

THE BATTLE FOR THE CHESTERFIELD CANAL

By C N Clark

At the public meeting Steering Committee members had been confirmed as officers of the new club (I abstained from voting). A small sub committee led by Ken Pinchas was set up to introduce club rules and I organised the printing of letterheads, car stickers and a bank account. Due to the short time available I set about organising publicity and the daunting task of approaching the politicians.

With this in mind I obtained the full names of MPs for Sheffield. Rotherham, Doncaster, Retford, Chesterfield. Gainsborough, Derby and Nottingham. All these were large centres of population and the idea was to show the enormous potential that the canal possessed for future development.

I then drafted the first of my newsletters. These were written with two aims in mind, to inform the membership of the progress and to circulate this to the media in the areas targeted. Tremendous help and publicity could be created if the newsletters were interesting and "newsy". Every newsletter was sent to about 30 newspapers and boating publications and it was amazing how much of the Information they used. All-in-all they did a very good job and enquiries regarding the club started to roll in. It seemed there were far more people with latent interest that was realised.

Within a month the membership had doubled and I started planning our first club cruise. Before this could happen, somehow I had to get some boats onto the canal! I purchased a 17' Brensal cruiser and contacted my pal Tom who had built a 17' cruiser from a kit. He promptly agreed to join the cruise. I picked the first Sunday in April for this first official cruise. Nothing too exhausting, it could still be cold this early. I launched my new boat in Retford Basin the previous Sunday (yes you could still leave stuff around then without it being nicked!)

Sunday dawned fine but with an icy wind from the north east. When I arrived at the Basin I found several other small craft had been launched, mainly open boats. No sign of Tom. I delayed as much as I dare and by this time there was quite a sizeable towpath party. I could wait no longer and we prepared the lock. It took two lockings to get everyone through and just as we were about to leave, Tom turned up, late as usual! A party of volunteers helped him to launch and we set off through the rubbish strewn pound to the next lock. Here we experienced problems with rubbish behind the lock gates and by the time we had it cleared, Tom had caught us up. Once through West Retford lock the canal became much more pleasant, deeper water, green banks and some delightful landscaped gardens to our right. Trees were fairly plentiful which gave an added sense of seclusion. This fairly long stretch without locks formed a very pleasant cruising area as the high banks kept off most of the bitter wind. People were beginning to enjoy themselves.

When we had been cruising for about an hour we decided to stop for lunch close to a pretty little wood with a sloping grassy bank. The craft would have no problem beaching whilst their occupants ate lunch. Unfortunately we had lost the shelter of the high banks and the wind was cutting. One member, John Atkinson, was in a dinghy with his pregnant wife. They were frozen stiff and so I asked them to come aboard for a warm. They gratefully accepted and this was later to develop into a very close friendship which lasted until his untimely death a few years later.

The towpath party had grown even further by this time and I reckoned there must have been about 60 people on the canal bank. After lunch we set off again, still a fairly long and pleasant ride to the next locks, a flight of four, which I knew would

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take time. I also knew there was a very friendly lock-keeper who was keen to see the canal prosper. His country cottage was idyllic and he had no wish to lose it! It took most of the afternoon to reach the locks and get everyone to the top where I knew we could moor. We got them all through by about 3.30 pm and we all stood about in groups chatting. It was clear everyone had enjoyed the day. Quite a few friendships were formed and I must say they seemed a good bunch of people. The cruise had been an outstanding success.

The cruise was reported in the next newsletter which kept those who been unable to attend informed. By this time the membership had reached over 100. This was after only two months.

I now had to turn my attention to the forthcoming Parliamentary debate. It was due near the end of the month. During the intervening weeks much midnight oil was burned planning my summary report. Mr. John Wells, the MP for Maidstone was prepared to speak for the canal. As the time drew close for the debate I sat up almost all night bashing out my lengthy argument for its retention and pointing out the enormous interest that had been shown. Our membership had reached beyond the 200 mark and I was now printing 230 newsletters to cover circulation of members and the media.

