
A history of Trent Basin —
By Mark Patterson
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TRENT BASIN

In the final chapter of DH Lawrence's novel 'Sons and Lovers' there is a lingering description of a Nottingham view seen by a young man and woman as they walk back from Trent Bridge to his lodgings in Lady Bay. The man is Paul Morel, his companion Miriam, a stand in for Lawrence's real-life love Jessie Chambers:

The Trent ran dark and full under the bridge. Away towards Colwick all was black night. He lived down Holme Road, on the naked edge of town, facing across the river meadows towards Sneinton Hermitage and the steep scarp of Colwick Wood. The floods were out. The silent water and the darkness spread away on their left. Almost afraid, they hurried along by the houses.

That was published in 1913. Today the ‘black night’ at Colwick is pierced by many street and house lights, Holme Road isn’t the ‘naked edge of town’ it used to be and part of floodplain to its front is a popular nature reserve called The Hook. Yet, despite the passage of a century since Lawrence’s novel was published mostly only the detail has changed in this river scene. Lawrence, if he was around today, would have no trouble orientating himself. Rivers themselves are paradoxical in this sense: they change physically second by second but broadly remain the same over hundreds and thousands of years. Hence the Trent, Britain’s third longest river, can be seen as a symbol of both continuity and change since it keeps flowing the same old way through Nottingham even as the city around it reflects larger cultural and economic changes year by year. By 1950, for example, when the Nottingham historian A.C. Wood published a history of transport and trade on the Trent, it must have seemed as if there could be no further potential important developments on the great river between its navigable points at Trent Falls, where it joins the Humber, and Shardlow in Derbyshire. Didn’t all the important events already belong to the past? But such a view would have been premature as in retrospect the 1950s looks more like a heyday for the Trent as river trade picked up after the war and strings of heavily laden unpowered ‘dumb boats’ towed by motorised tugs brought tens of thousands of tonnes of cargo upstream from Hull for delivery at busy wharves in Nottingham. The largest of these facilities was the Trent Lane Depot whose two massive nine-storey concrete warehouses had room for up to 10,500 tons of bulky goods such as flour, cement, timber, wire, cocoa, tinned food and even coconuts for use in fairgrounds. At the warehouses such cargo, having been transported 81 miles from the Humber, was loaded onto trucks and trains for distribution to Nottingham and the Midlands. The empty dumb boats would then be re-loaded with everything from Raleigh bikes to leather ready for the return trip downstream to Hull and then coastal transport around Britain or export abroad. In this way Trent Lane Depot realised the ambitions of the Nottingham Corporation which paid for its construction between 1928 and 1933 – that the depot, with its warehouses, transit sheds, basin, cranes, railway line, staff and cargo crews would increase Nottingham’s business and enhance its position as the main port on what was called its ‘Highway to the Sea’ – the river Trent. Thus, to appreciate the background to the Trent Basin residential development one must have some knowledge of the Trent Lane Depot which came before it – and of the historic cultural and commercial importance of the Trent to Nottingham itself.

They said if you could navigate the Trent you could navigate any river in the world.

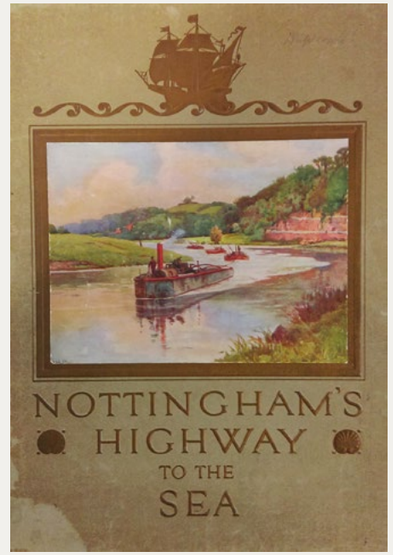
Barrie Taylor
Former Trent dumb boat crewman

