

High water at Bull's Bridge

Tim Coghlan continues his series of articles looking to this year's 13th Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally – co-sponsored by Braunston Marina and *Towpath Talk* – and touching on some of the historic narrowboats that will be attending.

I AM convinced that there is still a lot of historic canal material out there just waiting to come to light, as shown by my recent find. It is a large, very fine mounted photograph –

reproduced here – of the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company (GUCCC) Bull's Bridge Depot in about 1937.

This was the headquarters of its canal carrying and boat

maintenance operation. It was simply bursting with activity, with about 23 GUCCC boats undergoing various stages of maintenance.

The photograph was taken

when the GUCCC at its peak of canal dominance, with a fleet of some 180 boats, and this framed picture was certainly in the ownership of the then fleet manager Leslie Morton, who was relieved of his position in that year – hence the suggested dating of the photograph, which is in fantastic condition, simply because, for reasons to be explained, it has not seen the light of day since 1970. It is even still in its original frame, the label on the back stating 'J Brown & Son, Fine Art Dealers and Picture Framers, Aldgate, E.C. It is similar to the one in Alan H. Faulkner's booklet *The George & The Mary, A History of the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company Ltd*, and was no doubt taken by the same photographer on the same day and from almost the same spot. But two things are special about this one, which I have never seen before: Firstly there is shown here a horse-drawn maintenance barge, full of dredgings, and on closer examination a recovered motorcycle that had been dumped in the canal – so no change then from today.

The other special thing is that in this version two boats are seen in the bottom right hand corner, one of which is the *Phobos*, which from 1943 until 1945, was worked by the famous *Idle Women* trio of Sonia Rolt & co. It is the only photograph I have seen of the *Phobos* in its pre-Second World War fine livery. When I showed it to the *Phobos*' present owner, he was thrilled and told me it was only the second photograph he had seen of the boat in its GUCCC days, the other being that famous one of Sonia painting pro-Labour political slogans over the cabin for the 1945 General Election, which the Labour Party won, throwing out Winston Churchill.

The name of the butty moored with the *Phobos* is not visible, but using the registration number, it can be identified as the *Marcellus*, which may then have

been paired with the *Phobos*, but by the time of Sonia's arrival was paired with the butty *Moon*. All three of these boats will be attending this year's rally.

Only two of the other boats in the photograph have their names visible, the butties *Orion* and *Romsey*. What became of these boats post the early 1950s is not known to me. They do not feature in that recent definitive work by Williams & Silverster, *Historic Working Narrow Boats Today*, but then neither does Sonia's *Moon*. Those two boats may be out there somewhere, as hulls awaiting a sympathetic restoration.

Garage clearance
The photograph's discovery was the result of a garage clearance following the sale by the widow of the late Dennis Clarke of her house neighbouring Braunston Marina. Our marina builder Roy, whose weekend hobby is car boot sales, spotted the framed picture, with two others, at the back of the opened garage when he was speaking about matters of mutual interest to the Polish builders, who were giving the house a makeover for its new owner. The pictures were about to go into the skip, so it was a timely intervention – and yes, I have since been formally given them by Mrs Clarke.

Roy smiled as he said: "You just might be interested in these!" I was indeed, especially as the other two pictures gave a convincing clue as to who the original owner was. One was the framed certificate for Leslie Noel Morton's membership of The Institute of Transport, an organisation founded in 1919, "established to promote and encourage Knowledge of Traffic Science and the Art of Transport in all its branches and the means and appliances connected therewith". Morton's certificate is dated November 4, 1955.

The other picture was a fine small coloured print of J Spurling's famous 1924 painting of the *Cuty Sark* – Morton had in his time served an apprenticeship on a square rigger. So all three pictures had once been owned by Leslie Morton, one of the now forgotten heroes of the canals, who held the pass before they found a new life and purpose in recreation.



The lay by at Bull's Bridge in April 1944. This was to the south of the maintenance depot, where boats mustered awaiting orders. A group of *Idle Women* are seen – the girl in the white jersey being Evelyn Hunt whose motor was the *Sun*, which was later converted to the tripboat *Water Ouzel*. Behind the Town Class butties *Bedworth* and *Feltham* can be identified. PHOTO: WATERWAYS TRUST

were sold to the Clarkes in 1970 by the British Waterways Board, which had acquired the cottages on the nationalisation of FMC in 1947. The Clarkes had then converted them to one dwelling and built that garage.