At nearly 4am I finished the lengthy report addressed to Mr J J Wells MP. House of Commons, London. I took it to Doncaster to post where they had a special late collection. I managed to catch a few hours sleep. When I awoke I phoned John Atkinson (who turned out to be a well-known solicitor in Doncaster and quite a bright boy!) He in turn phoned Mr Wells' secretary to inform her the document was on its way and would arrive some time that day We learned afterwards it did not arrive until 4 pm and Mr Wells had to engage in the old parliamentary trick of "filibustering"

I was very gratified about a week later when Mr Martin Redmayne, MP for a Nottingham constituency and also the chief Tory Whip (a position of some clout) sent me a lovely letter which I still treasure, enclosing a copy of Hansard drawing my attention to certain passages marked in red. It started with a quote from John Wells' long speech, "I have now been handed copious notes and information from the local boat club ..." and had used the arguments in my letter to get his points over. Other pages marked in red were very interesting, "In view of the submission put forward by interested parties, the House has decided to pass the subject to the Standing Committee for further consideration." This was good news - at least we had got a reprieve. Some time later I was informed the decision was that the canal should continue to be maintained "in a state no worse that it is at present", which seemed like a stay of execution for the lime being. The war was not yet over.

In the weeks and months that followed, the club blossomed and we had several fairly enjoyable cruises, but as high summer approached a new enemy appeared! What was to be known as "the dreaded weed". In the hot sun, the wretched stuff came up from the bottom like magic, and multiplied faster than a plague of locusts! Within days the whole -surface of the canal was covered with thick green slime and the horrible binding flannel weed which fouled propellers to a standstill. It was just like my battle at Drakeholes a few years before, how was I going to tackle this?

After giving the matter some thought, I devised a system of enormous rakes, made from TV aerial masts. The main pole was 12 feet long, whilst the cross-boom containing the teeth was some 8 feet wide and the teeth 2 feet long! An amazing contraption. It promptly got the name of "The Commodore's Backscratcher". We fixed ropes to the end of the main handle (the long pole) and one to each end of

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the cross-boom.

I organised the club working parties which kept the interest going during a bad patch. Being aluminium, it was not too heavy and fairly strong. We would lay the teeth in the water at one side of the canal whilst we would either throw or ferry across the other ropes. One gang would be on each bank. The system I devised was simple. The gang on the far side would haul on their ropes and being high up on the bank, it pulled the teeth upwards and over the weed until it got to their side. They would then slacken off their end, and the gang on the main handle rope on the towpath side would haul on their fairly long rope which doubled the distance from the teeth. This method had the effect of hauling the rig back across the canal but because of the longer pull, the teeth settled down into the weed and wickered stuff came over to the bank, leaving a swathe of clear water in its wake! A cheer went up from the other side and a fresh party of volunteers set about with garden forks and the like, digging the stuff out onto the bank where it quickly dried in the sun and went to nothing.

We continued this work for several weeks, and at the end of each day there was a five foot high wall of recovered weed the whole length of our mooring pound! People were so happy, they started up their boat engines and cavorted up and down the cleared stretch!

These rakes continued in use for many years but were not the complete answer. They cleared many impassable bottlenecks but the stuff grew so fast it came back nearly as bad as the original attack. It was just possible to hold a club cruise, albeit with difficulty.

During one of the club cruises, I noticed that the boats with small outboard engines seemed to sail through the weed without much trouble whilst those with bigger engines had very great difficulty. This intrigued me, it was an apparent paradox. Why could small engines do better than a more powerful one? I studied the differences there may be in the design, then spotted something quite by accident in a catalogue for new engines. The small engines were invariably quoted as having "semi-weedless" propellers. This caused me to study the differences between them, then I could clearly see why. The smaller props had long curling blades and their leading edges always curled away from the centre. In this way, as it picked up the weed, it was forced to the edge and away, while the larger engines had clover leaf shaped blades. This did the opposite. The leading edge forced the weed to the centre where it clogged and clogged until the engine stopped. I got on the phone to the manufacturers who informed me that there was a range of weedless propellers available for most larger motors and I ordered a few. What a difference! Where before people had been floundering with masses of horrible weed, now all they had to do was to switch to reverse for a second then on going into forward gear, presto - no weed!

News of this wonder spread and I quickly disposed of those props I had acquired at my cost price. I publicised this find widely in the newsletter and soon most of the bigger boats were enjoying better cruising. Unfortunately as the canal became slightly better, people seemed to forget about these and their value.