The Trent has been a conduit of trade and travel since ancient times. Bronze Age canoes, spear heads and tools, hauled out of the river at Clifton Grove in the 1930s, are among the earliest signs of human activity on the river and the Romans developed at least two crossing points over the Trent at East Stoke and Littleborough, both downstream of the future site of Nottingham, at small towns called Ad Pontem and Segelocum respectively. Of the Romans, more later.
By Domesday in 1086 the river was already considered important enough to warrant the threat of fines against anyone who impeded boats on it. In a period of terrible roads, rivers were a more certain medium of travel. Records suggest that later in the medieval period the river was alive with fishing weirs and mills, ferries, fords and bridges. But the transport of freight in bulk really came into its own in the late 17th and 18th centuries when cargo boats, aided by the country’s new network of canals, were able to deliver an extensive range of goods to Nottingham including wine, oil, hops, herbs, flax, salt, pitch, wool, grocery goods and Norwegian oak. Nottingham, in return, used the river to export Nottinghamshire coal, Derbyshire lead, Staffordshire pottery and three kinds of regional cheese! In 1783 the Trent Navigation Company, with eminent canal designer William Jessop as engineer, was established to maintain and improve navigation on the river downstream to Gainsborough and in the 18th and 19th centuries a series of Acts of Parliament further sought to better regulate the important river trade. Bargee Thomas Spick, who worked on Trent cargo ketches throughout the 19th century. recalled later in life how a ‘huge fleet’ of boats carried grain from Hull to Nottingham and returned loaded with coal. Barges also ran from almost every village connected to the Trent, he said. Despite this busy scene the flow of goods began to decline in the 19th century in large part because the rapidly expanding railways were faster and cheaper. But there was another reason for the drop in river trade: the Trent was so full of shoals and shallows that 40 ton cargo craft could not be relied on to arrive in good time. Long known as an unpredictable, capricious river, the Trent was famous, or infamous, for both bursting

its banks when it flooded and having so little water in the channel that vessels could be left stranded for days or even weeks together. At such times boats had to be hauled off to deeper water by teams of horses. The river is also tidal for the first 54 miles from its junction with the Humber which means that all boats operating below the lock at Cromwell have to work with the natural ebb and flow of the water. Silting of the channels has been a further on-going natural problem. The Roman town of Segelocum, now Littleborough, evidently reflected the unstable nature of the river as the name translates as ‘violent pool.’ But it was to address the natural problems which impeded trade, and to enlarge Nottingham’s business role as an inland port, that the Nottingham Corporation made a decisive commitment in the 1920s to exert more control over the river and to the construction of Trent Lane Depot. The river came first. This ambitious programme of works began in 1922 and involved deepening the channel and improving and enlarging a series of locks suitable for use by bigger cargo boats. For the next four years some 550 men, nearly all former servicemen, were employed in the construction of new locks, cuts and weirs at Newark, Hazelford, Gunthorpe, Stoke Bardolph and Holme Pierrepont at a cost of £450,000. Hazelford, the last lock to be completed in this grand scheme, designed by Col Frank Rayner DSO, formerly of the Sherwood Foresters regiment, was officially opened by future Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1926. The Nottingham architect T.C. Howitt, best known today for his neo-classical designs such as Nottingham’s Council House in Market Square and the former Raleigh head office in Lenton Boulevard, made some contributions to the lock-side architecture of the scheme and later assisted corporation engineer T. Wallis Garden in the design of the Trent Lane Depot when work commenced there in 1928.

Souvenir publication celebrating completion of the Trent navigation scheme in 1926

Nottinghamshire Archives



The Trent is indeed nature’s gift. But like many other of nature’s endowments it requires the skill, the capital and the labour of man to harness its possibilities and to ensure its greater usefulness.

Nottingham’s Highway to the Sea: A Souvenir published in 1926

Costing £91,000, the Trent Lane Depot was Nottingham's largest Trent-side cargo facility - and indeed the largest on the Trent. There were three others in Nottingham, at Colwick, Wilford Street and Meadow Lane, the latter located just a short distance away between Trent Bridge and Lady Bay Bridge. But it was the massive new Trent Lane Depot, on the other side of Lady Bay Bridge, which made the biggest statement about Nottingham as a trading city and the corporation's intention to bolster and enlarge its hold on what old boatmen called the 'Hull Trade' – the transport of cargo along the Trent to Nottingham in one direction and from Nottingham to the rest of the world via Hull and the North Sea in the other.