Dennis Clarke was a Braunston lad, his parents for many years running the lockside Admiral Nelson pub. He was a man of talent and worked his way up from an apprentice in Samuel Barlow's yard – now part of Braunston Marina – before being appointed in 1954 as the Braunston foreman to the newly formed Willow Wren Canal Carrying Company, with premises and workshops at Braunston Bottom Lock.

Willow Wren had been formed in 1954 by the IWA under the driving energy of its chairman Robert Aickman, who had proclaimed that only by encouraging "the canal's lifeblood of commercial carrying" could the canals be retained for pleasure use. Aickman was wise to appoint Leslie Morton as general manager, who then aged 56 was working as an import export agent, and looking forward to his retirement. In the event Morton took up the challenge of saving canal carrying, and worked tirelessly on his new appointment, until he died in the harness in 1968 aged 72. His death really took the driving force of Willow Wren which finally ceased commercial carrying in early 1970.

Head office
Willow Wren's head office was firstly in Brentford and then moved to Bull's Bridge, with the northern branch depot at Braunston Bottom Lock, which Morton would visit each week. He would drive up from his home in Epsom, and stay Wednesday and Thursday nights at the Admiral Nelson.

On the evenings of his visits, he was to be found in the bar of that in what today is the table-skittles room. Any of his boatmen who were in Braunston would be treated to a pint of black 'n tan, a mix of bitter and stout in equal measures.

Those evenings made for great party nights among the boatmen, with much loud singing to the accompaniment of accordions and mouth organs. David Blagrove, who worked for Willow Wren for three years in the early 60s, wrote a song, the last verse of which was:

*We work for Leslie Morton a very kindly man,
On Wednesdays at the 'Nelson' he buys us Black and Tans,*

He gets us lots of orders, and pays us now and then,
Three cheers for Leslie Morton, the King of Willow Wren.

For the most part Morton was well liked and respected by those of his boatmen who had come from his old GUCCC fleet and also the FMC. But he was generally detested by many of the neighbouring Barlows boatmen who saw him as responsible, during his GUCCC years, for killing off the old independent boatmen – the Number Ones – by undercutting them on prices to the point when many had surrendered their independence to join Barlows simply in order to survive.

Morton had a small wooden hut for an office attached to what today is Wharf House Narrowboats' shop. Dennis Clarke's son told me who could not recall seeing those three pictures in Morton's office – there didn't even seem room for pictures, and he just did not know where they had been after Morton died, and how they got put in his parents' garage in 1970. But they had been there ever since, until their recent discovery.

After Willow Wren closed its Braunston operation, Dennis Clarke ran a trip boat with his wife, until his death in 1992. The

boat was the converted former GUCCC motor the *Sun*, renamed *Water Ouzel*. During the Second World War *Sun* had been the motor for another trio of *Idle Women* Evelyn Hunt & co. Today *Water Ouzel* still survives as a tripboat, operating on the Regent's Canal in London.

At its height in 1961, Willow Wren had a fleet of 38 boats, which it had acquired from British Waterways Board, whose nationalised fleet – mainly of former GUCCC and FMC boats – was now in steep decline. The fleet size was only a fraction of what Morton had previously experienced in the pre-war heyday of the GUCCC. It is to Morton's credit that all these boats survive into modern times, and several are regular attendees at the Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rallies, including the former FMC butty *Crimbsby*, which is returning this year after an absence of a few years.

Dramatic expansion
Leslie Morton was born in Birkenhead in 1896. When aged 13, he served as an apprentice on a square rigger, the *Beeswing*, in which capacity he had sailed six times round Cape Horn. By the time of the First World War he had moved to modern ocean liners, and was an able seaman on the *Lusitania* on that critical day of May 7, 1915, when it was sunk by torpedo off Ireland. Morton was taking the

starboard watch at the time, when he spotted what he claimed were two torpedoes coming towards the ship, one of which sank it. Morton survived and also saved many passengers, for which he was awarded a *Lusitania* medal. Morton's medal is in the current *Lusitania* Exhibition in Liverpool to commemorate the centenary of the ship's sinking.

