

SIDE ONE

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|---|---------------------------|---|
| 1 | Come Now Begin Delving | The 'Stour', Jen & Sue (vocals), John (accordion) |
| 2 | The Navy Boy | Jen (vocal & guitar), John (concertina), Sue (oboe) |
| 3 | The Bold Navigators | Jen & Sue (vocals), John (vocal & accordion) |
| 4 | Canal Fever | Sue (vocal) |
| 5 | Leeds - A Seaport Town | John (vocal & concertina) |
| 6 | The Manchester Ship Canal | Gary & Vera (vocals) |
| 7 | Birmingham Lads | Jen & Sue (vocals), John (vocal & accordion) |
| 8 | All Hail This Grand Day | Jen (vocal & guitar), John (concertina), Sue (oboe) |

The Bold Navigators

Jon Raven
John Kirkpatrick
Sue Harris
Gary and Vera Aspey

SIDE TWO

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|---|---------------------------|---|
| 1 | Captains of The Waterways | Jen (vocal) |
| 2 | The Cruise of The Calibar | Gary (vocal), Vera (accordion) |
| 3 | Keep Yer 'Auds Off | Jen (vocal), John (accordion) |
| 4 | The Tommy Note | Jen (vocal) |
| 5 | Poor Old Horse | John (vocal & accordion), Sue (vocal) |
| 6 | Push Boys Push | Jen (vocal & guitar), John (vocal & concertina), Sue (oboe) |
| 7 | The Rosemary | The 'Stour', Jen (vocal & guitar), Sue (vocal) |

tradition
TSR 019
stereo

Sleeve Notes from **The Bold Navigators** TSR 019 (1975)

*"Come new begin delving, the Bill is obtain'd
The contest was hard, but a conquest is gain'd;
Let no time be lost, and to get business done
Set thousands to work, that work down the sun.*

In attempting to tell the story of England's canals in one short collection of songs, it seems natural to start - after a brief 'echo' from former days - with one celebrating the passage of the parliamentary bill which was the necessary precursor to each and every new venture. Once the projectors had secured this consent, the financiers, engineers, craftsmen and labourers were able to begin to "work down the sun". In this country the names of the Duke of Bridgewater and James Brindley stand at the forefront of the canal builders' role of honour; the Duke for his vision and courage, Brindley for his skill and hard work. Their Bridgewater canal, completed in 1761, paved the way to great commercial enterprise and became one of the wonders of the age. However, all their efforts would have been worthless without the skill and strength of their craftsmen and navvies (from 'navigators') to see the work through. In the first place both artisans and labourers were obliged to learn new methods and techniques so that in time a skilled workforce was available. Inevitably, rather than train new men, the contractors and engineers preferred to take their men from job to job. While many of these were originally recruited locally, they were joined by travelling Irish, Scottish and English men in search of good employment and, by the end of the 18th century, thousands of itinerant craftsmen and labourers were following the course of the navigations to many parts of the country. **'The Navy Boy'** reflects one aspect of the consequent social upheaval but there were other, more serious, problems created by the huge bands of faceless navvies (also known as 'banditti' or 'bankers') descending upon relatively isolated communities. Crimes against locals were common and mob warfare between the navvies themselves was also rife. During the great period of canal building from the early 1760s through to the 1800s, accounts of the varied brutality and criminality of these men occur in the columns of local newspapers wherever the banditti gathered. They existed in social isolation and possessed a strong sense of community - expressed in the words of a contemporary broadside, **'The Bold Navigators'**. The job itself was fraught with hardship and danger, often resulting in injury or death. In monetary terms their pay was good but they might be cheated by

greedy landladies or, if they lived in the hut encampments, fall victim to an extortionate Truck system whereby payment was in the form of company notes - redeemable only at the company store, where prices were often high and quality low. In many cases what little they had left was spent on the 'demon' drink so perhaps it is not surprising that they were preoccupied with aggressive behaviour and outrages against the community at large.

Despite the civil actions for compensation brought against the construction companies on account of the ravages wrought by their workforce, both the building and operating of the first canals were proving a huge commercial success. Speculators all over the land were falling over themselves to launch their own particular projects and a regular **'Canal Fever'** gripped the country. **'Leeds - A Seaport Town'** is one of several very similar songs which serve to illustrate the wild expectations of the populace from this new impetus to the Industrial Revolution. Although the navigation in question was eventually opened nearly seventy years later, **'The Manchester Ship Canal'** was sung at the city's Theatre Royal in the 1820s and, again, creates an extraordinary vision of the changes to be brought about.

Whatever the illusion, the efforts and hardships of the navvies, craftsmen and engineers were frequently brought to a successful conclusion and the owners were happy to forget the social problems and celebrate the completion of each new canal with the grand opening ceremony befitting the magnificence of the occasion. The 'gongoozlers', described by de Salis in his *Handbook of Inland Navigation* as idle and inquisitive persons "who stand staring for prolonged periods at anything out of the common", were provided with opportunities for gongoozling on an Olympian scale. The company barges, decorated with flags and bunting, carried the proprietors on the first trip along the new navigation, church bells were rung, bands played and salutes of guns were fired. The navvies got their roasted ox and free beer and were allowed to take part in the general festivities before 'going tramp' to look for their next job. Special songs were written to celebrate the occasions - exemplified by **'Birmingham Lads'** for the opening of the Birmingham Canal in 1769 and **'All Hail This Grand Day'** written by a 'gentleman' and actually sung by one of the proprietors at the opening of the Croyden Canal in 1809.