The depot's origins lay in 1927 when Col Rayner, as engineer and a director of the Trent Navigation Company, told the corporation that a riverside cargo depot was desperately needed in order for the company to obtain more trade. He identified a 4.5 acre site of farmland adjacent to Trent Lane, valued at £3000 per acre, and the corporation quickly set about obtaining the land and putting out tenders for construction. The scheme took five years to complete but trade was so healthy that there was constant demand for expansion and more storage space. By 1933 the most visible assets at the new facility were two huge

Colwick viewed from the River Trent, painted by Henry Dawson in 1857
The open fields across the river are where Trent Lane Depot would be developed (Nottingham City Council Galleries Service)

warehouses called simply No.1 Warehouse and No.2 Warehouse since this was the order in which they were built. Each was of nine stories and measured 52 metres by 15 metres (170ft by 50ft). Each was lit by electric lights and offered labour-saving devices such as spiral 'Archimedes screws' and powered joists, all clad within the clean efficient lines of reinforced concrete. Floors were accessed by internal spiral staircases. The freight stored in these buildings was usually unloaded by mobile cranes from boats moored at the depot's river wall, overlooked by No.1 Warehouse, or in the concrete basin, adjacent to No.2 Warehouse, which was designed for grain storage. These spacious wharves had enough room for fourteen barges to load and around twenty to unload. After storage in the warehouses goods were carried away on lorries or trains which ran into the depot on a line which connected to the L.M.S. line on the far side of Daleside Road. Two 1,200 square metre Transit Sheds and a workers' mess completed the depot. The first boat to dock at Trent Lane in 1928 was the motorised Eagre, named after the tidal bore which sweeps up the Trent in the spring. In January 1933 the Nottingham Evening Post reported that the Gersham Teal, carrying 130 tons of flour from Hull, had docked at the basin – the first boat to do so. Excavation of the basin had been carried out by a steam digger which 'first cut out the sides so as to allow a summer depth of 6ft of water,' the report said. The whole depot, completed with the help of around seventy otherwise unemployed men supported by a Government work assistance scheme, was finished in May 1933.

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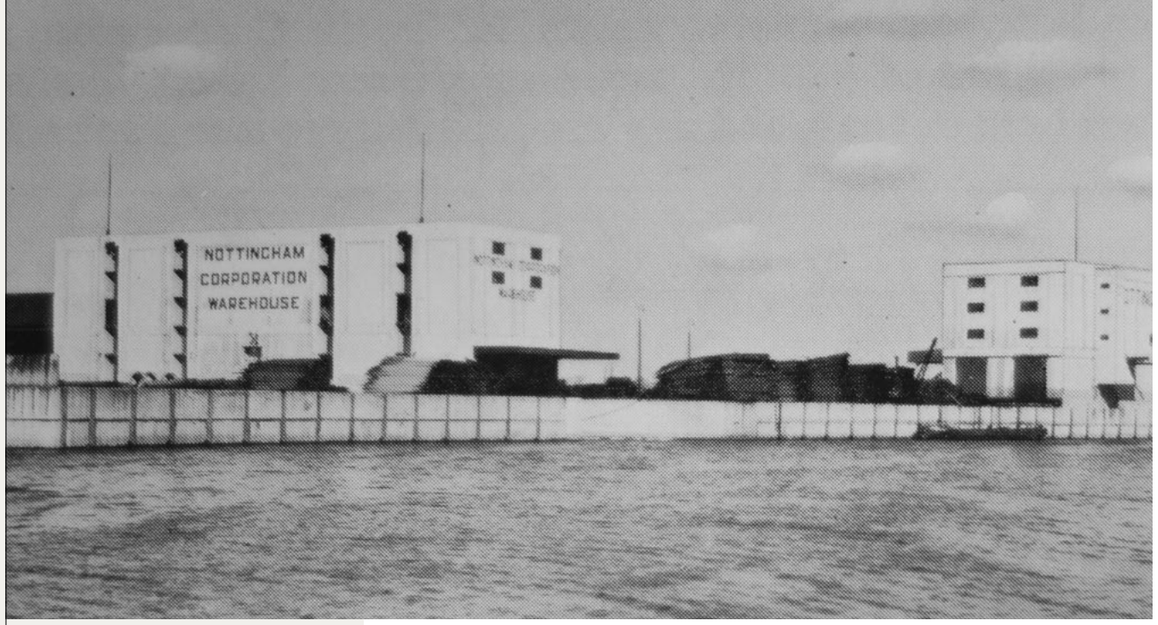
Trent Lane Depot, Nottingham Castle and Council House together on the cover of the 1936 Nottingham Official Handbook

