

Life on the Boats



Families on board

On some canals families began to live aboard the boats with their husbands or dads. This saved them money as they didn't have to pay for a house on the land. Only the captain of the boat got paid but the whole family helped with the jobs on the boat. The quicker the boat got to the destination, the sooner they were paid for their load.



Pay

There was only one wage for the boat even though the whole family was helping out. Boaters were paid by the ton of cargo they delivered not by the hour or week. This meant the faster you worked, the more trips you could do and the more you were paid.

If the cargo was unloaded by the boaters, they were paid more. Some families worked more than one pair of boats so were able to carry double the amount of cargo.

Hours

Working 12 to 15 hours a day was considered normal and on some stretches it was not unusual to work 18 hours.

Space

Space was limited on board. Families were often large and overcrowding on boats was considered a problem. The whole family lived in one cabin that was approximately 3 x 2 m.



There were no toilets on the boats. The boaters used chamber pots, which were emptied into the canal. Or in countryside areas they probably just nipped behind a bush! Boats today have flushing toilets and showers!

There was no running water on the boats. Water taps or pumps were provided alongside the canal. This was used for drinking and cooking. It was stored in water cans kept on the roof of the boat. Water for washing and cleaning was often taken from the canal.

Inside the cabin

Cabins were small and every last bit of space had to be used carefully.

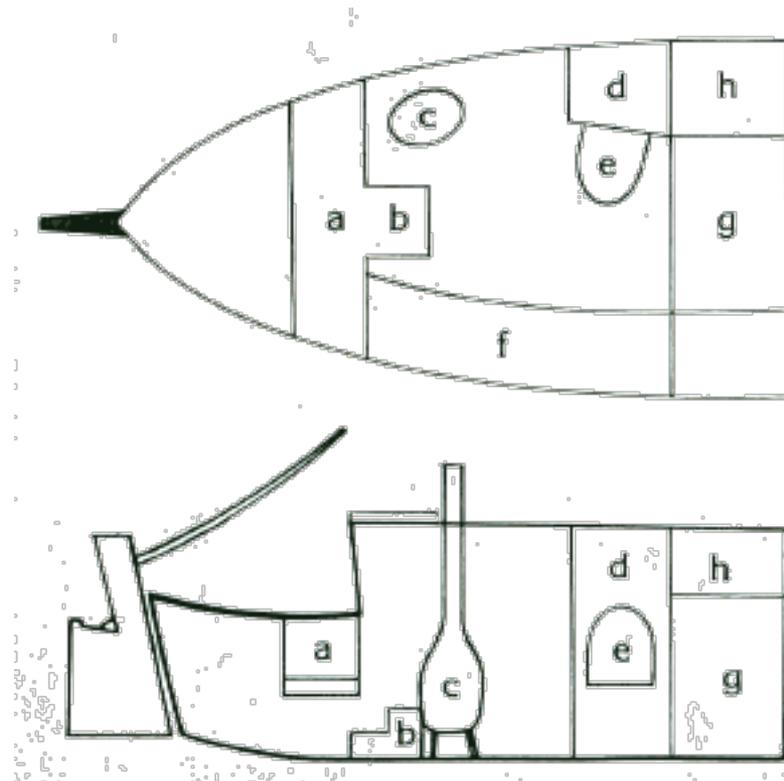
Everything has a place. The majority of the boat had to be given over to carrying the cargo. This did not mean that the boats didn't look like home. On boats where women lived, the cabins were often highly decorated and very well organised.



The inside of the cabin was often painted cream and 'combed' with brown paint to create grained patterns. Cupboard doors and drawer fronts were made with panels that had pictures painted on them. The decoration was influenced by the Victorian style of the time, which meant lots of frills and fancy items. This made living in such a small space easier as it was such a colourful, cosy place.



The cabin was entered from the 'hatches' (a) through a pair of doors, with the coal box acting as a step (b). On the left stood a range or a bottle stove (c) which was kept alight all the year round for cooking and boiling water for making tea. Next to the range, was a large cupboard for crockery (d) which had a door that was hinged at the bottom so it could be dropped down to form a table (e).



On the right-hand side of the cabin was a side bed (f) which served as a seat during the day and as a bed for children at night, with storage space underneath. Forward of the day cabin was a double bed formed by a mattress on a wooden flap (g) which was folded up to the left during the day to form the front of a cupboard (h), leaving a further area for seating on a bench to the right. This sleeping area could be divided off from the rest of the cabin by curtains at night to give the parents more privacy, and a new baby could sleep on a shelf of the open cupboard. In the stern of a horse boat, behind the hatches, was a small cupboard where food was stored away from the warmth of the cabin. On the roof of the cabin were kept one or two water cans for storing fresh water for drinking and cooking, which were refilled when necessary from stand-pipes along the canal route. Some boats had a small fore-cabin in the bow of the boat to provide additional space.

The Outside of the Boat

- The outside of the boat was kept smart as it represented the company and showed a sense of pride.
- Colours
Boats were given names, which were shown on the outside, and also had to display the company's name, if it wasn't privately owned. It was important that the lettering could be seen from a distance. It had a least 2 colours, with the font changing to suit the styles of the time.
- The most popular colours for boats were red, white, blue, yellow and green.
- There were people who decorated boats as a job, but some boaters preferred to decorate their own. The brightly painted boats stood out from other forms of transport and the dull colours of the industrial era.





Roses and castles

No one knows where the canal painting known as roses and castles came from, but it is still popular today.

Roses and castles probably started being used because beautiful landscape and flower paintings were popular at the time.