But the battle went on - next time we announced a club cruise, we found the canal empty of water over the route we had planned and had to change our plans quickly. On the other hand, if we announced a working party to clear rubbish the canal would be full to overflowing! It was obvious someone was trying to kill us off. Why would anyone want to do that? To try and find an answer I went to see our friendly Lock Keeper at the cottage near our moorings. I call him a Lock Keeper but he was

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really a canal maintenance man living in an idyllic lock cottage.

He knew the answer alright. "It's that..... Foreman!, he said. When I asked the reason I heard an intriguing story. It seemed that the then canal Inspector had originally been a bricklayer. He had been working down at West Stockwith lock when there was an accident. The bricklayer had been badly injured and on his recovery he had been rewarded by promotion to inspector following the retirement of the previous chap. The foreman resented this, he thought the job should have been his. It transpired that the new inspector, a nice chap, knew little or nothing on how to run a canal. There was great jealousy. One result of this was the foreman took to supplementing his income by doing private deals with local farmers. They all had licences to extract water during the growing season but for very small quantities indeed. In practice they had bribed the foreman to shut a blind eye to their water extraction activities and were taking whatever water they wanted in enormous quantities.

In order to keep them supplied, it was the foreman's policy to adjust water levels so that they had an inexhaustible supply to pump on their crops, while other parts of the canal became drained dry! Indeed, during one altercation with this character he had the audacity to come straight out with it! "Grub comes before boats". I could not believe my ears but I knew it was the truth. By doing this the foreman was lining his nest with the farmers and at the same time dropping his boss in it for not keeping the canal in water!

Much of what happened those first two years were as a direct result of his activities. Another sideline he appeared to have developed was drawing vast amounts of timber for so-called work on the canal, flogging it to the farmers, while his gang played cards in their hut when they should have been working, on the canal. I found the lock keeper's stories hard to believe but it was proved conclusively that he was telling the truth but was afraid to say so in public for fear of recrimination. I just got fed up with these antics with the water supplies. It was obvious we were being deliberately sabotaged; if the boat club got going, all his little fiddles would be nipped in the bud! I had another chat with my friend, the lock keeper regarding water supplies. "Oh, there's little trouble with them, he just turns the water off on a Thursday morning, so he doesn't get called out on a weekend".

It was Friday morning and we had a club cruise on the Sunday. The lock keeper was afraid to be discovered with me and squatted down on his seat in the car so as not to be seen. He directed me to the feeder to the canal from the River Ryton and told me to raise it. I did as he had instructed and lo and behold on the following Sunday we had a lovely cruise down to Osberton Lock from Worksop with good deep water all the way. As we approached the lock we were met by the Inspector and his side-kick, the foreman. They tried to stop us operating the lock, it was a very ugly scene and nearly came to fisticuffs. I was adamant and anyway there were more of us and they eventually slunk away. We all got through the lock and moored up for lunch at the first available spot.

Half way through lunch I noticed my boat listing badly. So were the others. I went to investigate, it did not take long to find the cause. Every long pound in the canal has an emergency paddle. This had been raised to the full extent by the foreman thereby draining the canal on us. Boats were going aground all over the place! Without waiting I grabbed my lock key and promptly wound the paddle down to stop the draining water. I then went back to the lock, opened both paddles for a while and ran water down from the topside. Twenty minutes later, we were all

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floating once more. I returned and closed the lock down again. Off we went in good deep water and finished our cruise in comfort. It was certainly a battle in more ways than one but the battle was by no means over!

The very next cruise we organised, we were met by my friend the lock keeper. "You won't be able to go anywhere, he's blocked all the locks off with stop planks on the grounds of bank safety. It's all baloney but that's what he's done" he said. I thought for a moment and asked my friend if he wanted the canal to continue. "Of course" came the answer. I therefore asked him to come down the locks with us on our cruise and show us what to do. So he did, that wonderful argumentative little man was the best friend the canal ever had. In six months he taught me exactly how to run a canal and his advice was invaluable. I learned much more about the unusual properties of water and some of the strange ways it worked. It was quite an education! He showed me how to remove stop planks and how to replace them after using the lock. It was quite an art but I soon got proficient at it. Funnily enough this helped to cement the club together more than anything. They had to go on a club cruise if they wanted to get anywhere. As a result they all got to know each other better and the camaraderie increased noticeably.

It was never our policy to leave anyone in the lurch, we became experts at sorting out breakdowns or in the worse scenario give them a tow. One for all, and all for one was the motto.

