

LONDON CANAL MUSEUM PODCAST SCRIPT PART TWO

(Part two is aimed at the listener when he/she is physically present at the museum and is to add to, reinforce, or otherwise enhance the visitor experience.)

Hello, so you're now in the London Canal Museum. Welcome. I expect you noticed as you came in that there were rounded stones either side at ground level, and another one on the right next to the disabled visitors' toilet. Actually this one also has a matching partner on the other side but it's hidden by the shop counter. These stones remind us of the reason the building was built. They are guards to prevent horse drawn ice carts from hitting the walls. The remains of a weighbridge can clearly be seen as well.

I expect you've got a copy of the mini-guide leaflet so I'll assume you're following the route it suggests. When you hear this sound [ding-dong] pause the MP3 until you reach the suggested location. Pause now and start again when you get to the narrowboat cabin. [Ding-dong]

When the railways started to offer an alternative to the canals in the 1830s the canal carriers had to cut their costs in order to compete. Whereas previously, boats were crewed by men and boys who lived on dry land, family boats became common. A whole family would live on board and have no other home. A cabin like this was their living, cooking, and sleeping place and many babies were born in cabins just like this one. Every bit of space had to be well used and you can see how the cupboards folded into a dining table and a bed. Incredible as it may seem, a large family of two parents

and several children lived and slept in here. It was largely a life outdoors, of course, and the canal boat people were less blighted by disease than the urban poor who lived in crowded slums, so living like this was not all bad.

The boat people were a community apart from mainstream society, marrying mostly amongst themselves and certainly not adhering to middle class Victorian morals as regards their personal relationships. Family relationships were often extremely complicated. They were barely educated at all because the children could only attend school occasionally when the family was not on the move. There were some special schools set up for boat children including one at Bull's Bridge in west London, on a converted barge, but attendance was sporadic. Victorian reformers tried hard to improve conditions and eventually parliament passed the Canal Boats Acts of 1877 and 1884 to try and impose some minimum standards and limit the overcrowding but these Acts were not all that effective and the boat people often dodged the attention of the inspectors. Christian missionaries also worked tirelessly to bring the boat people to God and there were boatmen's missions at strategic points, including one at Paddington. One of the most active shares a set of initials with the museum and is still today a very active organisation in the Capital – the London City Mission.

With very little money, and only a simple stove for cooking, the boat people did not enjoy a luxurious diet and indeed they were often hungry. A pot would be used for a stew into which anything suitable would be added. A boatman who was good at catching rabbits might feed his family rather better than others!! The boat people were ostracised by respectable Victorians and they had their own canalside shops where at least they knew they would not be shown the door.

Family boats were mainly used for long distance goods. They linked London with the midlands but were not used for the short distance traffic to and from the London docks that was so important for the Regent's Canal. The way of life living aboard went on until the early 1960s. The growth in road transport after World War Two brought about a relentless decline in the demand for canal transport and it was in the end lack of trade, rather than social reform, which brought this unique community and way of life to an end.

Pause the MP3 until you reach the outside, or the window if it is raining!! [ding-dong]

The basin is built up from the natural level of the land which is why you had to climb some steps to reach the site of it. The spoil from the cutting of Islington Tunnel was used to make the banks of the basin so you're standing on a bit of Islington Hill!!!

Most of the boats out here are residential, and often peoples' only homes. However the whole of the boat is of course used for living and they are often fitted out to a high standard, so they provide a small but very comfortable home with all modern amenities – even wireless broadband Internet, provided through the museum!

Battlebridge Basin was never as busy as nearby City Road Basin and was not used as a freight terminal. It served its own industry and you'll see more about that on the displays back in the museum. In the 20th Century it was dominated by the jam factory at the end of the basin, to the left, now replaced by flats, for which fruit was brought by boat. The basin is a mix of a few old buildings and some modern ones. Don't miss

the old pulley wheel on top of the Porters Building opposite, and of course look out for the museum's red and green small Tug *Bantam IV*.

The Regent's Canal runs along the end to your right, going east to Limehouse and west to join the Grand Junction Canal at Paddington. These two canals merged in 1929 to form a large canal company with a famous name, and a motto of "Silent and Sure". That Company was the Grand Union.

