

## **Script of Life on Board**

### **Beginning of feature:**

Helen:

Visitors to the London Canal Museum can see inside a narrowboat cabin and try to imagine what it was like to live in such a small space. But they needn't rely solely on their imaginations, because museum volunteers have made a collection of fascinating oral history recordings - of people who can remember in vivid detail what it was like to live on board all day and every day. One of the recordings is of William Tarbit, who was born in 1955 on a narrowboat called 'Rosemary':

### **1. William Tarbit, background**

*IN: "My grand-parents lived on the butty..."*

*OUT: "...by the door, opposite the stove."*

DUR: 38 secs

William Tarbit was an only child, so he had more space than most children. Tom McManus was born in 1950 and he remembers how little space there was for families with more than one child:

### **2. Tom McManus, cramped conditions**

*IN: "The cabins had a little fire..."*

*OUT: "...so it was very cramped."*

DUR: 21 secs

But it must have been even more cramped in the days when it was common to have very large families. One of the oldest people recorded for the museum was John Halford, who was born in 1915 and was one of ten children. So how did they all manage?

### **3. John Halford, large families**

*IN: "The bigger wider barges, we had plenty of room..."*

*OUT: "...and canals and all that."*

DUR: 1 min

Large families continued to live on boats into more recent times. John Daniels began working for British Waterways in the 1960s and even as late as that he can remember some very large families living on what he used to call the 'monkey boats':

#### **4. John Daniels, one large family**

*IN: "They was British Waterways craft..."*

*OUT: "...on the monkey boats, true."*

DUR: 59 secs

And in these very cramped conditions, there were few modern conveniences - even as late as the 1950s and early 60s, when William Tarbit was a child:

#### **5. William Tarbit, heat, light, water and washing**

*IN: "Cooking was on the black stove..."*

*OUT: "...we had to go for a little walk down the tow-path."*

DUR: 1.10

But retired boatman George Smith remembers that *he* always brought canal water into the boat to wash and that when he was a child before the Second World War the canal water was very clean:

#### **6. George Smith, water for washing & drinking**

*IN: "You washed in basins and you used the canal water..."*

*OUT: "...half the taps now they had then what there is now."*

DUR: 32 secs

But though George Smith remembers that there were fewer canal-side taps for drinking water before the War, he did have the advantage of canal-side shops for buying food:

#### **7. George Smith, bread from shops**

*IN: "Some places there were..."*

*OUT: "...that will take us on to there."*

DUR: 27 secs

But when William Tarbit was growing up in the late 50s and early 60s, his family managed without canal-side shops and used age-old skills passed down through generations:

#### **8. William Tarbit, finding food and drink without shops**

*IN: "During the time I was a child..."*

*OUT: "...homemade beer made by one of the other families."*

DUR: 1.53

Before the Second World War, many families relied on home-made goods – not just canal families. But perhaps people who lived on boats went on making things after other people had given up doing so - partly because they had less money and partly because it was more difficult for them to get to shops. So as late as the 1960s, William Tarbit's clothes were made for him by his parents and grand-parents:

### **9. William Tarbit, home-made clothes**

*IN: "We had the traditional clothes..."*

*OUT: "...made for me by my grand-parents"*

*DUR: 27 secs*

The canal families took their own skills for granted, but nowadays their craftsmanship is highly prized – and original artefacts made, or just decorated, by boat people are very expensive to buy, particularly if they're decorated with the traditional castles and roses. Not surprisingly, the museum's oral history collection contains several memories of these decorations, going back many years.

Clarice Robbins was born in 1921 and although she was brought up on dry land, near the canal in Paddington, her parents were boat people and she has vivid memories of her parents' artistic skills:

### **10. Clarice Robbins, art-work**

*IN: "The tea used to be in the big brown tea-pot..."*

*OUT: "...beautiful really, beautiful work."*

*DUR: 51 secs*

Ron Bateman also comes from a family of boat people. He was born in 1935, and though he too was brought up on dry land – in South Wharf Road opposite the dock gates – he learnt traditional art work from his family and regrets the fact that few people now possess those skills:

### **11. Ron Bateman, art-work**

*IN: "People can't really paint them up..."*

*OUT: "...and put the flowers on meself."*

*DUR: 40 secs*

Like Ron Bateman, Val Weathersbee was born in the 1930s and lived by the side of the canal near Little Venice. She too feels very nostalgic for the boats of her youth:

## **12. Val Weathersbee, beautiful boats**

*IN: "To a child they were beautiful..."*

*OUT: "...I don't remember a scruffy one."*

*DUR: 28 secs*

The traditional skills were handed on right up to the 1960s, when William Tarbit was living as a child on a narrowboat. When his parents and grand-parents were working on the waterways, most of the families that worked for the same company used to moor up together, so he became aware of the very different ways in which decoration was used:

## **13. William Tarbit, castles and roses**

*IN: "Each different boat family had their own way..."*

*OUT: "...but we still called him a sign-writer."*

*DUR: 1.02*

When people admire the beauty of the traditional boats, it's easy for them to feel sentimental about a way of life that has now vanished, but William Tarbit remembers that he and other children on the boats had a very hard life:

## **14. William Tarbit, child labour**

*IN: "As soon as I reached the age of three..."*

*OUT: "...most of our childhood was working."*

*DUR: 1 min*

This was a dangerous way of a life for a child and in fact it caused the death of William Tarbit's brother:

## **15. William Tarbit, death of twin**

*IN: "I'm the only surviving child..."*

*OUT: "...and basically died from head injuries."*

*DUR: 1.24*

And Ron Bateman remembers when he was young, he had a job unloading timber from a barge and indirectly caused the death of a close friend:

## **16. Ron Bateman, drowning**

*IN: "I had got the job of.."*

*OUT: "...and they disappear like that."*

*DUR: 53 secs*

Several people whose memories have been recorded for the Museum have mentioned deaths on the waterways and some have mixed feelings about the decline of the canal trade, because of the dangers that surrounded working boats and the hardships of life afloat. John Halford's parents had lived on boats as far back as the *nineteenth* century, and he liked living on the water. But he still thinks it was a hard life, particularly in winter.

**17. John Halford, hard life**

*IN:* "I used to like the water actually..."

*OUT:* "...it was an hard life."

*DUR:* 1.03

And for William Tarbit's family, that traditional way of life came to an end in the freezing winter of 1963:

**18. William Tarbit, leaving the canals**

*IN:* "There's not many people that a lot of the ..."

*OUT:* "...quiet, very quiet."

*DUR:* 1.05

**END**



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