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THE SHELL BOOK
OF
INLAND WATERWAYS

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Book Club Associates
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For June and John Humphries, Clare, Evelyn, Amanda and Diana, ideal companions on many journeys when we discovered the magic of waterways in England, France and Holland.

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or bank collapse demands instant closure without advance warning. Major works like the relining of a tunnel, enlargement or mechanisation of a lock or substantial repairs to structures like Barton Swing Aqueduct or the Anderton Lift, may involve a closure lasting many weeks.

The most familiar stoppage will be that at a lock. Several days before the starting date an assortment of boats will begin to arrive from the maintenance depot – barges or narrow boats equipped as workshops, some bearing new gates, and others loaded with bricks and cement. At major river lock improvements, massive lifting gear for hauling out old gates will be mounted on pontoons hauled by a tug. Once the stoppage has been effected, the working day far outstrips the hours of winter daylight.

First, water must be drained from the site. Generally, grooves for forming a dam of stop planks are to be found at the head of the lock, and, ideally, a short length of canal will be drained off, particularly where locks are close to each other. In the case of a single isolated lock another set of stop planks must be fitted at the tail, and a mobile diesel pump used to clear water from the chamber and keep it reasonably dry while work is in progress. An alternative is to drive a temporary cofferdam across the waterway.

The scene of a stoppage is a place of mud, noise and controlled chaos. Perhaps a three-pronged sheerlegs has been erected over the chamber, so that gates can be taken out and replacements slung into place. Coordination and teamwork are very necessary when shifting heavy components. Whatever the chief cause of the stoppage, every opportunity will be taken to fit in other more routine tasks that can only be tackled with the lock dewatered. Crumbling brickwork may be cut back and replaced, or alternatively sprayed with gunite (a form of concrete resurfacing). Ground paddle tunnels will be cleared of any obstacles, and refuse removed from the lock floor. Tar on gates may still be wet when the water is reintroduced and the first of the waiting boats allowed to pass through. For some weeks after the men and equipment have gone, muddied grass and telltale patches of diesel oil and cement on the ground will serve as a reminder of the activity.

A visit to the scene of a scheduled lock closure is the best way of seeing a variety of maintenance craft. They have often been adapted from the conventional cargo boats of the district: thus narrow boats are used on narrow canals, short boats on the Leeds and Liverpool, steel lighters on the Upper Thames and wide-beam barges on the waterways of the Irish Republic. In addition there is the humble work flat, rectangular and with low freeboard, bow-hauled from the

towpath or pulled by tug, and often fitted with a small hut-like cabin where tools can be stored and the workmen boil a kettle. Ancient variations of the work flat are to be found on the River Stort. Timber-built and more than a hundred years old, they were once owned by the Royal Powder Mills at Waltham Abbey. Their cabins are barrel-shaped, rather like certain types of traditional horse van.

The Waterways Museum at Stoke Bruerne preserves a set of brushes whose shape matches the profile of nearby Blisworth Tunnel. In the days of steam tunnel tugs these brushes were mounted on a small boat and swept accumulated soot from the roof as it was pulled along.

Few climatic conditions are likely to interfere with waterway traffic, although drought, floods and fog produce problems. The greatest threat to canal boats is ice. If it is allowed to freeze to more than 2-3in, it brings craft to a halt. In the old days this delayed urgent consignments of goods, with consequent loss of tolls to the navigation companies, so at the start of a cold spell, ice breakers were brought out of the maintenance yards. Mostly these were narrow boats of iron or thickly sheathed timber hulls, whose rounded underwater shape enabled them to be violently rocked from side to side by a gang of men gripping a taut rope or rail down the centre. Teams of horses would be hitched to this strange vessel, as many as a dozen animals being used if really thick ice was encountered. With the crashing of splintering ice, the shouts of the men and the white breath of the straining horses, the arrival of the iceboat was an awe-inspiring sight. There are tales of boats being rocked so far that they turned turtle or were pulled under the ice itself. Steam-powered ice breakers (used on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal until the 1940s) and diesel boats largely superseded these craft. With a general decline in freight traffic on routes most prone to

Ice breaking on the Birmingham Canal Navigations in 1954; the heavily-built timber vessel is sheathed with plates of rolled iron and drawn by several horses (Wolverhampton Express & Star)