Pause the MP3 now and start again when you get to the lifting and handling exhibition. [ding-dong]

The lifting and handling exhibition brings together a collection of tools and weighing machines that remind us that the world of work, in canal transport, canalside industry, and elsewhere, was a very different world from the present era in which manual handling is controlled by health and safety regulations and machines are used to make most lifting and moving easy. Weighing machines like the two on display were used in many canalside warehouses. Pilfering was rife in Victorian London and sacks of goods such as flour or grain would be weighed to check that half their contents had not vanished! These traditional balancing scales have a platform for the sack and cast iron weights were placed on the opposite side until the scales balanced. The weights were of course marked in pounds so that the warehouseman could tell the weight of the sack.

It was sheer hard work that got goods on and off boats, into warehouses and carts and eventually delivered. Men were expected to lift much heavier loads than today. When

you look at the ice well you'll be able to listen to a recording about the heavy weights the ice men used to carry up stairs. Shifting barrels, moving timber and cases, shovelling coal and other bulk goods, were all jobs often done by hand. Few wharves on the canal had any mechanisation – a hoist or manual crane was available only sometimes and powered equipment very rarely.

Pause the MP3 and start again when you are looking down into the ice well. [ding-dong]

This is one of the two wells on this site. It was the first to be built and Carlo Gatti chose a pretty good spot for it, in the London Clay, beside a private basin, and within easy reach of central London by horse drawn cart. It was undoubtedly his success that led him to build a second well, and the building in which you are standing. The floor you are standing on was not built until after the wells ceased to be used, in 1904. Neither was the floor above. So we think the ice would have been stacked above ground as well as below ground – why else would such a high roofed cover be needed? We know the wells are about 42 feet, or 13 meters, deep because in 1863 a workman was killed when he fell to the bottom, and the Coroner's report gives us this distance. He was working on a wooden cover, before the new building was constructed. The cover was caught by the wind. Although industrial accidents were common in those days his death may have been a factor in Gatti's decision to build a brick-built ice house building over the wells.

After the Second World War the wells were used as a convenient place to dump waste, most probably from bomb sites nearby. Excavations have found domestic

items from the inter-war years. There have been three excavations of the wells, by volunteer workers, to remove this spoil, but as you can see there is a long way still to dig. Whilst it is the museum's long term hope to remove it all, and perhaps even to take the visitors to the bottom, the challenges of such a project are enormous.

There is a lot more about the ice trade in the ice trade exhibition. Pause the MP3 when you have finished with that and returned to have a look at the display in the case under the arch bridge, about the tradition of "Roses and Castles". [ding-dong]

Nobody really knows for sure why we have an English tradition of painting roses and castles on canal boats. The tradition blossomed in the 1840s with the introduction of family boats that I mentioned before. One strong theory is that popular domestic items, imported from the Continent, inspired the first boat painters and the custom took off. This theory may explain why the castles tend to look as if they are on the river Rhine rather than at home.

The decorative painting wasn't done by fine art painters, but mostly by "dock painters" - boatyard workers who may have combined this craft with others in the yard. Some boatmen would decorate things like water cans in the same traditional styles. You'll see examples of narrowboat decoration on *Coronis* and on the wall above. It is an art form that is unique to the English canals and which has been enthusiastically perpetuated by many of today's canal enthusiasts whose boats are adorned in traditional style.

In the case next to the ice well fence is a display of Measham pottery. Measham is a Leicestershire village where this distinctive design was sold to boaters. The teapots are particularly distinctive, having a miniature teapot on the lid. A motto is often included on the side. Due to their size, however, it is unlikely that many narrowboat families kept one in their tiny cabin. However the ribbon plates, or lace plates, that you see in the same cabinet were a popular form of cabin decoration. They were sold as souvenirs in Victorian times and often depicted seaside resorts or other attractive places. The boat families, however, could not afford a week's holiday in Blackpool!!

