



Canal &  
River Trust

National  
Waterways  
Museum  
Ellesmere Port

# Researching your waterway family history



[canalrivertrust.org.uk/archive](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/archive)

DOCKS & INLAND WATERWAYS EXECUTIVE

NORTH WESTERN DIVISION.

DIVISIONAL TRAFFIC OFFICE,  
LIVERPOOL.

# BOATMEN WANTED

To work British Waterways  
between the Midlands and  
the Mersey Ports.

**Good Pay!**  
**A Floating Home!**  
**Healthy Outdoor Life!**

APPLY TO:—

S. LOMAS,

Toll Office,

Autherley Junction.

OR

E. R. TART,

Albion Wharf,

Shipton Street,

Wolverhampton.

C. S. & B. CO.  
Divisional Traffic Office,  
Liverpool.

The Liverpool Printing and Publishing Co., Ltd., 25, Market Street, Liverpool.

44/77/24

## Introduction

Ever taken a walk along a canal and wondered what it was like a hundred years ago? Perhaps you have an ancestor who lived or worked on the canals?



**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.

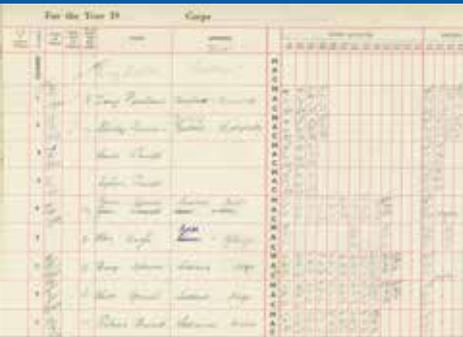
There are many reasons why people research their family history; curiosity about their ancestors, a desire to discover something about themselves or just a fascination with the past. At the Waterways Archive you can delve into the past for all these reasons and explore what life was like by water.

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](http://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.

Prize No.	Date	Owner	Boat	Trade	Destination	Value
1836	18	J. J. King Esq.	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1837	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1838	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1839	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1840	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1841	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1842	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1843	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1844	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1845	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1846	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1847	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1848	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1849	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1850	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1851	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1852	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1853	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1854	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1855	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1856	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1857	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1858	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1859	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1860	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1861	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1862	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1863	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1864	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1865	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1866	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1867	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1868	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1869	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1870	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1871	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1872	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1873	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1874	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1875	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1876	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
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1894	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1895	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1896	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1897	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1898	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1899	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105
1900	1	Wm. J. King	Swanage	Ballard	Wokingham	105

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](http://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](http://findmypast.co.uk) or [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk)

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



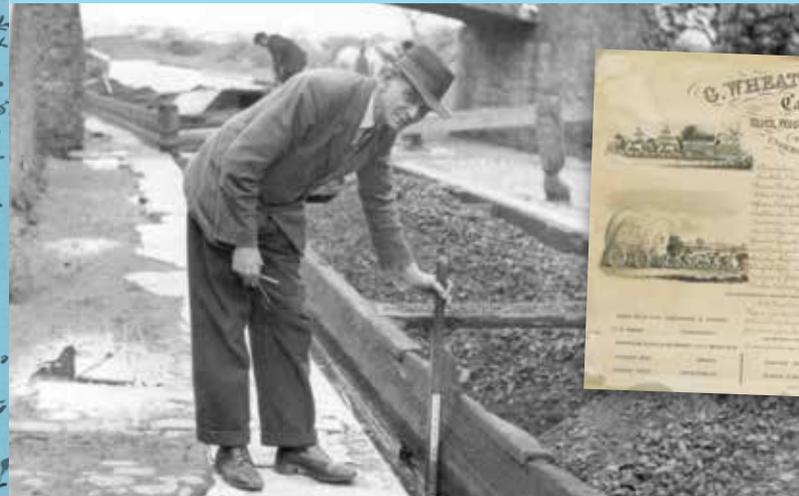
GRAND JUNCTION CANAL.

Month June 1922.

