

Life on the waterways: The watermen

Detailed carrying records of the canal company survive in part in the National Archives for the early years 1816–17, and then from 1818–36 and 1849–54. These list dates, names of keel skippers and owners of cargoes, types and tonnages of cargoes and destinations.

The watermen

The watermen imported goods including coal, lime, bricks, iron and timber, whilst exported goods included potatoes, carrots, grain and sawn timber.

Some watermen were experienced coal and lime merchants from the West Riding, whilst some were likely inexperienced local men. Others were already trading on the Derwent, Ouse and elsewhere and came from established boating families. Several were among those who were first to rent landing places at Canal Head including Thomas Tate, Richard Firth, Robert Witty and the Hodgsons.

The Hodgson brothers, Bannister, John and Robert, were sons of John Hodgson, dyer, of Pocklington. Robert became a coal merchant at Canal Head, but all three were busy skippers, with Bannister carrying many loads for his brothers and on his own account until his early death in 1828, followed by the death of John in 1833, leaving Robert to continue alone.

Other traders were based along the canal, including Thomas Tasker at Walbut and Henry Ogle at Melbourne. Tasker often hired Bielby coal and lime merchant William Ellis to carry his loads. Ogle, a brick and tilemaker, was also a coal merchant and general trader, with his son, Henry jnr, doing much of the carrying, although it was another son, Charles, who took over the brick business on his father's death.

The Walsh family

Cain Walsh (1808–80), was one of three sons of canal carrier John Walsh. Cain took over as skipper of the Union Packet in 1830, almost certainly living at Canal Head from the start. Another family member, George, had been paid in 1816 for the carriage of stone for the canal.

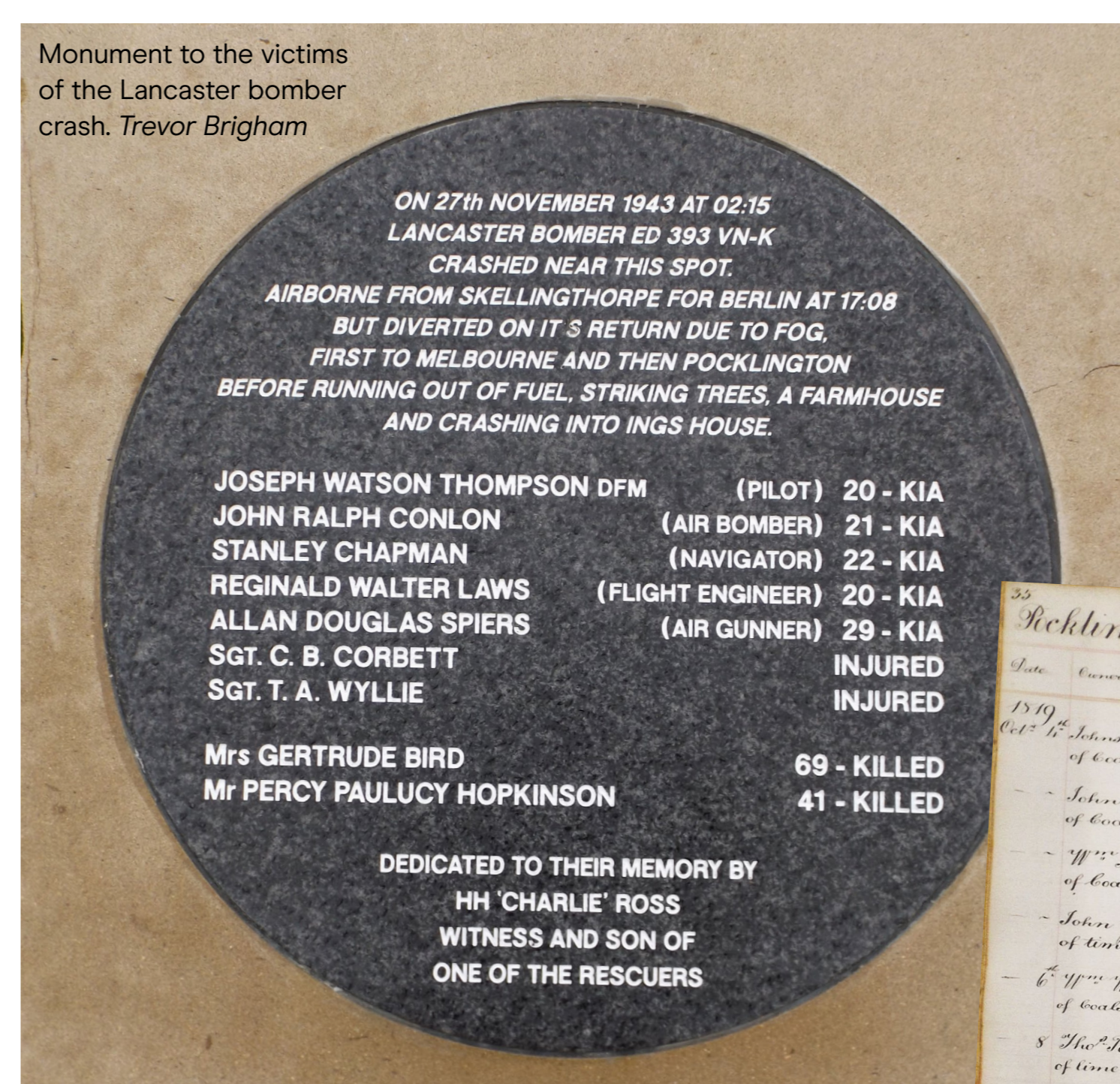
Cain married local girl Elizabeth Clegg in 1836. In 1838 he apprenticed Mark Thorpe, nephew of the lock keeper Mark Swann, suggesting that he might have left the Union Packet by that time and started his own business. In the later 1840s he was assisted by his two sons, Stephen and William, who was tragically drowned in 1848 while filling a lock for his father's boat.