It's time to go upstairs so please pause the MP3 until you reach the top of the main staircase. There is an alternative route via the two lifts if you need it. [ding-dong]

This floor was built in 1904 to 1906 when the building was extensively modified. The ice wells were no longer used, the ground floor was used for carts, and this floor was stables for the ice cart horses. The carts were now laden with man-made ice, produced elsewhere. In front of you is a black iron pillar. This supported a loose box in this corner. That is a special spacious stable stall for a horse that is ill. The layout will be seen when you look at the Horse Power exhibition.

You can't have failed to notice the map. Despite coming late to the national canal network, London still had an extensive system. If you catch a train from West Croydon to London Bridge today, you travel over much of the route of the Croydon Canal, a waterway that was never a great commercial success and that was bought by the railway company for their line. The map shows you which parts of the network are rivers, made by nature, and which are canals, made by man. Parts of some waterways

are a bit of each, where a natural watercourse has been improved. The low-level version is intended for wheelchair users.

Pause the MP3 now and start again when you've finished map-reading, and are looking at the model boats. [ding-dong]

A lot of different types of boat used the canals. The first thing to learn is that they were not all called barges. Barges are wide beamed boats, around 14 feet, or just over 4 meters wide, whereas those like Coronis downstairs are called narrowboats. Some canals, although none in London, only have locks wide enough for narrowboats to pass.

Sails were never much used on inland waterways, as the curvature made them impracticable, but on the Thames Estuary there was a large fleet of sailing barges and some of these were designed to be capable of working up the Regent's, towed by a tug or a horse. The mast could be lowered so that the barge would fit through the bridges and tunnels.

The basic design of the working narrowboat remained unchanged for a century and a half, with a cabin at the rear and a cargo area at the front, covered by tented sheeting to keep the cargo safe and dry.

In the 1930s the Grand Union Canal Company worked hard at modernisation and built a whole new fleet of pairs of narrowboats. One was a motor boat with an engine,

the other an unpowered “butty” to be towed behind. Coronis, downstairs, is one of those butty boats.

Pause the MP3 in a moment. Start again after looking at the boats and exhibition.

Look over the fence at the ramp before you re-start. [ding-dong]

The horse ramp was part of the 1906 improvements which turned this building into a state-of-the-art horse and cart depot, a little bit before there was much motorised transport on London’s streets. There were rungs across the ramp to enable the horses to get a good grip on the steep slope, which has a gradient of 1 in 3. You can probably see the positions they were in. What is now the main staircase was not put in until the 1950s so there was easy horse access at the lower end.

You’re going on now to look at the Horse Power exhibition. The granite stones or “setts” in front of the stable are originals from this building, recovered when the opening in the floor was made for the lift. There is an exhibition in the middle of the room about the Regent’s Canal itself, our “home” waterway. The archive film is part of this exhibition.

The final topic in this podcast is water and locks, so pause the MP3 and restart when you are ready, by the water and locks exhibition in the corner, behind the lift, by the window. [ding-dong]

Canals would obviously be useless without water!! They have to be level throughout their length so to climb up and down hills we need locks. The type of lock we now

use is called a pound lock, with gates at each end of an enclosed chamber or pound. These trap the water in the chamber so that water can be drained out to lower its level, or let in, to raise it. Any boat floating in the water rises or falls with it. Simple, but efficient. Provided there is a supply of water! Every time a lock is used, some water is lost and eventually drains out of the canal system. Therefore, all canals all have to be topped up at their highest point.

There are really only two ways in which water is supplied, natural gravity, and pumping. The canal engineer had to think about his water supply before designing the canal, and if he could, he would plan to use natural, gravity fed sources such as rivers whenever possible. However that was not always possible and pumping of water from sources at lower levels was often necessary. In the case of the Regent's Canal it was planned to pump water from the Thames in a complicated deal with the Grand Junction Canal. They also had small steam engines at every group of locks to pump water back up the canal route from Limehouse to Camden Town.

Locks are filled or emptied through sluices in the bank, or in the gates, that are opened or blocked by paddles. The paddles are moved into place by a winding mechanism or paddle-gear, which has a characteristic noise that is a typical sound of the traditional English canal. We'll end the podcast with that sound. We hope you've enjoyed the podcast tour as well as the exhibitions and exhibits in the museum. Good bye. [insert, paddle gear sound]