



Celebrating the past

The waterways archive contains photos and documents tracing the history of Britain's canal network back to the 17th Century. We interviewed Ben Jones, one of our collections managers based at the National Waterways Museum in Ellesmere Port, to find out more.

Could you tell us just a little bit about what the archives and collections include?

Our collections vary in size and number from boats as big as our 103 foot long Weaver Packet, Cuddington, down to individual photographic slides, which are tiny transparent photographs mounted in a plastic holder so that when you shine light through them you can make a much larger image on a wall or other surface. Of course, there's plenty in between, and my job involves looking after the small objects collection, which contains all the items that aren't a boat, a photograph or paperwork.

Can you tell us more about these items?

Cuddington was a Weaver Packet, a type of large boat that move between the river weaver and the Manchester Ship Canal, carrying soda ash to the factories of Runcorn and Weston. You probably have soda ash in your house right now, although it won't be called that; it will be called washing powder.

We also have a large collection



Cabin block and water bowl painted with Roses and Castles.

of painted wares, which are everyday items like metal water cans and bowls that would be used on a narrow boat or barge, taken and decorated with all kinds of colourful designs. These included scrolls, countryside scenes or arrangements of roses, daisies and storybook castles. This style is known, unsurprisingly, as Roses and Castles, and is often the most recognised type of canal art. It was very expensive to have these items decorated in this way, so many people who lived on or worked boats would only have had one or two pieces, often given as wedding presents.

Do you have any written accounts of what life was like working on the boats?

Our archive has a lot of written material and photographs

documenting life and labour on the boats. Not much of it was written by the workers or boat people, as people who mainly lived aboard their boats were known, but was rather written about them by outsiders, including people who wanted to regulate, change or improve the way the boat people lived.

Boat people were often viewed as a community outside of normal society, though again we don't have much written record of this from the boat people themselves. Examples like those of Rose King, who was a boat woman who could read and write fluently, provide a little glimpse of life from the other side of the cabin door.

Many people who worked on



Joe and Rose Skinner on their unpowered narrowboat 'Friendship'.



boats did not live aboard, and the cabins of those boats only made space for the occasional brew up, dinner, or a rest from the wind and rain. Life on working boats was hard and gruelling, whether you owned, lived on and worked your own boat or whether you and your family worked for a larger carrying company or manufacturer. The cabins were small and cramped, even if you weren't trying to fit your entire family on board.

Before motors were common on canal boats they were often pulled by horses and mules. Joe and Rose Skinner, whose boat Friendship sits in our Island Warehouse gallery, had one mule they called Daisy working with them for forty years. That, of course, meant caring for and handling a large animal every day.

Motors may have improved the speed and endurance of the boats, but they were dirty, smelly and oily things, especially in the cramped space of a narrow boat's motor room.

Which are your favourite items?

One of my favourite items in the collection, simply because it sounds so off-the-wall, is our Schermuly Rocket pistol. It's a launcher tube that was



The Skinners horseboat 'Friendship', at Hawkesbury. Joe Skinner stands in the background with his mule. The boat is loaded with coal.

designed to allow the firing, via a rocket, of a rescue line over to people in distress on the Manchester Ship Canal. It looks exactly like you would expect; a handgun with a finger trigger, a wooden handle and a huge barrel. It's a gun designed to save lives rather than take them.

My other favourite is our Starvationer, one of the small



Starvationer on show in the Waterways Museum.

boats that used to work in and out of the coal mines at Worsley and spend a lot of time in underground tunnels. They're known as Starvationers because of their exposed ribs, which are parts of the frame that hold the boat in shape.

The Worsley mine boats are a very old design, thought to have provided the blueprint for the canal narrow boat, but they're much smaller than the later boats. It's amazing to stand in our galleries and have a Starvationer in front of you and Friendship, one of the last operating wooden horse boats behind you, making a turn of your head traverse over a century of narrowboat design.

Visit the waterways archives at canalrivertrust.org.uk/places-to-visit/national-waterways-museum/the-waterways-archive