Once the publicity and excesses of the opening ceremony were over the work of the bargees began. They and their mates, with the aid of a horse, and later with the aid of a variety of different types of engine: from steam to diesel, floated their barges up and down the canals carrying coal, iron ore, wood, copper, building materials, foodstuffs, hardware and all manner of other goods. The boat people, as they came to be known, left a wide variety of occupations in favour of the 'new life' and sometimes the navvies who had excavated the 'ditches' ended their tramping days and lived relatively settled lives as '**Captains of the Waterways**'. The companies who owned the canals were usually separate from those who operated the carrying business. The owners levied tolls of varying amounts, depending on the type of goods, and the carriers charged their customers whatever the market would stand. Canal boatmen sometimes practised deceptions in order to defraud the companies and supplement their incomes - covering high toll cargo with low toll goods and obtaining the connivance of the toll keepers. The carriers, in turn, took various steps to curtail such abuses and were quick to prosecute in order to make an example of the errant boatman, both by severe fines imposed by the court and by charging any cargo they discovered to be 'mixed' at the highest toll rate. The halcyon days of canal carrying - for both owners and boatmen - lasted till the second decade of the 19th century. From the 1830s the life grew harder as competition from the railways, and the many trade recessions of the first half of the century, hit the canal carrying companies. As usual, wage rates failed to keep pace with the cost of living increases and often, particularly on the longer hauls, wives and children had to travel with the boats in order to make the life a paying proposition. The subsequent social problems caused by overcrowding and poor amenities were considerable but '**The Cruise of the Calibar**' is a more light-hearted glimpse of the trials and tribulations in a bargee's life on the Manchester/Rochdale canal - the song was written in the 1870s and was very popular in Lancashire. As with many of the workers of the 19th century, the music halls had a very strong influence on the songs that were in vogue among the boat people. An all-time favourite with them was '**Keep Yer 'Ands Off**' but there must have been many songs made directly by themselves and reflecting their own working life. One so far discovered is '**The Tommy Note**' - a song with a nice sense of irony dealing with the Truck system as it affected them. (The Tommy Note was the note used in lieu of money in payment of wages). '**Poor Old Horse**' is a chantey said to have been collected from a Midland boatman - a 'number one' being a boat operated by its owner, whilst the Hearts Hill length is a stretch of canal where granite chipping deposits on the canal bed caused the boats to scrape the

bottom, making towing hard work for the horses.

The struggle between canals and railways was long and bitter. Even though the canals still had a huge tonnage of freight in the early 20th century it was by then apparent that they were beginning a lengthy decline. Even as early as the 1850s canals had suffered the ignoble fate of having the water run out of them for conversion to railways. In the 20th century they had to contend with increasing road traffic as well. When the two World Wars took boatmen away for active service - many of them never to return - and other factors arose, the continuing decline as commercial vehicles was assured. In recent years, through public interest and renewed Government activity, the life of the canals has been, to some extent, revived and extended. They are now considered as important amenities and have become green fingers of the countryside extending into towns - rather than the converse. In 1967 the Government published a white paper which took a generally optimistic note regarding this aspect of the canals' future and nowadays there is heard talk of the renewed commercial prospects of some of them. Be that as it may, present activity on the 'cuts' is largely centred on the enthusiastic efforts of amateur 'navvies' and boatmen devoting their weekends, under the aegis of the Waterways Recovery Group, to making it possible for the public to spend more of its leisure time on the canal network. '**Push Boys Push**', is perhaps the nearest thing to a modern 'folk' song, having been made by members of the Dudley Canal Tunnel Society (now the Dudley Tunnel Trust) and others to help them 'leg' their way through the tunnel. Like many another, it has no towing path so, as the use of an engine is ruled out by the danger from fumes, propulsion is obtained by lying on the boat's cross beams and 'walking' along the roof. In the early 60s this tunnel was almost closed permanently but it is now open to traffic again, thanks to the success of the Society's struggles. Other enthusiasts are digging up (sometimes quite literally) the old working boats and restoring them to their former glory. Gary & Vera, together with Chris Cheetham and others, are now the proud owners of a seventy foot narrowboat - complete with its original Bolinder engine. It seemed particularly appropriate to record some sound effects aboard the 'Stour' as it is one of the Clayton company's boats mentioned in '**The Rosemary**' - a modern song which tries to capture the thoughts and feelings of an old boatman who imagines himself able to work the canals once more - and the 'echo' with which the whole story opens was 'immortalised' on the same occasion.

*Compiled and collated from notes and information supplied by **Jon Raven**.*