Nottinghamshire Archives

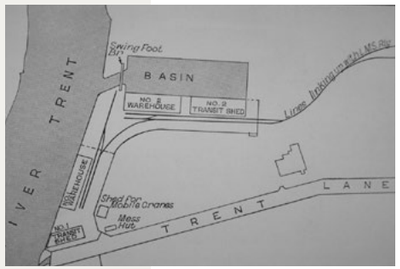


↑ No.2 Warehouse at the newly completed Trent Lane Depot as seen in the 1936 Nottingham Official

Nottinghamshire Archives

↓ Plan of the completed Trent Lane Depot

Nottinghamshire Archives



↑ In the 1930s Nottingham was promoted as being a city of commerce at the centre of a national network of rivers and canals

Nottinghamshire Archives

The Eagre and the Gersham Teal (the latter boat survives today as a house boat in London) were the first of thousands of cargo boats which would tie up at Trent Lane over the next five decades. And the reports of the time suggest that the depot's contribution to trade was as beneficial as the corporation fathers had hoped for. According to the corporation, by 1936 the annual volume of freight transported on the Trent had increased 'eight-fold' to 117,449 tons since it had taken control of the river to Gainsborough from the Trent Navigation Company. While there may have been a natural desire to boast given the corporation's investment in the depot, the tonnage figures certainly show a significant revival of trade on the river in the 1930s in which Trent Lane Depot played a key role. Advertisements from the time also made the most of Nottingham's jealously guarded position as 'head of navigation' of the Trent in a waterways system that was now truly national and properly open to trade. 'The Trent is The Navigation' said one advert. 'The best way is waterway,' said another. 'Humber Ports to the Midlands,' said a third. And so that nobody missed the point that Nottingham was now definitely an inland port, and the main access point for trade throughout the Midlands, these same words would later be painted on the side of No.1 Warehouse in huge white letters.

Neville Chamberlain had said as much in 1926 when he described the completion of the Trent lock improvement scheme as' the greatest step in inland waterway transit since the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal...of national as well as local importance.' But the corporation's trumpeting of its own success may also have played to another agenda - a quiet desire to express triumph over the Trent Navigation Company since relations between the two bodies appear to have been strained. Although shorn of its regulatory responsibilities over the river since 1915, the company had a complicated, entwined relationship with the corporation based on a shared interest in the depot and the health of trade on Nottingham's waterways. In the 1930s and forties the company, led by Nottingham industrialist Sir Ernest Jardine, tried to purchase large parts of the depot but for various reasons these efforts failed. During this time the company continued to rent warehouse space at Trent Lane, ran its own fleet of cargo boats and later operated a steam locomotive at the depot sidings. In the 1930s the company also ran the 11 depot warehouses, a position which made it both a manager and a customer of the corporation's property. Despite this responsibility, or rather because of it, the company and the corporation were constantly at odds over the nitty gritty business of rents and leases. The fraught relationship between the two bodies was summarised in 1940 by two headlines in the Nottingham Evening Post concerning yet another disagreement: 'Trent Navigation Problems' and 'Hopes for Improved Relations.' The company continued to operate as a commercial carrier at the depot until 1948.

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Col Frank Rayner DSO, engineer and designer of the Trent navigation scheme. A working boat named after him was a regular sight on the river

Nottingham City Council

As the dark clouds of war gathered over Europe in the late 1930s Trent Lane Depot drew the attention of another customer - the Government. In 1937 the Ministry of Works asked the corporation if it could use No.1 Warehouse for storage. A rent of £1300 per year was agreed and thus as war started in 1939 the building was already being used to store gas masks. But although no part of Britain suffered a gas attack during the war the depot narrowly escaped complete destruction by German bombs. During the night and early morning of May 8 and 9 1941 the Luftwaffe made a major raid on Nottingham that saw high explosive bombs, incendiaries and parachute mines rain down across the city. In one concentrated attack on the south of the city a bomb hit the Co-op Bakery in Meadow Lane, killing 50 people, while another hit Trent Lane Depot and destroyed No.2 Transit Shed, adjacent to the basin. This space was to be occupied by Nissen huts for the rest of the war. The other transit shed and No.1 Warehouse were also slightly damaged by the bombing. David Burton, who was a regular summer visitor to Trent Lane Depot in the 1950s, still recalls being told how the Trent itself actually caught fire during this attack:

The depot was used all during the war and a bomb hit one of the buildings. From what I can gather it was full of lard and butter and it all melted and caught fire and went floating down the river. A stick of bombs was dropped. One hit the warehouse, one hit further up Trent Lane and the church opposite Colwick Road was bombed. This is the story I was told and I believed it.