And so the unseen battle went on, I had to keep quiet about what I knew to avoid putting my friend in trouble but I had now formed the opinion that many of the troubles were a local conspiracy of which higher management knew nothing. Things improved of course, once the farmers' crops were in and the excessive pumping stopped and so our first year came to an end.

At the end of the first year. I decided we would hold a Dinner and Dance for the Club at the Olde Bell Hotel at Barnby Moor. I priced the tickets modestly and was prepared to underwrite any loss, but they all sold well. The room was packed and although I gave an overlong speech reviewing the events of the year (mainly for the benefit of any press that were present) the night as a howling success and helped to cement us into a coherent body.

During the course of our first year as a club. it had become obvious that friendships were being made and people wanted to stop and yarn but it was difficult there on the towpath in front of the lock-keeper's cottage. The nearest pub was two miles away and impractical. We had talked many times about a clubhouse but due to precarious state of the canal politics we could not make any real plans and the idea was mooted about a floating clubhouse. This seemed a great idea as it could be moved about, and if things went wrong I had ideas about moving to the River Idle which at that time was still a statutory navigation.

A ballot was held among members and got a 99% "yes", the one dissenting voice turned out to be right in the long run but we didn't know that at the time. I received offers of cash help from members after including a little form on the ballot papers for them to indicate what they were prepared to give. Some were very generous, others mediocre and others quite frankly stingy!

As soon as the ice started showing signs of going and the ice-breakers were at work again, I took myself off for a tour of the Midlands boatyards on the lookout for a sensible hull to convert. I was startled when prowling around the basin at Walsall on the BCN to see about twenty open narrowboats, all laden to the brim with coal, all frozen solid. I wondered what this had done to their trade! After a day prowling around I got to the extensive boatyard of Blue Line at Braunston and there found

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exactly what I was looking for. It was double the price of what I hoped to pay but it was fully fitted out with electric light, four twin sleeping cabins and a flush toilet! The owner of the yard (with whom I was later to become friendly) told me it was the sleeping half of a pair of hotel boats called Nancy and Nelson; Nancy being the motor boat which towed Nelson. Like all the others it had sunk in the ice but had since been dry-docked and repaired. He further went on to say that they had found a considerable amount of rotten wood in it and had to withdraw it from regular service. However, he pointed out that as we only wanted it for a clubhouse, it should be OK for quite some years on a mooring but warned against regular cruising as the hull just would not stand it.

I pointed out that we had to get back to Worksop. "Well" he said "we've only just fixed it so it should be good enough to get you there". With that we agreed a price and he promised to fix a large bracket on the rudder to take an outboard motor and the deal was done. I never did publish the amount pledged by the members but it was about a quarter of the cost. I paid the rest, also the whole of the costs in getting it back but I never told anyone at the time - morale had to be kept high.

The news spread like wildfire among the members and offers to crew came in quickly. In the end, when the engine bracket had been fitted, I bought loads of food, more than enough for everyone, and two weeks later loaded the lot into a van including several jerrycans of spare fuel together with an anchor for the tidal section of the River Trent. Torches and various other essentials including two large charged batteries for lights were also loaded aboard. I took a member of my staff with me to bring the van back and off we went picking up the crew en route.

We loaded all on board, checked everything over - the van went off - it was all down to us now. We would soon find out if the 18hp outboard would move the boat. We said goodbye to the boatyard owner, started the engine, cast off the ropes and I slipped into gear. Slowly, ever so slowly, the 72' craft long craft inched forward, which was just as well as were to turn a 90 degree bend into the main canal. I had posted a man in the bows to tell me if the coast was clear, and when the nose peeped out into the canal he waved me on. Quite surprisingly the craft answered well to the long handled rudder and we came out into the canal quite easily and set off at about 3 miles per hour.

We were soon to come across our first hazard, a flight of about five wide locks, leading to Braunston Tunnel, a dark winding 1.5 mile long tunnel where the engineers had got it wrong. It was not straight as planned but bent like a donkey's hind leg, in their attempts to join both ends together! Nevertheless, despite this and the fact that we only had hand torches to light way (most boats had large headlamps fitted) we managed to creep along for what seemed an age, before we saw the pinpoint of light at the other end.