Permit No.	Date	Owner	Barge	Freight	Destination	Weight Tons.
8536	1st	J.S. Luge Co.	Quaker	Rollard	Uxbridge (Grimsdalea)	150
8545	"	Hope Luge Co	Chere	Tar	Southall Gas Wks	50
8562	2	Bowker & Co	Sunlight	Gas oil	"	50 1/4
8565	7	Maypole Ltd	Shadwell	Oil	Maypole Dock	44
8560	8	Hope Luge Co	Jug	Coal	Uxbridge Gas Wks	60
8586	8	"	Gene	Tar (10,000 Gallons)	Southall	50
8591	"	Clayton (Aldbury)	Medway	Fuel Oil	Greenford (Hyson)	53
8650	11	Hope Luge Co	Gene	Tar	Southall Gas Wks	50
8653	"	J.S. Luge Co.	Redpole	Ulcose (not by rail)	Botwell (Valley)	65
8693	17	Bowker & Knight	the solar	Gas Oil	Southall Gas Wks	50
8731	21	Clayton (Aldbury)	Gene	Liquor	"	45
8736	21	Thas Luge Co	Renown	Complies (fms)	Rubastic Dk	25
"	"	"	"	Cocoa Beans	Botwell (Handons)	65
8737	"	"	Smithfield	"	"	62 1/4
8744	24	Hope Luge Co	ella	Coal	Uxbridge Gas Wks	60
8745	"	"	Gene	Tar	Southall (10,000 Gallons)	50
8785	26	Maypole Maypole Ltd	Quebec	Nails	Maypole Dock	30
"	"	J.S. Luge Co	Completed	Sugar	Walthamstow	25
8804	28	Maypole Maypole Ltd	Sunset	Oil	Maypole Dock	28
"	"	J.S. Luge Co	"	Scrap (13000 Gallons)	Botwell (Uphead Wks)	19 3/4
8814	7	Bowker & King	Petrol	Gas Oil	Southall Gas Wks	50 3/4

# 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](http://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.

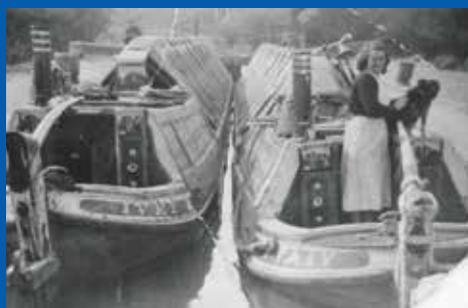
# Records held at The Waterways Archive

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:

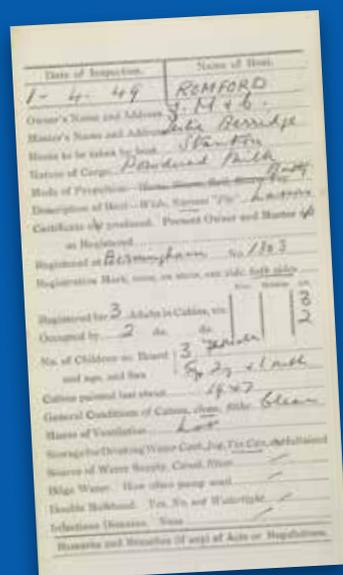
- Company minutes and accounts
- Correspondence
- Personal work diaries
- Engineering surveys and reports
- Deeds and other legal records
- Contracts and specifications
- Staffing records
- Toll, traffic and tonnage records
- Acts and byelaws

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.

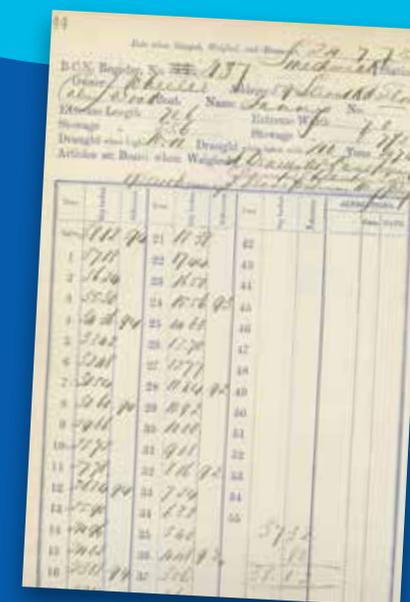


In 1877 and 1884 Acts of Parliament were passed to ensure certain living standards on boats were met and that children were educated. Regular inspections were carried out by local sanitary authorities.