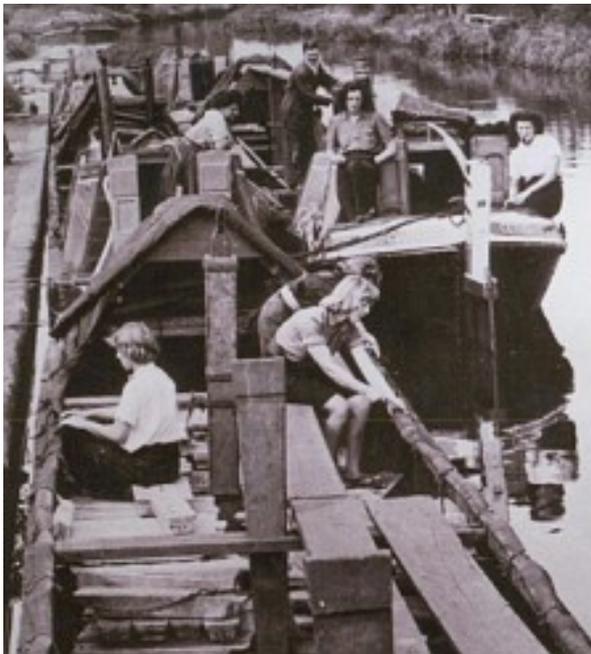
The boating community created their own style, which varies from region to region.

The technique for roses was to paint quite quickly with broad strokes, the more stylised designs taking less time to complete



Play

Boat children didn't have much time to play, as from around 5 years old they began helping to steer the boat. Children enjoyed playing in the hold when it was empty or on cargoes such as coal. If the hold was empty, a swing could be hung from the planks above. Cowboys and Indians was a popular game, possibly because of the horses.



On loan

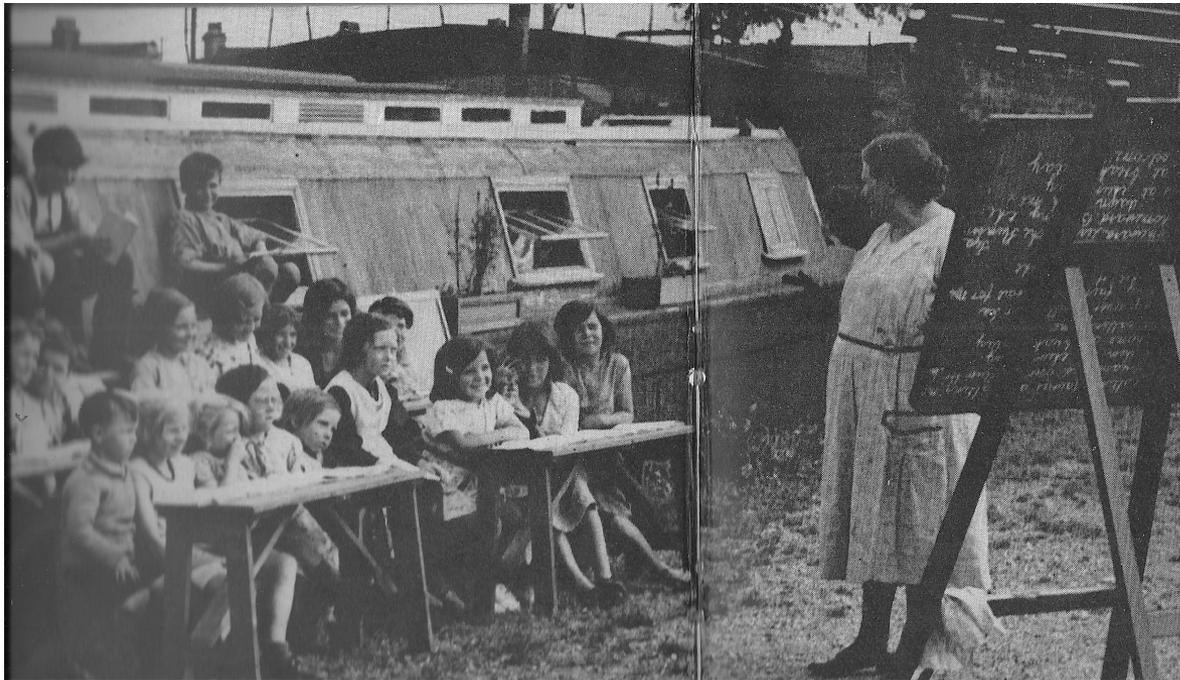
Children were often lent out to other boats that didn't have as many helping hands, although the majority of children lived on their parents' boats. This is not quite as bad as it sounds as they mostly knew the people they were going to. Most were well cared for, although had to work hard. They were leading the horse by about 7 years old, and working locks by age 12 was not uncommon.



Education

Going to school was difficult for children living on narrow boats because they were always on the move.

Most children hardly went to school at all, only for about three weeks a year. Sometimes they would go to school for half a day or occasionally up to a week, depending how long their boats were tied up.



"I was born in 1920 on the coal boat Mabel belonging to West Leigh collieries, I was actually born three foot six under water - because at the time the boat was loaded!

I grew up on the boats, but from five or six onwards I sometimes used to stay with relatives for a bit to go to school, what little bit of school we may have. I spent a month or so with my gran going to Barnton school and, before my great grandfather died, I spent a little time living up at Hill Top and I went to Little Leigh school. I've been to school in Liverpool, I've been to school in Burscough, I've been to school in the midlands, I've been to school everywhere. But from eight onwards I worked on the boats."

My dad was badly wounded in the 1914-18 war, so I more or less was the man of the family. He taught me a lot and relied on me a lot. As far as horseflesh was concerned, judging horses, I was buying and selling horses when I was nine years old! That was the education that the boat lads got, learning rope work, paint work, roses and castles, pricings so forth."

"We was lent out a lot, today they've got a posh name for it, fostered, but we was lent out to work for our keep! I've been lent out to more families than I can remember."



Jack Allen at 14