In the years after the First World War, Morton went ashore and joined the Northampton-based Associated Canal Carriers Ltd, which was acquired by the GUCCC in 1930. Morton became traffic manager for the combined operation, and was then appointed fleet manager in 1934 until he was ousted by the new chairman in April 1937, after the company got into financial difficulties, after which Morton left the canals.

His three years at the helm saw a dramatic expansion of the GUCCC fleet, with 80 pairs of new boats ordered from various builders – mainly Yarwoods of Northwich and Hartland & Wolff at their North Woolwich works. These were to designs by Morton, who by this time was a qualified naval architect.

Morton's main designs were twofold, the Town Class and then the Star Class. It is quite astonishing that so many boats could be built – 160 of them – in so short a period of time. They caused Morton no end of



The site of the former Bull's Bridge maintenance depot as it is today. In the late 1980s the land, then in a state of semi dereliction was sold off by the British Waterways Board to Tesco to make a large supermarket and the slipways filled in to make a car park. As a token heritage-gesture the dry dock was saved, but does not operate. PHOTOS: TIM COGHLAN

problems in naming them. It is said that for the Town Class, once he had run out of canal towns, like *Nuneaton*, he resorted to the current Bradshaw's Railway Guide, taking names which had nothing to do with canals, like *Brighton* and *Battersea* – both of which will be attending this year's rally, as well as *Nuneaton*.

As regards the Star Class, Morton again soon ran out of popular names, the likes of the *Sun* and *Moon*, *Orion*, *Milky Way* and *Polaris* being soon used up. However, during his years at sea, during the long night watches in the Southern Ocean, with clear nights of stars, Morton made an academic study of astronomy – hence the *Phobos*, one of the two small moons of Mars only discovered with a modern telescope in 1877, and Stoke Bruerne Museum's *Sculptor*, which is named after a small and faint constellation in the southern sky, supposedly resembling a sculptor. It was not known to the ancients, but discovered by a Frenchman in the 18th century.

But the intriguing Star Class name is the *Marcellus*, as there is no *Marcellus* anywhere that I could find in astronomy. However, there is a *Marcellus* in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a nightwatchman on battlements of doomed Castle Elsinore.

Canal author David Blagrove worked for Willow Wren for three years in the early 1960s –

after dropping out from being a London solicitor – and got to know Morton well. Blagrove informs me that Morton was both widely read and loved the theatre, so he would have known this play. And Blagrove's view is supported by actor and canal enthusiast Timothy West – that this is the literary source of the name (Timothy West pointed out that this is one of only two occasions in Shakespeare's plays when Christmas is mentioned, the other being a brief reference in *Love's Labour's Lost*).

The ghost of boat *Marcellus* will be with us for its first ever visit to our rally – the butty was cut in two in 1995 and made into two boats and we are getting the back end that appeared in that photograph. And also in their entirety, *Sculptor* and *Phobos*. Regular supporters, actors Timothy West and his wife Prunella Scales will be steering Sonia's paired *Phobos* and *Moon* in the parade of boats. And those three Leslie Morton pictures will be on display in the marina office.

The tripboat *Water Ouzel* entering Nelson Lock, Braunston, in about 1970. The steerer could well have been Dennis Clarke, former foreman of Willow Wren's Braunston depot, who operated the boat with his wife until his death in 1992. The Admiral Nelson Inn is seen, where Leslie Morton would stay on his Braunston visits. PHOTO: HUGH MCKNIGHT

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The recently discovered photograph of the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company's maintenance depot at Bull's Bridge, West London, in about 1937. PHOTO COURTESY TIM COGHLAN

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Braunston Bottom Lock during the terrible winter of 1962/3 when the canal froze for three months, helping to kill off what little trade remained on the canals. Three loaded Willow Wren boats are moored below the lock. Michael Street's pair of hotel boats – converted former working narrowboats – are moored against the quay. The buildings seen are the workshops of Willow Wren. PHOTO: PAT STREET