

## *I understand that your family originated as canal people?*

'Yes, they came from the Kidderminster area. They'd always worked on the boats and used to bring salt from Northwich to William Blythes at Church.

used to go with the second boat when they took salt to Blythes chemical works and brought other goods back. They worked between Manchester and Liverpool. When they were building the aqueduct at the iron bridge, they brought bales and bales of cotton. The land was a swamp, the railway lines were built on trestles. (I think.)'

## *Where was that at, then?*

'Hapton Valley. My grandparents then got a house near Blythes. Grandad worked at Blythes a while, then went back on the boats working on the Leeds and Liverpool canal. All his brothers were bargees as well.

Joseph was my grandad's name; he could neither read nor write but he knew what money was. In those days the boat men had to buy their own horses. They used ex-funeral horses; why, I don't know. Uncle Joe went with him, but he went further afield on the Manchester Ship Canal. Uncle Fred also went on the boats. He could neither read nor write but he was a character in his own right as well. He was a very heavy drinker and he came home one night and gave his wife a black eye. When he awoke the following morning he said: 'Who the hell's done that.'

'You did, last night,' she told him, and he never touched alcohol again 'till the day he died!

He was going abroad in 1939 and he went all over the world despite being unable to read and

write.

Uncle George lived at New Brighton and he worked on the River Mersey. Uncle Jim worked on the River Weaver on the I.C.I. salt boats. Uncle Ted, at Northwich, also worked on the canal. My great aunt was a typical 'water gypsy'; all the jewellery she wore was solid gold; you couldn't cheat her, she was quite a character!

Old grandad told this story about his father: When he died he was given a boatman's funeral and they had to use a crane to lift him out of the boat. I believe he weighed twenty seven stones.

When uncle Bill started work, half-time, he went to work at the canal wharf at Church Commercial and he had the same wage as a man. He worked on the 'fly' boats, which meant changing the horses every so often. When they brought the sugar back to Blackburn, there was so much for Enfield at Clayton-le-Moors and so much for Burnley; then they went on to Skipton and Leeds. They re-loaded with cement or anything else that was going. On the Leeds and Liverpool Canal there are two tunnels and if the steamer didn't take the boat through, you had to 'leg it' on a plank. We got three shillings extra for negotiating the Gannow Tunnel at Burnley. The tunnel at Foulridge is not quite a mile long and we got five shillings for that. No matter the weather, rain; snow or frost, I never knew a boatman suffer from the common cold.'

## *Why was that?*

'Well, being out in the fresh air, and good wholesome food—not the rubbish we have today. We'd eggs; bacon; cheese; meat etc. On the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Bingley a man called Turner had a big orchard near the locks. We could get a bucket full of apples and a dozen eggs for a shilling [5p]. We went to Shipley; a load here, a load there, a twelve or

fourteen hour day was common. The old horse used to plod along but we stopped to feed him of course. Woe betide any bargee who ill-treated his horse, he was sent to 'Coventry'! And I mean sent to Coventry!

When the canals were frozen over, then they used ice-breakers and they were very hard work. The horses had to pull hard to get the boats through and sometimes an explosive had to be used to clear the way. After the Leeds and Liverpool Canal Company, grandad went to work for Ben Walls at Skipton. He had brand new boats all called by a letter from the Greek alphabet. Grandad got a boat called The Omega which, in Greek, meant 'the end'. I was only four years old but I well remember being given a shilling for saying the word 'Omega'.

## *Why was Church so well used as a loading point?*

'Well, 95% of Howard and Bulloughs machinery was transported by canal and also Steiners Calico Printworks and Foxhill Bank Printworks used the canal transport. Steamers used to come up the canal; 130 tons of goods could be carried. I think that in the future someone will have to start thinking about re-using the canals; not only to protect the environment, but to make better use of fuel. I've seen wagons waiting for days to be unloaded at Liverpool when the goods could have been carried by boats. Blackburn was a busy centre. The boatmen used to leave the boat at Blackburn and catch the tram to Church where they would spend a night at home. They would come back with a huge basket full of food. There was never any stealing but I never knew grandma to buy any coal.