

SIGHT SEEN PARTNERSHIPS (Capturing waterway skills on film)

How it all began.

As the Operations Manager for British Waterways' Birmingham & Black Country Canals (B&BCC), Glyn Phillips became aware that the former 1890's Shropshire Union Canal warehouse in Broad Street, Wolverhampton was going to be surplus to the daily operation of the local Section. By June 1996, a lease was to be granted to enable the Listed Building to be converted into a nightclub.

Although he had been past it many times over the previous 30 years, like most people, Glyn had never managed to take a look inside. Gaining access for the first time, he couldn't believe his eyes. Everything was still in place, exactly as it was left when the narrowboat traffic ceased some 40 years earlier. As a canal enthusiast of many years, and a member of the Canals and Water Engineering Advisory Panel to the Black Country Living Museum, he realised that the building should be recorded for future generations to appreciate and understand. He thought that the best medium for recording might be to video the building, paying particular attention to the novel crane arrangement that served the warehouse on two floors, with its single electric motor and extensive belt driven overhead line shafting.

Glyn enlisted the help of Eliza Botham, the Marketing Co-ordinator at BW, B&BCC, who was able to secure some funding, and with this promise, he contacted Ian Walden at the Black Country Living Museum and Tony Conder at the National Waterways Museum to source further finance. Dudley Canal Trust volunteers jury-rigged a modern electric motor to make it all work safely, and with volunteers Tony Gregory and Peter Freakley, the warehouse was tidied and prepared for filming. Eventually, sufficient funds were promised, and in May 1996, I.A. Recordings were engaged to carry out the recording work with all haste. Filming was completed just a couple of days before the building was gutted.

Due to a lack of funding for editing, it was to be a further two years before the finished film, '*Warehouse at Work*' was made public.

Securing the past for the future.

For some time, it had been realised that the people who worked on the canals before 1960 were passing away, and with them, valuable knowledge, and the skills necessary to maintain and operate a working canal system. For many years, volunteers from the Boat Museum Society and the Black Country Museum had discussed how best to record the disappearing skills. Now, with the experience gained making '*Warehouse at Work*', they realised that here was a way forward. A partnership was formed between members of The National Waterways Museum, The Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port, Stoke Bruerne Canal Museum, The Boat Museum Society, The Black Country Living Museum and staff at British Waterways.

The main objectives of the Partnership were stated as:

- To research the skills and techniques used to operate canals.
- To endeavour to pass some of these skills to future generations.
- To record on film, the techniques, for the archive and possible future sale.
- To publicise the work of BW, BMS, BCLM, NWM, HNBOC, etc
- To foster co-operation between BW and voluntary groups.
- To illustrate why the canal furniture is positioned as it is.

The group was still, at this stage, an ad hoc collection of canal enthusiasts and volunteers, with employees of BW, who referred to themselves as members of the 'Heritage Film Group'.

A sound footing.

Members of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal Society (W&BCS) suggested that the Astwood Flight on 'their' canal might be a suitable location to film horse boating techniques. It had the advantage of being a relatively unspoilt section of canal still with most of its original furniture. It had the added bonus that there were no pylons or motorways to mar the scene or ambience. There had been discussions with the Boat Museum Society (BMS) who had recently restored their 1926 horse boat 'Gifford', and also with ex Boatman Tom Mayo, who was to provide the knowledge and local experience. With local enthusiasm, a positive canal management team, the involvement of the Historic Narrow Boat Owners Club, the commitment of horse boat 'Northwich' from NWM, and with the project management skills of BW's Annette Simpson and W&BCS/BMS member Mike Woodhead welding all this together, sufficient funding was raised. With two experienced horses and handlers, and the involvement of many volunteers, we were ready for filming. Learning from the Broad Street film, a director was appointed in the form of Tony Lewery, and the storyboard, which he produced, enabled filming to be done in a more workmanlike manner. The finished product, '***Towpath Encounter***', has received much acclaim, and has been used to great effect in telling the story of boating before the advent of the internal combustion engine.

The video cover now sported the name **Sight Seen Partnership** - the group now had a proper identity!

The changing scene.

