Researching your waterway family history

canalrivertrust.org.uk/archive
In today’s changing world it’s hard to imagine what life was like then, what they did and how they earned a living.

Discovering your waterways’ history might be easier than you think. The Canal & River Trust’s Waterways Archive holds a wide and fascinating range of documents, plans and images relating to the history of Britain’s inland waterways. Along with other archival sources (some referred to in this book) the Waterways Archive is an essential research tool – and one that could help you unlock your own waterway family story.

There are many reasons why people research their family history: curiosity about their ancestors, a desire to discover something about themselves or just a fascination with the past. At the Waterways Archive you can delve into the past for all these reasons and explore what life was like by water.

This booklet provides you with an introduction – a starting point for your journey of discovery… and if you get stuck there is always our Archivists and archive volunteers you can turn to help you on your way. Happy exploring!
First steps

So, you want to find out more about your boat family history?

The census will usually give you the name of the boat the family were working and its location at the date of the census. The national censuses for 1841 to 1911 are now available on-line (for example see findmypast.co.uk) and county record offices usually hold film or microfiche copies for each year from 1841 to 1901. Boat families are usually listed at the end of each enumeration district.

With both parish and census records, it is worth bearing in mind that boat families were not tied to one location. In many cases their boat was also their house and someone could have been born, married and buried in three different towns and their children born in yet another county.

The boat people would have stopped off at churches along the canal, where they were welcomed, in order to register births, marriages etc. The family would normally return to their place of origin to bury their dead. Often the boat families made connections to non-conformist churches such as Primitive Methodist and Salvation Army – you can talk to the relevant local authority record office to find these records or search nationalarchives.gov.uk/discovery.

The Waterways Archive can advise you which churches were popular with boat people.
Names and locations

The name of the boat and location may help you to discover which company a boatman worked for and the canal he was based on.

In large cities such as Manchester and Birmingham there were also day boatmen who would have lived on land and therefore used the local church.

The Waterways Archive has transcriptions of various census and parish records for the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. These are indexed for boatmen (some are also indexed for the name of the boat) and include Wolverhampton (the Norman Holt Transcriptions) and the historic counties of Lancashire, Cheshire and Staffordshire.

Many parish records, including those, for example, for Cheshire, Lancashire and Shropshire are available fully digitised and indexed on findmypast.co.uk or ancestry.co.uk.

The Waterways Archive is equipped with a subscription to the former.
Transportation

Most relevant records, other than statutory records such as birth, marriage and death and the census, have been generated by the administration of business transactions.

For centuries goods have been manufactured and carried to and from markets. From the 18th century through to the early 20th century they were transported along canals. Company records naturally built up over the life of canal companies, carrying companies and boatyards.

Some of these records are to be found at The Waterways Archive, though others are held by The National Archives. There is now a growing range of finding aids to assist you in your search.

In addition to The Waterways Archive, the quarterly magazine Narrowboat is a good source of information about carrying companies and businesses associated with the waterways and Waterways World has also produced fleet lists (available at waterwaysworld.com) through which boat names and carrying routes can be tracked.

The Waterways Archive keeps back copies of these and also has an extensive specialist reference library located in the Reading Room at the National Waterways Museum Ellesmere Port.
Records held at The Waterways Archive

You can research all aspects of navigation history. These include creation, ownership, maintenance and use of the nation’s inland waterways.

The archive has many types of records and information including:

- Company minutes and accounts
- Correspondence
- Personal work diaries
- Engineering surveys and reports
- Deeds and other legal records
- Contracts and specifications
- Staffing records
- Toll, traffic and tonnage records
- Acts and byelaws

Boat people working on tidal estuaries may be recorded in shipping records. Statutory registration of merchant shipping in 1786 brought about the establishment of local registries and central returns were held at HM Customs.

Those for the port of Liverpool (and Runcorn from 1862) are now at Merseyside Maritime Museum and at Flintshire Record Office for the port of Chester.

The Waterways Archive has some copies and indexes of these and many other useful sources. After 1795, inland waterway craft had to be registered by the Clerk of the Peace. Some of these registers survive and originals are usually held at County Record Offices.

In 1877 and 1884 Acts of Parliament were passed to ensure certain living standards on boats were met and that children were educated. Regular inspections were carried out by local sanitary authorities.

These resulted in inspection records. Where these records survive they can be found in local record offices. Though some, either in original or transcribed form, are in The Waterways Archive.

Another useful source of information on boat people (particularly steerers) and their boats, is the gauging record. Gauging is the process to establish how much cargo a boat is carrying, so the appropriate toll can be charged. Tables were kept for each boat gauged and details include boat name, master, owner (sometimes with an address) and gauging station.

These records are useful for locating ancestors who worked as boat people and establishing their role at a particular place and date.

The Waterways Archive keeps indexed transcripts. Many of these can be easily searched, including:

- Runcorn Register of Boats and Barges 1795-1812
- Runcorn Canal Boat Registers 1878-1949
- Chester Canal Boat Registers 1879-1916
- Nantwich Canal Boat Registers 1879-1924
- Northwich Canal Boat Registers 1880-1940
- Wolverhampton
- Gloucester
- Birmingham
Toll and Tonnage Records (Traffic)

These record the journeys taken by the boats. Details can include the name of the person steering the boat and cargo.

From this information you’ll be able to research the route and canal worked by the boatmen.

This will then help you discover more about the places of birth, marriage and death. You may also find other useful documents produced at the time, such as toll tickets, permits, check sheets and loading tickets.

Daily Passings of Boats
These relate, for example, to the passage of vessels through a tunnel or another significant place, and give names of owners and crew. Some of these records can be found in The Waterways Archive and in local record offices.

Some boatmen may have rented property from the canal company. Some rental records survive in The Waterways Archive that show names of tenants.

Wage sheets and workmen’s timetables
These can provide the name and age of the employee, job title, dates worked and length of service. Many records of carrying companies, such as Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd, also survive, as do those of canal company proprietors.

Records include minute books, engineers’ reports, accounts, correspondence, wages books, tonnage records and more.

Manufacturers such as Unilever, Cadbury and organisations such as the National Coal Board all ran their own fleets of boats. Once you’ve located your ancestor’s employer it may be worth checking at nationalarchives.gov.uk/discovery to see if the company records survive and where they’re located.
Photographs

The Waterways Archive includes over 400,000 images, many of which provide an evocative snapshot of the life and work of the boat families. See canalrivertrust.org.uk/archive

Local libraries, record offices and canal societies may also have historic images of the waterways. Other sources include:

- Personal work diaries.
- Staff magazines
- Canal societies

If in doubt contact
The Waterways Archive for advice

Reference books

The Waterways Archive is home to a growing library for anyone keen to find out more about their ancestors. The following publications are good sources of information:

- Sue Wilkes
  Tracing Your Canal Ancestors
  Pen & Sword, 2011

- George Smith
  Our Canal Population

- Harry Hanson
  Canal People
  David & Charles, 1978

- Harry Hanson
  The Canal Boatmen 1760-1914
  Alan Sutton, 1975

- Michael Stammers
  Mersey Flats and Flatmen
  National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, 1993

- Tom Lightfoot
  The Weaver Watermen
  Cheshire Libraries & Museums, 1983

- Richard Cheetham-Houghton
  Burscough Boatmen: Their Marriages and Their Boats
  Ormskirk & District Family History Society, 2015
You are very welcome to use the Waterways Archive. Please contact us to make an appointment and if you are a researcher wanting to use original records we recommend allowing 24 hours notice.

We open Monday - Friday 10am - 4pm
Please email archives@canalrivertrust.org.uk
or call 0151 373 4378

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