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.

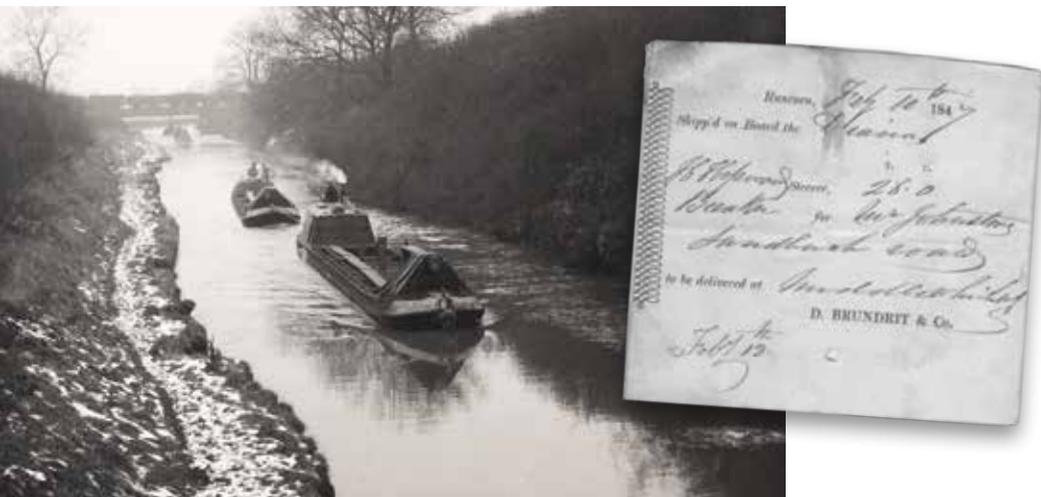


The Waterways Archive keeps indexed transcripts. Many of these can be easily searched, including:

- 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.