We then had a long easy run to the junction of the Leicester section of the Grand Union canal and the flight of five locks at Watford. These gave us no trouble and we sailed through to the top to enter the 23 mile long summit pound. Hooray, no more locks today. We found the canal here very narrow and shallow, it also bent like a snake. I quickly found that getting 72' of boat round a tight corner was very hard work on that long-handled tiller, horse work in fact. The boat needed to be worked backwards and forwards as I soon found that not only had I to get the bows round but then had to steer the rear, while at the same time keeping an eye where the bows were going! Another notch in the learning curve. Just as I was getting the hang of it and we turned into a straight section, Bessie Banton, a crew member's wife handed me up a cup of steaming hot tea for which I was duly thankful. I had

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just nicely finished when a fierce squall blew up without warning. It just took the bows and blew them hard on the shallow bank! We came to a juddering halt! The force of the sudden stop threw a couple of the crew, who were standing on top, off balance and forward on to the cabin roof. Fortunately they did not go into the water but I bet their knees were sore. The wind kept blowing and the only way we could get off was by all the crew "shafting" with long boat hooks which they plonked on the bank and shoved like hell! As soon as the bow came clear, I revved the engine hard to get us under way before the wind could do it again.

Unfortunately the weather turned into a typical April day, bright one minute, then dark cloud accompanied by torrential rain plus the odd blizzard. I stood there at the tiller, the rain dripping off my nose end, frozen stiff even inside my Crombie. I could not even keep warm as this stretch was straight and there was little tiller work to do. However, the wind came again and again, each time requiring shafting off by the crew. We rounded another bend and were promptly blown aground again. By the time the crew had got us clear once more they were in rebellious mood. A hundred yards further on when the same thing happened again, they downed tools and went on strike, telling me the darned thing could stay where it was and they all went inside. It was a good thing nothing else was coming, but it was early April and trade over the top had ceased some years before. We all went in for a warm where Bessie had got the gas fire going and just sat down and waited while the storm passed over.

By the time we got going again, it was getting late and we all decided that as soon as possible we would call it a day. Eventually we moored up at North Kilworth and made straight for the nearest pub! Sitting in front of a great roaring fire and suitably thawed out with internal parts lubricated, we felt in a better frame of mind. We all decided to have a pub meal as everyone was too exhausted to do any cooking! I cannot recall ever being so happy to see the inside of a pub!

We slept like babies, and mercifully the next day dawned bright and clear. We had no more difficulty for the rest of the trip that day. We were joined at Foxton Locks by a whole bevy of club members come partly to help and partly for the ride! Either way we were glad to see them as the locking was to become horrendous from here on for the next 20 miles. We moored for the night at Kilby Wharf, a small village near Leicester.

The going was to get rough the next day, but we did not know that at the time and enjoyed another night in a warm pub.

The next day we made good time down the remaining locks into Leicester and moored up for an early lunch. I then produced a whole set of posters I had done beforehand proclaiming "RUGBY TO WORKSOP BY CANAL", "JOIN THE RETFORD AND WORKSOP BOAT CLUB!" These were designed in sections to stretch the whole length of the cabin sides. They were certainly eye-catching; at least people en route would know about us.

We were joined by more members here, many of them ladies; I felt I could do no more than to offer to take them to the next village, Birstall, where they could catch a bus back to Leicester. Through a couple of locks and out into the River Soar.

As we came out of the lock cut, we found ourselves in the middle of a raging, storm swollen river in full flood! What a shock: although we had bad weather, it must have been far worse further west, in the upper reaches of the river. We had no warning, but I was committed as the torrent swept us downstream at breakneck speed. There were all sorts of whirlpools and undercurrents. Steering Nelson, which

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I had got to a fine art down the canals, needed different treatment in a flooded river. I had to up the speed on the engine to give me more steerage as I found when I instinctively slowed down, I was thrown all over the place by the whirlpools!

We approached what looked like a wide bend, and I set my course to navigate it sensibly but alas, the flooded river was not sensible, it caught my front end in a whirlpool and whipped us round until we were beam on straight across the river and aground! I feared the rushing water could capsize us and ordered all the passengers inside the boat to improve weight distribution. Try as I might, I could not get her off. The boat just would not come round. I knew if I could not shift her, she would break her back if the floods eased, which they could have at any minute. Whilst I was struggling, I noticed that a part-submerged branch was slowly getting wet further up. Could the water be rising? A further check confirmed that it was. I immediately put my helm hard over and gave the engine full throttle! Mercifully, the back end moved into deeper water and at long last I was able to regain control of the 70 ft boat. My hands were shaking!

