

# Photographers Drive Away Bargemen

By Our Special Correspondent W. E. HALL

The boatmen who work the waters of the Midland canals are disgruntled, not because of trading conditions, but because of the curiosity of the public, which is indulged in at the expense of ordinary courtesy. Some people insist on taking photographs; others just stand and stare.

THE still—and not very deep—waters of canals in the Midlands and, I have no doubt, the country, are being ruffled by something more than the wind. The canals, declining in importance as a trade artery, unhappily, have become an amenity. People go to cruise on them, or walk by them, in search of the picturesque, or just to stand and stare.

Their ways, often, do not fit those of the boatmen working trading boats who are there because they have a job to do. I have been told of men who have gone to other jobs because they "can't stand it"; and Mr. of Long Itchington, who has been a boatman nearly all his life, is giving up because, among other reasons, he will not put up with it any longer.

More than any other single thing, "it" is the intrusive camera, who, with his wife and son, has been working two boats carrying tar from Leamington to Banbury, making two round trips a week, is infuriated by people who try to take his photograph. He has held his jacket up in front of his face and has even threatened the very persistent with the windlass handle used to open the sluices at the locks.

One man with a cine-camera tried to placate him by saying that he only wanted him "for a laughing-stock."

"He didn't take my photo," said. The boat, he says (and his wife will echo him, is his home. "Would you like people staring into your home and taking pictures of you?"

moored at the wharf at Braunston, was more explicit. "You get pretty messed up at this job. You don't want your photo taken all the time."

His wife said that people seemed to find it especially queer if they had a meal when they were going along. "You'd think they'd never seen anyone eat." Her husband would sometimes go without food if there were many people about—"Me, I don't care. Let them get on with it."

does not mind being photographed if he is asked, though he suspects, and is not very happy about it, that some make plenty of money out of photographs of canal boatmen. What rankles most is silence. "People stare and don't speak. You wouldn't think we were human beings."

THE locks at Watford are the worst place. Crowds of people gather there, particularly at holiday times and week-ends, lining the lock-side, just staring and saying nothing. There are other and worse hazards—youngsters in and around Birmingham, for instance, will spit

from bridges on to the boats and boatmen passing below, or drop bricks—but it is the bleak silence that

and his wife feel

most. It gets worse as London is approached. The dividing line was somewhere near Braunston.

thought. On the Birmingham side of the line and further north people would speak and pass the time of day; south, they would not.

"A Birmingham man will always speak. Numbers of Birmingham people want to come with us for a holiday. I could bring lots of them, but we haven't got the room."

AS it happened, my meeting was an odd coincidence. I had seen him the week before working his boat through the Birmingham locks which run parallel with Great Charles Street. This was a virtuoso performance, with the boat being left at intervals to chug along by itself while he was working the locks. I did not wish good morning, as I told him later, because he was so absorbed and what he was doing was

so finely calculated, so timed to the second, that it seemed that the briefest greeting would have thrown the whole thing out of gear. This seemed to me then, and does now, a legitimate reason for silence.

To his wife, bringing the motorless "butty" boat up through the locks he had prepared, I did say good-morning because she was working to a slower tempo. "Ah," she said, when I reminded her of this. "I was pulling twenty tons."

Difficulty, of course, is bound to arise from mixing the expert and the inexpert together. Some pleasure boaters do not use the locks properly, and add to the work of the trading boatman who comes after them. Others will cast off their moorings in a hurry if a trading boat is coming so that they can be first up a flight of clear locks.

Others, yet again, will wave trading boats ahead out of mistaken politeness, regardless of the fact that the locks are all set against them. Their best service to the trader would be to go on ahead and clear the locks for him — "and of course," as one lock-keeper said, "he tells them to get a move on and perhaps uses a few 'bloodies' and there you are."

SOME, probably many, get on perfectly well, of course. I met one pleasure boat-owner who has been canal cruising for 12 months who had met only the day before and had

had a long and cordial shat with him; and the enthusiasts of the Inland Waterways Association have made it abundantly clear that they want to see more trade on the canals and that they are on the boatman's side.

When things do go wrong, seriously wrong, it is at the personal level. The reason is not hard to find. Canals are seen as a rather quaint survival and, since we are in the Age of Tourism, the man in the street has come to assume a sort of proprietorial right over what is old or unusual. It exists to be conned. It has justified itself if he finds it interesting.

Hence the ever-pointed camera. Hence the behaviour of the trippers who spread out their picnic under the front windows of the lock-keeper's house at Bascote, or the man who actually peered in through the windows. Hence, too, the unmannerliness of the people who will walk on to the canal boats without a by-your-leave, and the mute Londoners who get in the way at Watford.

Curiosity in the ways of the trading boatman is indulged at the expense of the usual courtesies. The boatmen feel that they are regarded as a separate people, a race apart, a tribe of aquatic gypsies, perhaps. They don't like it.



A tranquil wait at Braunston, near Rugby, while the lock empties.