Cain owned several keels over the years, including *Betsey* (his wife's nickname), *Sarah*, *Two Sisters*, *Single Sister*, *Mary & Jane* and *Blessing*. A dispute with the NER in 1858 revealed that he was operating two vessels at the time, still assisted by Stephen, but also still had the use of an old boat moored at Canal Head.

Cain's brother Stephen Walsh (1816–99) also lived at Canal Head with his wife, Frances ('Fanny'), second daughter of lock keeper Mark Swann. Keels operated by Stephen on the Pocklington Canal and Derwent included *Elizabeth* in 1861 and the *Mary Ann* and (*New*) *Friendship* in 1862. Stephen's eldest son, Mark, was also a waterman for many years before moving to King's Lynn, and they were sometimes accompanied by Fanny: in the 1881 census, all three were recorded on board their keel *Francis* at River Head, Driffield: both of the parents were by then 64. Families living and working together, often in cramped and unsanitary conditions, were common in the 19th and early 20th century. Boats used for dwelling purposes were eventually registered under the Canal Boats Act 1877 and annually assessed, but there was little improvement as a result.

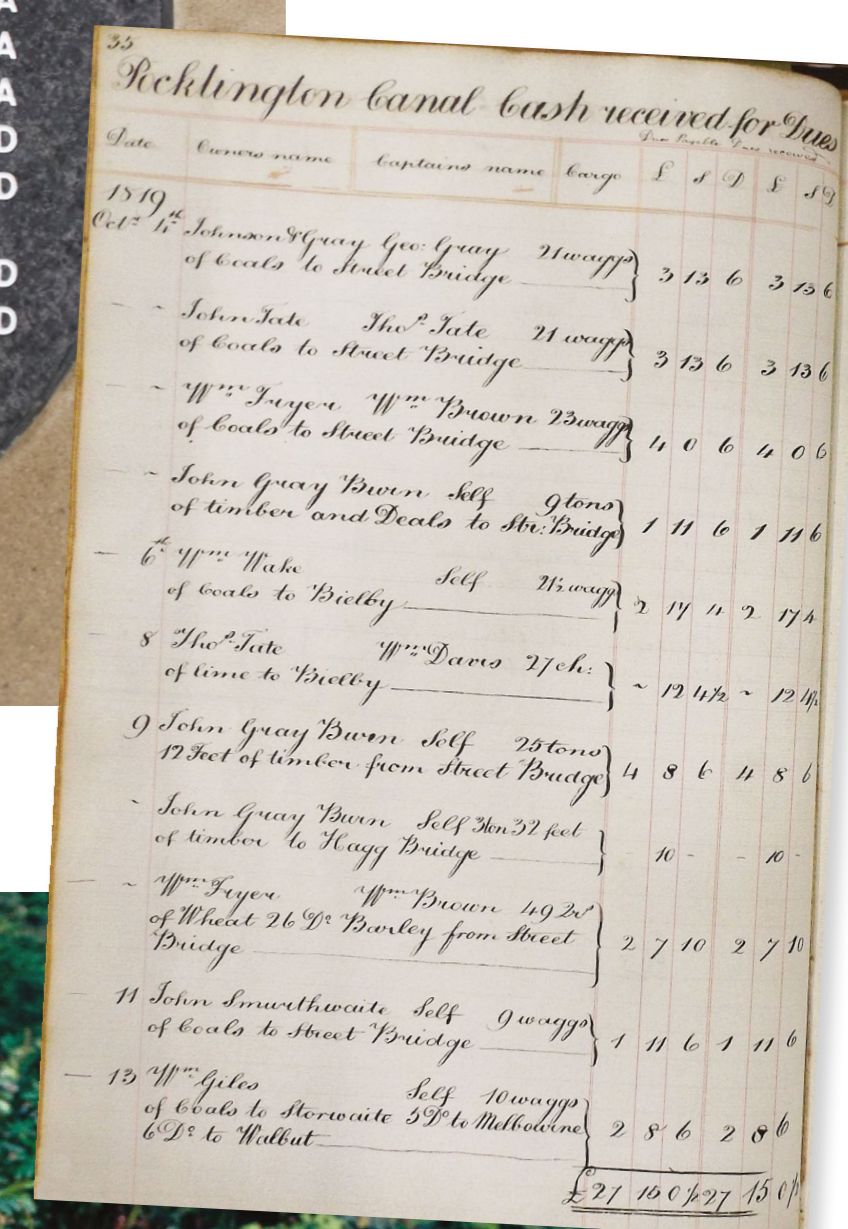
Stephen and Fanny are last recorded together at Canal Head in 1891, where Stephen died in 1899. His younger son, William, was already listed as working on a farm in 1871 at the age of 21 or 22, becoming a waggoner for one of the local cornmills, before eventually becoming a farmer in his own right with several children living on at Canal Head well into the 20th century.

William's daughter, Gertrude Bird, was killed in 1943 when Lancaster bomber ED393 from RAF Skellingthorpe crashed on the family home. Gertrude's daughter, Edith Marsh, retained a number of family heirlooms from the boats, including a Windsor chair, oil lamp and a large earthenware jug which had belonged to her great grandfather, Stephen Walsh.



Monument to the victims of the Lancaster bomber crash. Trevor Brigham

A sample page of tolls from October 1819. National Archives



The Walsh family's chair and jug. Sheila Nix MBE