Soon after the attack the Government's Director of Camouflage requested that both warehouses should be painted in camouflage colours. This was done. Then following the surrender of Germany in 1945 the director said that the camouflage could be removed. The corporation, ever watchful of how its pounds, shillings and pence were being used, worked out that this would cost £500. Yet Government assistance to cover this bill was waived. The reason? 'The application of camouflage paint had probably saved the Corporation painting the wood and other workings during the war,' noted the councillors of the Trent Navigation Committee. Even so, boatmen remember that staff added their own paint to the depot exterior when Japan surrendered later in 1945. Les Davey, who worked as a dumb boat skipper until 1972, recalls:

On the side of the warehouse, in big letters, were the words 'Victory over Japan 1945.' I must have seen that for years and years.

Another presence at Trent Lane in these years were the Nottingham Air Defence Cadets (forerunners of the Air Training Corps) who had formed in 1938 and set up their head quarters close in Trent Lane. In 1944 they were visited and inspected by Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC, who had led the Dam Busters raid.

Trade on the Trent had slumped during the Second World War, just as it had during the Grear War. Tolls had been increased by a third to compensate. But now a new era beckoned. In 1948 Britain's waterways were nationalised and the river trade revived as life got back to normal despite the continued rationing. New boats were being built and at Trent Lane Depot the tugs and dumb boats of commercial cargo companies such as Trent Carriers and Direct Delivery Services jostled for mooring space alongside the British Waterways craft. By 1955 some 200 commercial craft were working on the river; two years earlier the volume of freight tonnage on the river had reached a record 727,600 tons, far exceeding the volumes before the war. At least half of the freight came in the form of oil and petroleum products, carried by tankers bearing the company names of John Harker, W.M. Cory and James W. Cook which raced up the river to unload at refineries at Colwick. Smaller tankers could reach Trent Lane where businesses had their own fuel storage tanks.

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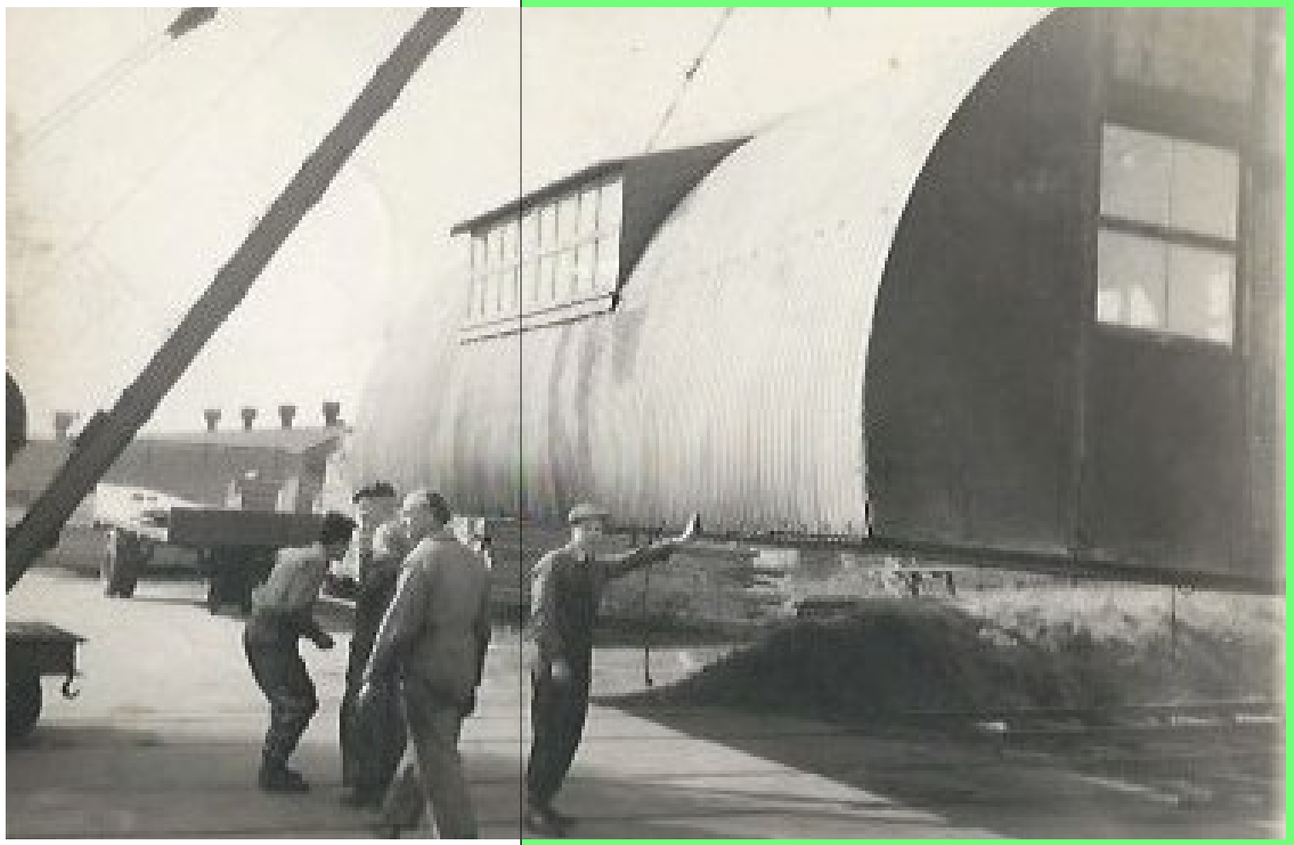
Cargo, Boats and Boatmen