We shot through the next bridge like a rocket; Birstall came and went before I knew it. By this time the passengers had had enough and were panicking how they were going to get back. They saw a grassy bank, away from the rushing river and demanded I drop them there. They could walk back to the bridge where they could get their bus. I was not keen, as I thought the water seemed to be slowing down and could quickly fall, leaving us aground on the bank with the possibility of rolling over! I agreed, "provided you make it quick". One crew member got a boarding plank ready and our visitors collected their belongings. Luckily I was able to manoeuvre alongside. Two of the crew jumped out and held the ropes whilst another supervised the disembarkation. When the last had gone, in some turmoil, my fears were founded, we were on the bottom and the water was falling quickly. I shouted to the crew to use the shafts and fortunately after what seemed an age, we slid off into deeper water.

As darkness beckoned, we had all had enough for one day, but there was no way I was going to moor on any grassy bank on that trip! I made plain the dangers to all and I kept going until I was able to moor above the lock at Mountsorrel, by this time it was pitch black! Again there was the usual exodus to the pub but I remained on board; I was not sure what the water levels might do and someone had to watch the ropes.

Things started to get easier the following day, there were long canal sections through Loughborough where we stopped for a snack, but I knew we had to get off the river whilst it was in this state before we moored for the night. We kept pegging away, helped by the rapid-river and we reach the Trent at about 4 pm- in good daylight. The Trent was also in flood but under much better control than the Soar. At Trent Junction, we could charge across to the other side where we moored for the night in the entrance to the Erewash canal. We tied safely to the rings in a safe quiet mooring with pubs on the doorstep • take your pick! There were people about here and we were the object of some curiosity. As we were near Nottingham and our activities had been widely reported In the local press.

The next day saw an easy run down to the other side of Nottingham where an empty barge had just pulled out and offered us a tow! Apparently he knew about us and admired our work. I gratefully accepted and in no time at all we were belting down the Trent at ten knots! The bows were half submerged with the force of the water and I became anxious but after watching for a while, decided it had stabilised enough to carry on. We got on so well that by late afternoon we were able to turn

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into Torksey cut where we were able to spend the night and meet our anxious relatives who quickly turned up after a few phone calls.

I was informed that a TV crew were on the way to Drakeholes if we managed to get there within two days. We did and after having a good rest moored up at Drakeholes basin. Nearly home! The TV people turned up about 10 am the next day.

After a short meeting on the bank, they quickly devised a format and gave me a short coaching session on the likely conversation. They were intrigued with Drakeholes tunnel and quickly thought this was the ideal way to start the dialogue. The very attractive interviewer asked us to back Nelson into the tunnel whilst she would stand on the boat top with a microphone and a cameraman behind her looking at her silhouette as we slowly drifted out of the tunnel. Believe it or not, they took the scene nearly 20 times: everything went wrong that could, even her mike cable fouled on one of the roof hatches for just as she had got it all right, I apparently ruined it when I leaned over and pulled the wire loose!

We did the take so many times, I remember her speech by heart - "Is this the black hole of Calcutta? Is it the Tunnel of Love? No. this is Drakeholes tunnel on the beautiful Chesterfield canal, etc., etc."

She went on to give a brief history of the canal and our activities. By this time we were to have poled her out of the tunnel entrance and moored up. I had to nip off smartly, help her down to where the interview was conducted. The whole lot then took off to West Retford where other Club members were able to give a demonstration of rubbish removal out of a lock with a pair of sheerlegs and block and tackle. I gladly handed over the tiller and the boat to a fresh crew who were to take it on to our moorings at Forest Lock and our friend the Lock-keeper. I can honestly say, I had gained several notches on the learning curve!!

Our second year was significant. The success of our activities at Forest Locks had overwhelmed the Lock-keeper and his wife, there were just too many of us! The committee had by this time been joined by John Atkinson and also Harry Spencer of the well-known estate agents in Retford. Harry had good connections and negotiated the tenancy of a long strip of land on the offside bank near Drakeholes tunnel, which also had the convenience of a friendly pub nearby! The basin was still chock-a-bloc with weed but we had a working party who came with waders and at the end of a long hard day, the weed was under control!

