

## Trench Boats

The East Shropshire tub-boat canals with their inclined planes remained isolated from the Midlands canal network until 1835, when the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction's branch from their main line at Norbury was opened to Newport and Wappenshall. At Wappenshall it joined the tub-boat canal from Donnington Wood to Shrewsbury. To accommodate narrow boats, the Shrewsbury Company planned to widen their locks and bridges, including those up to the foot of their inclined plane at Trench near Wellington. They could not, however, afford their full programme and only the two locks at Eyton, on the Wappenshall-Shrewsbury line were altered, plus the bridges on this length, eight being replaced by lifting spans, for headroom had been limited.

Between Wappenshall and Trench, the nine locks and bridges were left untouched, the locks over 81ft long but only about 6ft 7in wide, the arched bridges equally narrow and very low. All the Shrewsbury Canal locks were built with ordinary top gates, but bottom gates were of guillotine pattern, the idea being to accommodate four 19ft 8in tub boats at once. This could not be done if the lower gates had been mitred, to open inwards into the chamber, but was possible with the drop gate. Some of the gate-lifting mechanisms survive. They comprise a wooden gantry, pulleys, chains, a windlass and a counterweight. Originally the weight was a box of stones or scrap iron rising and falling above the gate, but from 1840 the design was altered to an iron weight in a well alongside the chamber, except at Hadley Park (No. 4 lock) where the box, much damaged, remains.

With standard narrow boats running to Shrewsbury, it was not long before narrow boats of special design were being built to work up to Trench and tranship to and from tub-boats at the foot of the inclined plane. No date has yet been advanced for the start of this service, but almost certainly it would be initiated by the Shropshire Union Company, which was formed in 1846, the Shrewsbury Canal being one of the constituents. It was Shropshire Union policy to build up their own carrying services over the whole 200 miles of their system and they succeeded in achieving a near monopoly of carrying. Certainly they monopolised traffic to Trench, handled by their Trench boats. These were extra-narrow narrow boats with a beam of 6ft 2in and a low cabin. They generally only carried 16 tons, although they could manage 18 tons. Some were fly-boats, others being called 'reserve' boats, taking local traffic. The fly-boats worked between Ellesmere Port and the foot of the Trench plane, making intermediate calls at Nantwich, Audlem, Market Drayton, Goldstone, Shebdon, Newport, Edgmond and Wappenshall. The 'reserve' boats ran between Trench and points on the Shropshire Union main-line north and south of Norbury, including Gnosall, High Onn, Wheaton Aston, Brewood and Chillington, and they went up to Shrewsbury.

Much of the traffic was iron ore from Ellesmere Port and limestone from Llanymynech, transhipped into tub-boats at the foot of the Trench plane and destined for the Lilleshall Company's iron and engineering works on the canal at Donnington Wood. Below the Trench plane were the Shropshire Ironworks, which received cargoes of copper ingots direct from ships at Ellesmere Port, these travelling non-stop by fly-boat. Outward cargoes were copper wire and iron billets from the Shropshire Ironworks, nails from a works at Hadley nearer Wappenshall and basic slag for export from Ellesmere Port.

Traffic patterns changed after 1870 when the Shropshire Union developed the wharf at Lubstree at the head of the Humber Arm, off the Newport branch on the Norbury side of Wappenshall. The wharf was given a rail connection with the Lilleshall Company's works and iron ore, ironstone, limestone, slag, pig iron and castings went this way instead of by the Trench plane. It saved maintenance of the plane and allowed loading into standard sized narrow boats which came to be called 'Humber Armers'.