Boatmen who operated the cargo boats on the Trent in the 1950s and early sixties remember the ‘Hull Trade’ as hard work, but completely absorbing and endlessly fascinating. And for some these years were also among the best years of their lives. David Burton, whose father Arthur worked as a mechanic for Direct Delivery Services, was just 15 when he began riding on the motorised tugs operating between Trent Lane Depot and Hull during his school holidays in the ‘50s. One of these tugs was the Eagre:

“I always think about it because they were happy times. I loved the ride up to Huil. You had all the locks to contend with and they were all manually operated so I had to wind them to let the water through. The best part of tying up for the night and then going on shore the next day to pick mushrooms which we fried up for breakfast. The depot was a very busy place. There was around 24 staff working at Direct Delivery Services. The boss, Mr Spencer, was ever so nice. He would give me pocket money for helping my dad.”

Les Davey, who began as a mate in 1960 and became skipper of the 100ft-long British Waterways dumb boat Trent 32, says:

“I loved it. Every trip was an adventure. They were magical days.”



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Here and in the picture above, a teenage David Burton (in cap on right) is seen helping out with the transport of his dad’s workshop from one side of the Trent Lane Depot basin to the other with the assistance of a steam crane

In the 1930s and forties customers using warehouse space at the depot included chocolate makers Cadbury and Fry, who rented three upper floors of No.2 Warehouse to store cocoa brought from Hull, and timber merchants such as J. Hobson and Bampton, Sons and Knight. Not all cargo was delivered by water. In the thirties the depot took big deliveries of pipes and pig iron from Stanton Iron Works in Derbyshire which were delivered by rail and then transferred to boats for the rest of the journey downstream. In the 1950s and sixties a wide variety of cargo was still being brought to Trent Lane. While Tuborg lager went to Meadow Lane, where Carlsberg had established a warehouse in 1960, Trent Lane's deliveries included wheat, bagged flour, concrete, timber, paper, wire coils, bone meal, Finnish wood pulp, Norwegian ferro-silicon and Dutch strawboard. There were also foodstuffs in tins such as tomatoes and fish – and coconuts for distribution to funfairs. For the return journey to Hull the boats were loaded with cargo such as Raleigh bikes, cigarettes, feldspar and leather. Many carried Trent gravel, picked up directly from dredgers. The oil tankers always returned to the Humber empty. The depot's key transport role attracted other businesses such as the Waste Paper Company, which handled big reels of paper brought up the river for the production of local newspapers. Other notable businesses nearby included Boots, which manufactured huge amounts of penicillin at its factory in Daleside Road during the war. British Waterways later had its local offices at the depot, moving them from Meadow Lane to Trent Lane in 1973. Janet Cassady (nee Brazier) who began working with British Waterways as a junior shorthand typist in Nottingham in 1949, and stayed with the organisation for over twenty years, recalls:

It was the most interesting job and also the first job I had. And one of the things that surprised me was learning that not everybody could read and write! The boatmen from our eastern division would come up on Friday for their wages and had to sign a receipt for them, and nine times out of ten they signed with a cross. Many of them had been born on the boats and that was where they were brought up, but until then I had always assumed that everybody could read and write.

