten face, creased with almost as many lines as miles of canal he has travelled; the same deep-set twinkling eyes, always smiling and the same optimism."

As the area round Preston Brook began to be developed, it was suggested that both man and boat should move to Ellesmere Port as a sort of floating resident caretaker at the Boat Museum. Charlie was considering it when, because of ill health, his doctor ordered him to move off the boat. He went to live with his son in Birmingham.

In the meantime, the boat was kept at Preston Brook as it was hoped he would return to it. Sadly he didn't and he died in June 1981.

Following his death, Harry Arnold said of him in *Canal and Riverboat*, "He was a gentleman in the proper sense of the word and his death is like the closing of a door on another era of canal history. Many of us will miss the twinkling smile and the shake of the head, but there will be many times with Charlie Atkins that will never be forgotten".

British Waterways loaned this boat with its unique association with 'Chocolate Charlie' to the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port. Shortly after her arrival, she was repainted in the blue and yellow British Waterways' livery of the 1950s.

A few years later, in September 1986, following some restoration work on *Mendip*, funded by Cadbury Typhoo Ltd, she was loaned to Premier Brands UK Ltd at Knighton, now owners of the Cadbury's brand, as part of their factory 75th Anniversary celebrations. A number of people involved in the Cadbury's trade and the canals revisited the boat bringing back for them some poignant memories.

In 1993, Derek Cochrane, Regional Manager for British Waterways, presented the ownership of *Mendip* to the Boat Museum. Major restoration/conservation work was carried out on her in 1998/99. She was

repainted in the Anderton Canal Carrying Company colours and the traditional Roses and Castles style.

Technical Information
Length: 70.5 ft
Width: 7.08 ft
Capacity: 25 tons
Engine: Initially an oil engine, 1 cylinder by J & C G Bolinder, Stockholm, Sweden 15 bhp (however, not powerful enough to tow a butty), and, later, a Lister FR2 engine
Year of original construction: 1948, along with 'Malvern'
Builders name: W J Yarwood & Sons Ltd. of Northwich, yard no. 806, fitted out by FMC at Saltley at a total cost of £1,650
For whom built: Fellows Morton and Clayton Ltd.(FMC), Fleet no. 361