During 1999, it was brought to the attention of Sight Seen Partnership that the area surrounding Anglesey Basin on the edge of Cannock Chase was about to change forever. The coming of the Birmingham Northern Relief Road (later to become the M6 Toll Road) would alter the scene where countless boats had been loaded to transport Cannock coal to the industries of Birmingham and the Black Country. The last boats had left the wharf in the mid 1960's, and nature had taken over. Local BW staff set to and cleared the scrub and exposed the loading chutes. Bernard Hales & Partners offered the loan of their powerful tug 'Enterprise' and a joey boat, and two other boats were borrowed to make up a meaningful train. 'Enterprise' had been one of the last tugs to operate from Anglesey Basin before the traffic ceased. The filming of the '***Last Coal Run from Anglesey***' took place in mid September 1999, and was funded through BW Midland Region's Working Boat Project. Under the terms of their grant funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, they were obliged to make instructional films for their volunteer members, and for educational purposes. Filming was arranged so that the arrival of the train coincided with the biannual Boaters' Gathering at the Black Country Living Museum. The film, like its predecessors, makes much of the techniques, skills and expertise needed for the safe operation of heavy loads and boats.

Before it's too late.

A stable building at Wheelock in Cheshire, whilst not under immediate threat, was indicated to SSP. On inspection, it was found to be in a remarkable state of preservation. With the cooperation of the local waterway manager, a community project was set up in order to involve the local people, and a Local Heritage Initiative Grant was applied for. After a long wait for the funding to be granted, in October 2002 '***A Tanner a Night***' was filmed with the help and assistance of the Horse Boating Society, Trent & Mersey Canal Society, Boat Museum Society, Bill Atkins and many other volunteers.

Educate and Instruct.

By 2002, British Waterways Midland Region's Working Boat Fleet had a Grand Union pair (motor and butty) in perfect working order, complete with all their ropes, straps, running blocks, cloths, strings etc. The opportunity was seized by SSP to record how to cloth up a pair of boats.

August 2003 saw 'Atlas' and 'Leo' at Sampson Road Depot for the making of '***Topcloth and Tippet***'. The commentary by retired boat captain Phil Garratt not only describes the scene, but also informs of other methods equally acceptable, and fulfils the instructional role admirably.

What the Future Holds.

Where does one begin? The canals of the 21st Century are rapidly changing. Employees with up to 40 years service have all gone into retirement or are passing away. We must record their reminiscences before it's too late.

Like most organisations, SSP has a Wish List! We would like to record all the following, and more:

Long Lining, Working a Motor & Butty through broad locks. Tunnel tugs at work. BCN Day boating/Horse boating with wooden joey boat. Horse drawn Leeds & Liverpool Short boat. Boat Maintenance & Construction. Working a pair in Cheshire Locks. Ice breaking. Lock gate manufacture and fitting

The list gets longer as one thinks about it!

What is very apparent, is that there is no shortage of suitable material to record! However, before embarking on a project SSP is very aware that it must assess the following:

- What is its historical importance and archive value?
- What is its training value to others?
- Do we have finance in place?
- Location, informant, performer/demonstrators, support team availability?
- Do we have the co-operation of the local BW manager and appropriate craft & equipment?
- Marketability?
- Community involvement?
- Limiting factors – film costs, editing costs, and volunteer time – writing & recording commentary, availability of suitable background music.

Note: Filming has taken place at the Black Country Living Museum using Boat Raising Tackle, demonstrating how to raise a sunken loaded boat. The film is currently being edited, and will be released as soon as possible.

The current Organisation.

The current Partners are The Waterways Trust (Encompassing The National Waterways Museum, The Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port and Stoke Bruerne Canal Museum), The Boat Museum Society, The Black Country Living Museum, The Historic Narrow Boat Owners Club and British Waterways.

SSP is a non-profit making group whose prime objective is to make films and video recordings, documenting historic scenes, activities and traditional working practices on Britain's inland waterways. Its aims are to instigate, administrate and market such films for educational, archive and training purposes.

SSP is not a registered company or charity.

SSP operates by forming partnerships for specific projects between SS partners, funders and other interested parties, and looks for third party support to organise project accounting on a project-by-project basis.

If you think you know of a threatened location, disappearing skill, or knowledge of funding, you may be able to help in a project under the SSP banner – do contact us.

Who to contact:

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