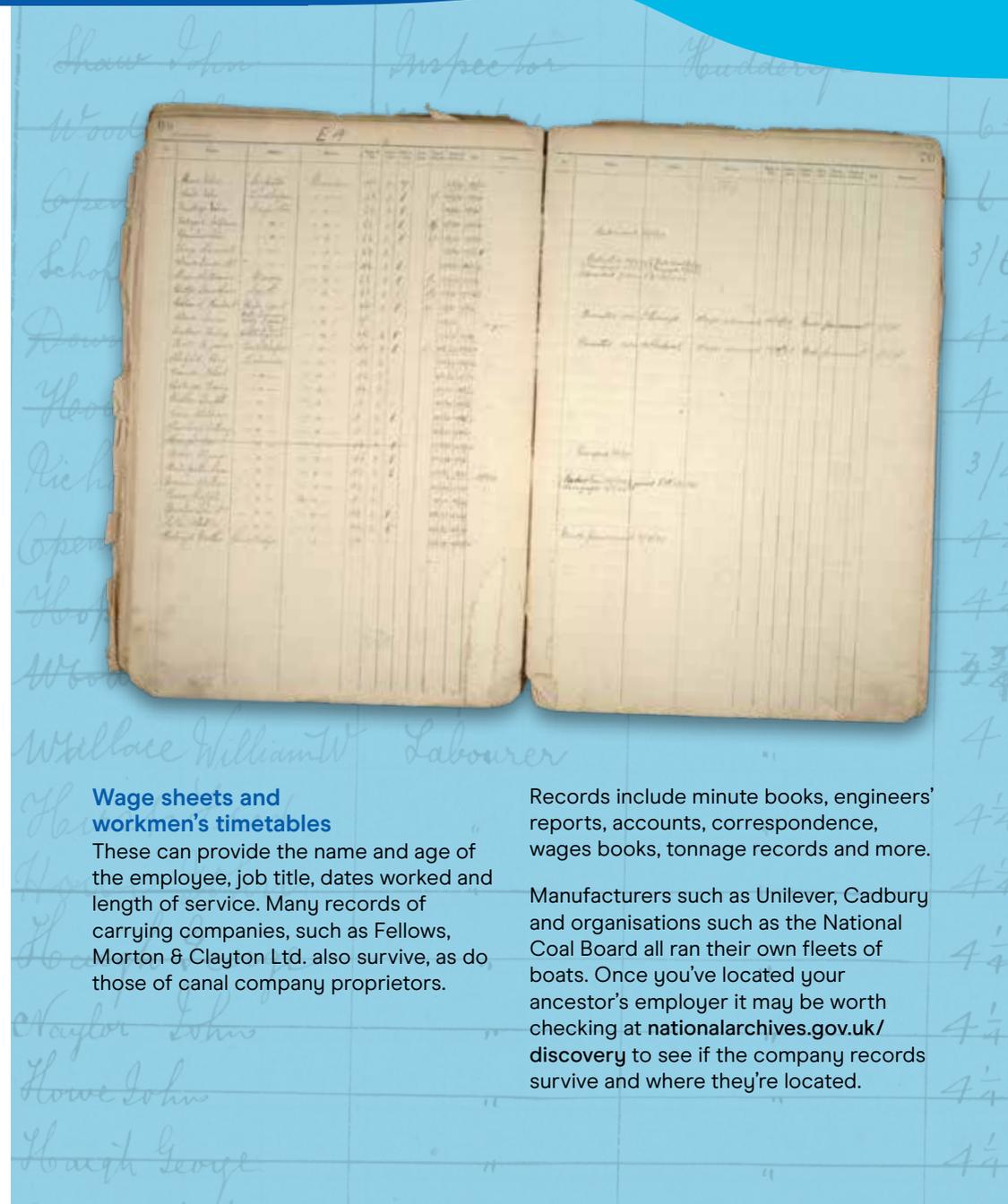
From this information you'll be able to research the route and canal worked by the boatmen.

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.

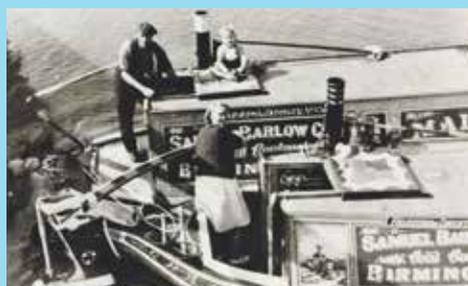
Records include minute books, engineers' reports, accounts, correspondence, wages books, tonnage records and more.

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](http://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](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/archive)



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

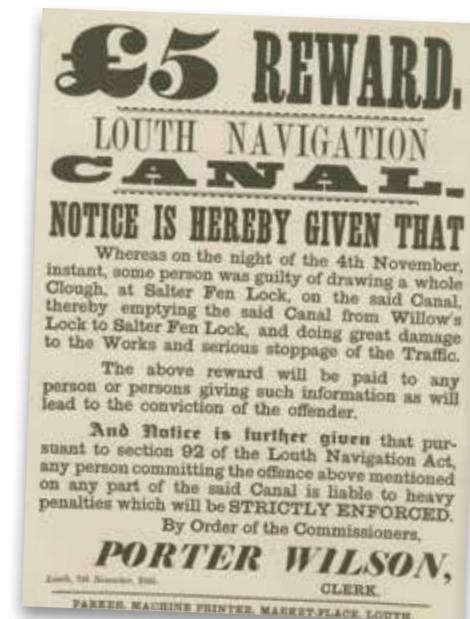
- Personal work diaries.
- Staff magazines
- Canal societies

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*  
EP Publishing, 1974
- 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 Cheatham-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](mailto:archives@canalrivertrust.org.uk)  
or call 0151 373 4378



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