

REMINISCENCES

By Ken Pinches

I suppose my interest in boats was inherited since one of the responsibilities of my father who was the Joiner and Pattern maker at Tinsley Rolling Mills, was to keep in good repair the horse drawn wooden keels that brought coal from the Don valley collieries for the steam engines that powered the rolling mills.

However my interest in boats really started in 1958 on the Norfolk Broads, where after a week's cruising we saw a small boy of six or seven sailing a lugsail dinghy up and down outside the boatyard. It looked quite exciting so we hired one for an hour only to find ourselves continually in the reeds along the bankside. Obviously there was more to sailing than met the eye! Soon after my return home a friend drew my attention to a magazine article about a firm called Bell Woodworking in Leicester who sold plans or kits to build G.P.14 or Enterprise sailing dinghies. I purchased plans for the former, bought the necessary mahogany and Sitka spruce from Fitchett & Woolacott in Nottingham and persuaded my father to cut it to size. Now building a boat in a garden shed was quite a rare event in those days for the word got out and I was interviewed by the Rotherham Advertiser and the article and photograph made the front page. After completing the boat I joined Rotherham Sailing Club at Harthill but in the following year I moved to be a founder member of Pennine Sailing Club at Underbank Reservoir near Stocksbridge.

Buoyed with my success as a boat builder, I then constructed a P.B.K.20, a two seater canvas covered canoe and it was whilst I was looking for somewhere to use it that I discovered the Chesterfield Canal. In August 1959 my fiancée and I canoed the canal from Norwood Tunnel to Stockwith Basin over a period of three days, camping at Forest Bottom Lock and Drakeholes.

We had previously had to apply for a non-powered cruising licence from Dock Street, Leeds, so our trip was closely monitored by the Section Inspector and his Foreman from their office in Worksop. Apparently, in May of that year the Inland Waterways Protection Society run by Bessie Bunker had also organised a canoe and small boat cruise from Shireoaks to Manton and as the official line seemed to be to discourage use of the canal, they were not overjoyed to see us. This was in stark contrast to the two lockkeepers that we met, Charlie Mitchell at Forest locks and Jack Green at Gringley, both of whom seemed delighted to see us and both regaled us for ages with stories of former times. Our trip entailed a lot of portaging round the locks of the Thorpe and Turnerwood flights, but all the locks below Shireoaks were in working order except for Morse lock where the vandals had burned off the top balance beam.

The attitude of the British Transport Commission to boats on the Chesterfield canal was starkly illustrated by the fact that when I walked the same stretch about a month later I was horrified to discover that, between Shireoaks and Worksop the sides of all the locks had been bulldozed into the lock chambers so that they could no longer be used. When I wrote to them accusing them of official vandalism I was told that it was all done in the interests of safety!!

The following year, 1960, I saw a notice in the magazine "Light Craft" advertising the forthcoming Inland Waterways Association's Boat rally at Stoke-on Trent which my wife and I attended. I was impressed with the aims of the I.W.A. and their efforts to save the Trent and Mersey and Caldon canals and so I joined. In the local North East Midlands branch magazine "Tidal Wave" I read that the committee was short of members so I offered my services and I was co-opted on 5th May 1961.

Soon afterwards, in October it came to the committee's notice that the new Transport Bill proposed the closure of the whole of the Chesterfield canal to navigation, but that it was to be kept as a water supply channel to the basin at Stockwith, which was still being regularly used by commercial traffic. Amazingly some of the cargo being unloaded was

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destined for Chesterfield but the remainder of the journey was to be by lorry! The committee immediately informed Robert Aickman (chairman of the I.W.A.) of the news and we received a reply by return of post imploring us to do what we could to prevent it.

On 3rd November 1961 at the branch I.W.A. committee meeting we decided to hold a protest cruise on the canal and I volunteered to organise it. George Pearson (later of Hotel boat "Bracken" fame), the secretary, circulated all local I.W.A. members imploring them to attend, in boats if possible, or otherwise on foot or by car. Now trailable boats, or for that matter boats of any kind, were a rarity in those days and motors to propel them were even rarer. Hence I approached ATCO, the lawnmower firm in Eckington who had just been advertising their "Boat Impeller". This consisted of a lawnmower engine which clamped to the transom of the boat and attached to it was a long shaft with a propeller on the end. They kindly sponsored us by the free loan of three of these machines.