We found 12 members who were prepared to stump up enough cash to build a fence round the new moorings as the field was used for cattle grazing. We slowly developed the moorings and our relationships with the pub's tenants who were very good to us by providing parking space for our cars and trailers. At last we had a home! It was a beauty spot, highly visible from the main road and a wonderful advertisement for the club and the canal. By the end of May 1964, we were established. As some members dropped out, disillusioned with the weed, others came to take their place. The club membership went up and up!

Then came the bombshell, I received a letter one day from the BW Chief Engineer's office at Leeds informing us that the tunnel was to be closed for three months commencing 1st June, just as our cruising season was getting underway! The summer would nearly be over before it re-opened. Bad enough but we would also be cut off from the very beautiful section on the other side of the tunnel, nor could we get out to the Trent for a long summer cruise.

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I made phone call after phone call, had meeting after meeting but fate had taken a hand. It seemed that West Burton Power Station was nearing completion and it was necessary to move two enormous generators by road to the building site ready for installation. The engineer was very apologetic, he understood our feelings but he pointed out that he had no option. There was no other suitable way of getting the generators to site. The tunnel was not all that strong and risked collapse. In which case, the canal would be finished. We tried every possible alternative but there was none so we just had to put up with it. I informed the members and those who were planning a long summer cruise moved their boats to the other side before the work started. The remainder just had to be content with the rest of the canal.

We then had to re-awaken the shattered interest. The tunnel would be open by September so it was decided our first ever boat rally would be held just in time to celebrate the re-opening of the tunnel which thankfully happened on time. Our first rally was a modest affair, numbers were small" due to the uncertainty of the tunnel re-opening but it was a great success from the point of view of the canal battle and publicity.

The next task was to keep the interest of the members during the cold winter months. A novel idea was born - the Frostbite Cruise. Our floating clubhouse was moored at Drakeholes having been brought down from Forest locks. In the next newsletter, I announced the date, the Sunday after Christmas. We were very fortunate that the canal did not freeze, although it did the week after. It was great fun everyone was in jovial mood and Nelson was moved along with my outboard motor mounted on the rudder. The cruise through the tunnel was slow, but who cared, we were on the water and enjoying ourselves!

The Frostbite Cruise continued every year and is still carried on to this day (weather permitting!)

The acquisition of Nelson and the flood of publicity which ensued started to swing the pendulum our way. More and more people wanted to join us as they discovered the delights of canal cruising and in particular, the extreme beauty found on large stretches of the canal. Those same stretches that had inspired me to try and save the canal in the first place. After the first few miles of pleasant open farm country after leaving the River Trent at Stockwith, the loveliness of both sides of Drakeholes tunnel, the unique ride through Wiseton, the nine mile lock-free pound, the woods near Hayton, the delightful stretches between Retford and Worksop, and the breathtaking scenery above Worksop. should it ever open, were catching the imagination of the public.

We had to triple the length of the moorings for all those who wished to join. By now most people were wise about weedless propellers and although the weed was still a nuisance, it was more than compensated by the loveliness of the canal. When we got fed up with the weed, we could always go for a bash on the Trent and the Club regularly organised cruises to educate people of the problems of navigating tidal water.

People could see we were a dynamic go-ahead force and wanted to be part of it. Our rallies attracted increased numbers of craft and became one of the events of the season.

I found myself being taken seriously by British Waterways and had access right to the very top. I found if I talked sensibly to them, they would listen and respond positively within their means. Things started to get done and we became one of the best known clubs on the waterways.

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The yearly cruise on the River Idle was started at this time just to let the authorities know that we wanted access to it, I believe the tradition is carried on to this day,

By 1964 I now had adequate help with running the club, but the first two years were nearly a one man band and many activities were often the result of my personal subsidy! Fortunately my pockets were deep at the time!

1964 had come and gone, and we entered 1965 with buoyant spirit - things were looking up - we had arrived'

One result of our success and our continued cruising of Nelson, as predicted by the one member who voted against the acquisition the boat, she started to deteriorate. She was dirty and untended, the batteries were run down, bilge water needed pumping and all those things which go towards keeping a wooden boat a going concern had not been addressed.

A working party was quickly organised to get her back to Forest Locks, where Charlie (our friendly lock-keeper) would keep an eye on it. We started off well enough until the straight bit after Wiseton bends. This had always been notoriously shallow due to difficulty of dredging and overhanging trees, the dead leaves of which helped to silt the canal up each autumn. We stuck on the bottom. Nothing we could do would budge us. We revved the engine until it overheated, even tried bow-hauling and towing with a Land Rover. No dice. There was nothing left but to abandon it for the day as it was getting dark. Remember this was a nine-mile pound. We could not play tricks with water levels as we had done at Forest Locks. It would take several days to raise the water sufficiently to float her off.