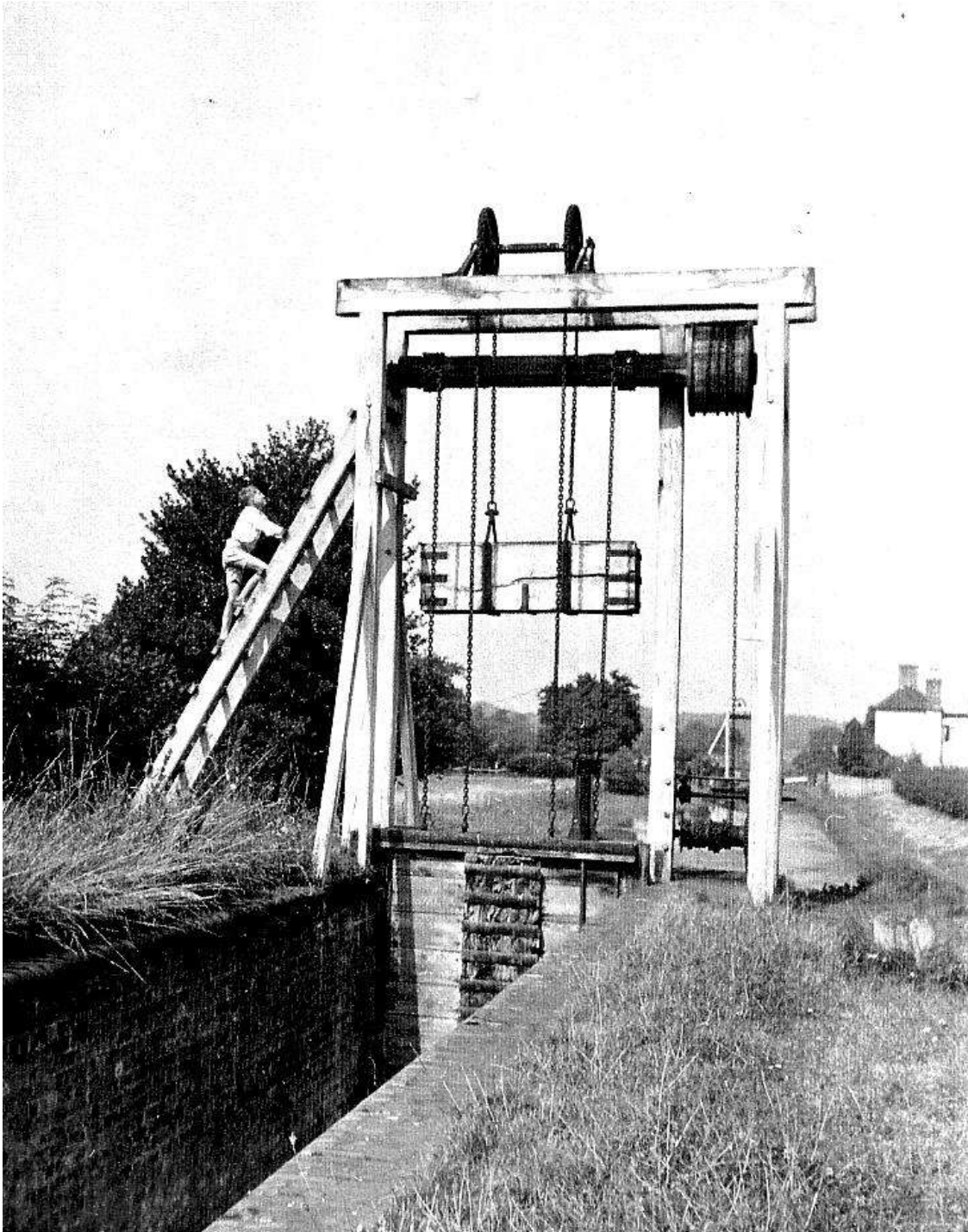
Grain traffic via the plane continued for the flour mills at Donnington Wood, and the Shropshire Ironworks cargoes were maintained until about 1918 when the Shropshire Union decided to stop the through Trench boats and handle everything at Wappenshall by standard narrow boat. Three Trench reserve boats were kept on for short-haul work to feed cargo to and distribute from Wappenshall. These were just dayboats and used one skewbald horse called 'Teeny'. They were crewed by Trench men. However, through boats were later restarted until the Shropshire Union gave up all carrying and closed the Trench plane in 1921. Wheat was the last traffic up it, four tub-boats being required for the 18 tons of grain aboard a Trench narrow boat.

There was no means of winding a boat at Trench, although local works demanded a hole; so one way, normally down, had to be performed stern first until the boat could be winded at the triangular junction at Wappenshall. Because of the low bridges, empty boats had to remove all planks, stands, cratches and chimney.

The guillotine gates were tricky to move; they stuck in frost and had to be prised free with bars, and they had a habit of bouncing off the slotted sill which meant more work at the windlass with its 2ft 6in throw handle. A gate paddle of standard Shropshire Union design was provided on these lower gates. The top gates had centre paddles with ground paddles alongside.

Latterly, in the twentieth century, there were four Trench fly-boats, the *Helen*, *Dot*, *Spot* and *Bee*; of the reserve boats the older were the *Tanny*, *Flora*, *Fritz*, *Hugo*, *Janet*, *Mavis*, *Mentor*, *Opal*, *Peak*, *President*; latterly in use were the *Colonel* (largest capacity), *Educator*, *Rogarth* (smallest capacity), *Jupiter*, *Patriot*, *Reynolds*, *Shropshire* and *Venus*. The names are typical of the Shropshire Union's 16 variety, the *Colonel* being named after Colonel Paget,

proprietor of the Shropshire Ironworks. In later years some of these became maintenance boats.



*A guillotine gate lock on the Trench Arm in 1935. The young man is Patrick Davies who was to become principal of Messrs Davies White & Perry, Auctioneers & Estate Agents of Newport.*