

THE BIRMINGHAM POST WEDNESDAY MARCH 27 1940
CANAL CARGOES
WARES THAT COME TO BIRMINGHAM

My first glimpse of the canal boats was through big open gates in Fazeley Street, Birmingham. A strip of water stretched between tall dark warehouses, and moored to the wharves on either side lay long narrow barges. Warehouses and wharves were in shadow, but sunshine caught the gaily painted sides and prows of the boats, and lit up patterns of blue, yellow, red and green that seemed bizarre in the dull dingy environment.

Few people are aware of the tremendous amount of business transacted by means of canals. Constructed more than a century ago, they are – in these days specially – important traffic routes. By them Birmingham is linked to London, Coventry, Worcester, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Hull, Lincoln, Oxford and intermediate towns. The canals form a vast network of arteries communicating one with another.

There are five wharves in Birmingham, and that which I saw is not only journey's end but journey's beginning. Some of the boats had just arrived from London ; others were loaded, and their cargoes securely covered with sheets of tarpaulin, in readiness to start that night. The voyage to London takes about three days, and the barges travel in pairs. A motorboat with a semi-Diesel engine trails a "butty" or engine-less barge, and the two vessels between them carry a cargo of fifty tons. There are very few horse drawn barges today.

On board each boat lives a family – father, mother, children and sometimes a dog as well. The tiny cabin is cramped but compact and spotlessly clean. Bunks fold up, tables are cupboard flaps, and the walls seem to be made of cupboards and drawers. Fittings and utensils are all decorated with traditional gaudy designs largely composed of roses and castles – roses symbolic of beauty, castles of worldly honour. Sometimes there are hearts too, for romance ; and the pictures are painted in the old unchanging style by a special artist.

The voyage is quiet and monotonous. Placidly through towns and rural scenery the Grand Union Canal winds. Between Birmingham and London, a distance of 150 miles, there are 150 locks to be negotiated, and the families on board turn out to work the gates. In one section, near Tring, the waterway gradually rises to the height of St Paul's dome by means of locks.

This canal has two outlets into the Thames – one at Regent's Canal Dock, Limehouse, the other at Brentford, almost opposite Kew Gardens. At these docks the exchange of cargoes is effected. Birmingham sends copper, pig lead, scrap metals, aluminium and tin, hemp, cocoa, timber and iron manufactures such as tubes and galvanised sheets. She receives sugar, tinned goods, dried fruit, grain, starch, rice, dried milk, dates, paper and borax. Two or three days suffice for unloading and loading, and then the return trip commences.

One of the most interesting cargoes consists of large black wicker hampers from the Soudan, packed with long wooden spools of greyish white cotton. There are immense rolls of paper from Finland ; and thousands of tons of tea come to Birmingham each year. That from China is warehoused on arrival at London, and divided into smaller quantities for distribution ; but tea from Ceylon travels all the way to Birmingham via water. The chests are transshipped directly from the steamers to canal boats, and touch land only when they are unloaded at Birmingham wharves.

Canal warehouses in the city are vast shadowy places stacked high with boxes, crates and rolls. One floor is entirely given over to sugar ; another to rice ; another to tea ; and so on. Labels and stamps tell of cargoes from Australia, Buenos Aires, Uruguay, South and Central Africa, Mesopotamia, Italy, Holland – all carried quietly and unobtrusively by canal boats.