

THE LAST GRAIN BARGES WORKING ON THE SEVERN

The grain barge CHACELEY moves slowly off her berth in Gloucester Docks. Fully laden with 250 tonnes of wheat destined for Healings Flour Mill at Tewkesbury, this barge, one of the two last remaining cargo carrying vessels on the River Severn, prepares for the final leg of the voyage.

For centuries grain has been carried in vessels on the Severn, from small craft pulled by man and beast to the modern motor barges of today. It was not so many years ago that the flour mills of Priday Metford and Reynolds, both of Gloucester, Townshends of Worcester and Partridge's of Pershore, [River Avon], ran their own fleet of barges. Now only Allied Mills of Tewkesbury own a fleet of grain carrying vessels in the Severn area.

Many people thought this trade had finished in the early 1980's when Healing's of Tewkesbury, laid up their fleet of five vessels. No doubt this was the only period this century that grain has not been transported on the Severn! Road transport must take some of the blame for the decline, not only the grain trade, but the carrying of others cargoes such as petroleum, timber and general freight.

Allied Mills Limited had become the parent company of Healing's Flour Mills at Tewkesbury and during a review of their transport policy in 1993 decided to sell the three old grain barges. They also planned to begin operating the two modern motor barges again, the CHACELEY and TIRLEY. During the eight years that the five barges were laid up they hadn't lay idle, use was made of them as static storage vessels. The barges were also serviced regularly, with the engines being started and run on a weekly basis, plus the paintwork on deck kept in good order.

Both modern motor barges had been built in Yorkshire to carry coal, the CHACELEY in 1964 and the TIRLEY in 1973. During 1975 they were both sold to S Healing & Son Limited and brought around the coast to Gloucestershire. Here at the shipyard of R W Davis of Saul they were converted to carry grain and a self discharge mechanism was fitted. Each with a crew of two men, the two barges became the main workhorses of the company, operating a regular schedule from Avonmouth and Sharpness to Tewkesbury.

In April of 1993 Allied Mills decided to operate the CHACELEY and TIRLEY for ten trips, moving 2,500 tonnes of French wheat from Sharpness To save on running costs the two motor barges would both only be crewed by two men, whilst one is being worked the other would be at Tewkesbury unloading. This arrangement suited the two crew men, it meant that there were no nights away from home, in fact the it would be comfortable hours to work, from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. The moving of grain by barge to Tewkesbury proved profitable to the company, for they are still in regular use on the River Severn.

A typical round trip on either the CHACELEY or TIRLEY will take two days. One of the barges will leave Gloucester Docks, through Llanthony Bridge, the first of the fourteen bridges that the vessel will pass through on its way down the Gloucester and Sharpness Ship Canal. Whilst one crew man steers the grain barge, the other prepares the vessel for loading on arrival at Sharpness. The huge tarpaulin sheets have to be pulled back off the hatch boards and the boards themselves prepared for removal prior to loading. At Sandfield Bridge which is roughly half way along the canal, one crew man relieves the other on the wheel. Unless there are some unforeseen circumstances, the trip down the canal proceeds quite normally. Until

recently each bridgeman was able to keep in radio contact with all canal traffic. British Waterways in their wisdom has decided that only three bridges now require to have a VHF radio, consequently this can lead to a delay in having the bridge open to canal traffic should the bridgeman not see or hear craft approaching.



Grain barge CHACELEY loading 250 tonnes of wheat at Gloucester from Burrows Silo. Loading by this method took at least 3 hours, whereas at Sharpness it would take slightly less than 2 hours.



The grain barge TIRLEY loaded with 250 tonnes of wheat struggling up a shallow River Severn in The Parting at Gloucester.

Arriving at Sharpness two and a half hours later, loading begins immediately. This is a dusty operation with 250 tonnes of grain being dropped into the hold in about two hours. The grain is either French or German wheat. This wheat is brought into Sharpness by ship from both countries at regular intervals, thus from the country of origin to the flour mill it has been carried only on water. Loading can only take place in fine weather conditions, but should it rain before the hold is full the barge looks as though it is covered in porridge! Once loading is completed the hatch boards are replaced and sheeted over, the ropes let go and it is back up the canal for the return trip to Gloucester. On a few occasions grain is loaded into the barges at Borrow's Silo, Monk Meadow Dock, Gloucester, usually a cargo of English wheat is carried from here to Tewkesbury.

To get rid of the dust from loading the barge must be washed down from stem to stern, which will soon have it gleaming again as the vessel moves slowly through the smooth waters of the canal. Again, the steering is shared by the two crew men, it needs to be for steering a 130' long barge is not easy, whether loaded or empty. Another factor to be considered when steering a

large barge is the stopping distance. Unlike a motor vehicle, barges do not have brakes! Therefore a great deal of concentration is required at all times, there is nothing worse than being on the wheel with the propeller going full astern, yet the vessel still moving forward into danger. Three hours after leaving Sharpness the grain barge is tied up in Gloucester Docks for the night.

The following morning the engine is started, mooring ropes cast off and into the lock for the final leg of the trip. The trip from Gloucester up the Severn with a loaded barge to Tewkesbury will normally take about four hours, but this will depend on the state of the river. With the river at its normal summer level the three miles to the old Tar Works at Sandhurst can take more than an hour. The river level is very low in the East Channel, [known locally as The Parting], and the barge is dragging the river bed, at places coming to a stop, sat on top of a tump of mud. Full ahead, full astern, the barge will not move. The worry now is that there are no other large craft working on the river to tow the barge off the hump of mud, so it could be another hour before the barge will slowly slide off the tump and continue on up the river. At times one side of the barge may be out of the water six inches more than the other, yet still moving slowly ahead with thick, brown muddy water violently thrown out from the propeller.

Whilst the skipper struggles to keep the barge in deep water, the mate has other chores to see to. Like cleaning out the cabin which is to be found up in the bows. A cosy cabin with two bunks, couch, gas cooker and fire. It is peaceful down here, no noise from the engine, just the sound of the river boiling up around the bow. With all the wheat dust cleaned out of the cabin it is time to make a start in the engine room. Down a short steel ladder into a noisy and hot environment, with the smell of burnt diesel oil hanging in the air. There are plenty of copper pipes and brass plates to polish, bulkheads and deck plates to be washed down. There is a host of other jobs to be done, but why rush them, there is always time to do them on the next trip.

All too soon Upper Lode Lock, Tewkesbury is reached and shortly after locking through the barge turns into the River Avon, where it is slowly manoeuvred onto the berth at the mill. After the mooring ropes have been secured the shore pipe is lowered into the barge's self discharge box, power turned on and the grain begins to be unloaded.

Whilst the skipper takes the documents to the mill office, the mate prepares the other barge for the return trip back to Gloucester. By early afternoon they are once again in Upper Lode Lock, soon to be gracefully winding their way down the Severn. Two hours later and the barge is tied up in Gloucester Docks ready for another trip the following day.....

Adapted from one of numerous articles written by Chris Witts for magazines around the world.

Since this article has been written the two grain barges were laid up at Tewkesbury since the summer of 1998 for nine years. In March 2007 they were taken to Sharpness to await their fate! During 2014 both barges were converted as accommodation vessels. The Chaceley was shortened before the conversion.