That night it froze! Nelson was trapped. There she stood in the middle of the canal looking very forlorn. It froze for over two weeks, we kept making inspections, but one day we went and the boat had gone. A thaw had started midweek and it transpired that two of our more enthusiastic teenagers, who lived nearby, had come along, seen it afloat and taken it on themselves to haul it a bit further. Eventually we got her back to Forest Locks but the writing was on the wall; regretfully Nelson had had her day. It was downhill all the way after that. The grounding and subsequent efforts to move her had seriously damaged the hull and she was taking in water.

One Sunday morning in waders, I made valiant attempts to repair the damage with sheet steel and the old fashioned caulking. It stemmed the flow and we got her re-floated but she was fated never to leave Forest Locks again. Leaks kept re-occurring and volunteers soon got fed up of pumping out and she finished aground in the shallows. She did survive the summer but not to move again.

The loss of Nelson caused us to look for another clubhouse. The landlord of the 'White Swan' at Drakeholes very kindly fixed us up with a large room in an outbuilding which members enthusiastically converted into a tidy clubroom. Particular thanks were due to Les Baines and George Stokes. This served us well and was also right on the doorstep, we even had our own beer on tap!

By late 1965, four years of intense pressure and overwork were beginning to tell on me. I was feeling tired and jaded. With all the publicity I was getting bombarded with offers to be on this or that committee or to oversee some business venture connected with the waterways. I had to turn them all down.

After two years of very good use of the White Swan, some members were fearful that if the landlord changed things might be different. One member in particular got

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his ear to the ground and did some very good "behind the scenes" negotiating. In autumn, this member, Les Baines (a wonderful chap) took me on one side and asked me to join him in a drink. Not at the White Swan but at a quiet pub in the country. He told me his enquiries had dug out the fact that a ramshackle, run-down pub on the canal was being abandoned by the brewery. The site was ideal, but the place was a mess. I was not enthusiastic my mind dwelling on the condition of Nelson but when he told me the price and the terms on which it could be obtained. I softened somewhat and could see the possibilities. However, the canal had not yet been saved, although things were looking promising and I was cautious. I advised him to keep the pot boiling with his negotiations but not to commit us to anything. If we finally saved the canal, it would be a wonderful investment.

By the end of 1965, I thought four years was enough and I was sure there were others who could do a good job and announced I would stand down at the AGM next February. A new chairman was elected, Richard Atherton, a bright young man in his twenties who I thought would be going places sooner or later. I handed over the reigns together with all the correspondence and the books.

Unfortunately Richard's time was short-lived. A few months after his election, he got promotion at work and moved to Wolverhampton, John Atkinson was elected in his place, John was not universally popular as he had an abrupt manner but was a fine man in many ways and he took over where I had left off. One day during a chat he told me the future of the canal was to be finally decided and that he was to meet the then Transport Minister, Mrs Barbara Castle (MP for Blackburn) in an effort to put our view over. John said he felt very hopeful as they were impressed by what we had achieved in a short time.

About a month later John called me saying he had just received a letter from Barbara Castle stating she had been convinced by our arguments and accordingly the canal was to be taken out of the "remainder" category and upgraded to the new title of "cruiseway". This meant finally, the canal was safe. Funds would be found - to renovate the -locks, dredge the waters and to generally Improve 11 ail round.

A short while later, Charlie (our friendly lock-keeper) sidled up to me at Forest Locks and asked, "'Ow the 'ell did you manage it Cliff?" I simple replied, "With your help Charlie".

That autumn, the. Sheffield Branch of the. inland Waterways. Association held their annual dinner. Feeling in the mood for a good nosh and plenty of chat, ! bought two tickets for Margaret and myself. On arrival 1 was surprised to "find we were seated of the fop table. I was equally surprised to be asked to pose for photographs, it seemed the press were in attendance.

I was even more surprised after the dinner when the speeches started to find myself the recipient of the Waterways VC, The Cyril Styring Trophy. That was that! They would not let me go - I was appointed the Club's first Vice President and I served on various committees for quite some time.

C N Clark