The protest cruise started from Stockwith Basin on Sunday 26th November in cold but bright weather and initially consisted of three craft. A rowing dinghy "Mimie" belonging to John Atkinson (a local solicitor) and Richard Atherton, a canoe paddled by Mike Bradford and A.N. crewed by George Pearson, Michael Baines and myself. The two dinghies were propelled by the ATCO motors. We were joined at Misterton by Cliff Clarke and 'Scudge' in an outboard powered runabout. We were also accompanied by a fair sized towpath party, some of whom I remember as being Pat Wilkinson, Irene Cowan, Jack Foulds, Joe Stringer and Les Baines. There was also motor cavalcade, most prominent of which was the van belonging to Stanley Sands which was covered in suitable slogans. We left Stockwith at 9.00am and apart from one or two shoals near Gringley we had a pleasant cruise and arrived at Drakeholes at 12.30pm where we stopped for lunch. The boats aroused much interest from passers by and the customers of the nearby "White Swan" pub. When we resumed our cruise we soon ran into difficulties with shallow water and dense weed and we had to resort to bow hauling all through Wiseton to Greys bridge at Clayworth and also from Hayton to near Whitsunday Pie lock. Here the cruise had to finish since we could not close the bottom gates of the lock due to an obstruction on the cill and dusk was approaching.

We decided to follow this cruise by another a fortnight later on December 10th, this time starting at Retford and hoping to finish at Worksop. However due to the condition of the canal the small flotilla of two dinghies and the runabout only managed to reach Manton viaduct, but again considerable interest was generated and several of the local newspapers gave extensive reports of the cruise.

Then on Friday January 26th 1962 the N.E.M. branch of the I.W.A. called a meeting of its members and any other interested parties at the Y.M.C.A. in Sheffield to decide what further campaigning could be done.

It was at this meeting of approximately thirty persons that it was proposed that a Boat Club be formed. This proposal was accepted and a provisional Chairman (Cliff Clarke) and secretary (Peter Fox, later Host of the hotel boats Mabel and Forget-me-not) were elected. A meeting to officially launch the Boat Club was to be organised at Worksop Public Library on Friday February 23rd to which any members of the public were to be invited. Meanwhile a third protest cruise took place on 11th February when one runabout, a small cabin cruiser (both belonging to Cliff Clarke) and my dinghy attempted to sail from Bracebridge to Morse lock. Unfortunately the cabin cruiser of 7ft 3ins beam was too wide to pass through the Town lock in Worksop, but the attempts to get through drew a huge crowd onto the adjacent bridge and gave terrific publicity to the forthcoming meeting. However the other two craft did manage to reach Morse lock, passing the last remaining Chesterfield Canal narrowboat "Ida" which was lying half submerged just above the Town lock. The meeting at Worksop Library was a tremendous success for the room was full to overflowing with people standing several deep around the sides of the room. The Retford and Worksop (Chesterfield Canal) Boat Club was duly formed, a committee was elected and the outlines of a Constitution were drafted. The committee consisted of Cliff Clarke as Chairman, Peter Fox as Treasurer, myself as Secretary with M. Bradford, G. Gosney, T.W. Hartley, D.

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Thompson, J.B. Glasby and G.R. Pearson as other members. Under the dynamic leadership of Cliff Clarke the club grew rapidly and after many long and hard battles the Chesterfield Canal was saved from abandonment and it forged ahead to become the popular club it is today.

Another little known fact concerns the attitude of the West Stockwith Yacht Club to the abandonment to navigation of the Chesterfield Canal. In January 1962 a letter was published in "Spray" the magazine at that time of the W.S.Y.C., suggesting that the I.W.A. should abandon their efforts to save the canal. Later that same month Mr Season (Chairman of the N.E.M. branch of the I.W.A.) was informed by Head Office that the W.Y.S.C. had written to the Royal Yachting Association suggesting that they should not back the I.W.A. in opposing the closure of the canal. A strongly worded letter was sent by the local I.W.A. committee to the W.S.Y.C. pointing out that they were associate members of the I.W.A. and if necessary their membership could be terminated and their subscription be returned. Further correspondence took place but W.S.Y.C. were uncooperative and I assume they were expelled from the I.W.A. since about three years later on 9th December 1964 Mr Season had a meeting with the Vice Commodore of the W.S.Y.C. and it was decided that if the club was sent literature, this would be put before their committee with a view to rejoining the I.W.A.

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