

Navvies



In the 18th and early 19th centuries canals were dug out by hand. Navigations - meaning canals and navigable rivers - were excavated by groups of workers known as 'Navvies', or Navigators. Navvies would travel around the country looking for work. They would camp in crowded temporary huts or tents near the canal. They often had a reputation for drunkenness and violence, which made the local people a bit scared of them.

The navvies like many people at that time worked long hours and in very difficult conditions. They faced all weathers, rain, frost, wind, and even snow. The work was dangerous and could lead to serious injuries such as loss of arms or legs or even death when canal banks collapsed. They would use basic tools such as spades, picks and wheel barrows to dig out and move the earth and stone. Horses would be used to help with carrying and pulling.

After a canal channel or 'cut' had been dug, it had to be lined with 'puddle' to make it watertight. Puddle is wet clay that has been squashed to force all the air bubbles out and make it waterproof. Firstly the cut would be lined with clay that had been transported on carts and shovelled in place. The wet clay would then be trampled and packed down hard either by the feet of navvies or by driving sheep or cattle up and down the canal. As long as the clay stayed wet the puddle lining sealed the bed of the canal with very few leaks.