↓ A large stack of timber on the wharf beside No.1 Warehouse in the 1930s

Canals & River Trust

Above and in the right picture:
cargo boats moored on opposite
sides of the entrance to the basin.
In the second picture Lady Bay
Bridge can be seen upstream

Canals & River Trust

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Trent Carriers towing tug Greendale at the upstream side of the basin entrance but the view here is back downstream towards No.1 Warehouse

Les Reid / Newark Heritage Barge

The time taken to load and unload at Trent Lane depended on the cargo. Timber was said to take the longest to unload. Barrie Taylor, who began working as a junior mate on British Waterways dumb boats in 1950, straight from school in Nottingham, says:

We liked to take tinned stuff for obvious reasons! But timber was very awkward. It didn't come on pallets like it does now. It came in all different lengths and would take three or four days to load at Hull because every plank had to be put into strops. Another cargo was cement, which was great since it was warm when it came out of the cement works. It kept your boat nice and warm. If you put 100 tons in and didn't burst a bag you got an extra pound. But not many people got that.

Les Davey recalls:

Where we tied up depended on what cargo we had. All the timber and wheat would go to the Trent Lane basin but a lot would also go to Meadow Lane. We would bring these big rolls of wire for Michelin tyres. There was pig iron which was unloaded by crane. And there was lager. If it was timber it would take two or three days to unload. The lager would take a day and a half. But the steel wire would take a day because you'd just put a hook on a coil and take it off. One of the old crane drivers used to be on the river when they still used sails!

With the aid of the boatmen in the holds the heavy loads were lifted out using mobile cranes. In the early days these were steam-powered. Colin Rawlson, who now runs Trevithick's boat yard in Nottingham, recalls:

Trent Lane was a busy place in the 1950s and I can still remember looking across the river at night and seeing the steam cranes, their boilers glowing.

Yet despite the mechanical assistance this was still physically demanding work for both the boatmen and the Trent Lane Depot warehouse staff.

Barrie Taylor:

When I started I weighed about six and a half stone. A year later I had muscles under my eyelids because everything was boat hooks, pushing, pulling…You were loading sacks of weight which were carried off at Trent Lane Depot and they were two hundred weight. And being young I wanted to have a go. One day the skipper was packing 110 tons. That was one load of wheat and of course I got hold of one of the sacks as it came out of the silo and it just flattened me. I couldn't get up.

He adds:

If they were short-handed in the warehouse you could help them out. Then you would be on double pay. But It was hard work in the warehouse because you had to tackle two hundred weight sacks up three flights of stairs with a topping stick. Cement and flour came in hundred weight sacks. One hundred tons was two thousand sacks of flour and that was a boat load.

But whether the cargo was flour, lager or bicycles it was down to the skill and knowledge of the Trent boatmen that freight reached its destination at all. The workhorses of the 'Hull Trade' were the dumb boats, two or three of which were usually towed in line by a dieselengined barge. The dumb boats had a crew of two (sometimes with wives and children on board) and were steered manually using a wooden tiller at the stern. Later cargo craft could measure up to 42.5 metres (140ft) long but a 'Trent size' dumb boat was 25 metres (82.6ft) long and had a beam of 4.4 metres (14.6ft) and all the Trent river locks were designed to accommodate this size. Today the last of these boats still in its original form, Leicester Trader, can be seen in Newark where it is being slowly restored by a team headed by lifelong boatman Les Reid whose personal knowledge of boats and the 'Hull Trade' goes back to the 1950s when he first hitched rides on the oil tankers as they passed through Newark en route to Colwick:

All the lads started out on dumb boats and the skippers were very strict with them. If they could stick it on a dumb boat for a while then they lasted. Some of them only came on for half a day and they were gone because they couldn't stand it. It was very hard work. In a lot of ways there was more skill wlth these boats then with a power barge. If you were behind a power barge and the whole lot weren't stopping at the same place then the first boat to be dropped off was the last on the tow and you'd just be let go. You'd be floating around in the tideway and you either had to get yourself to the jetty quick or get your anchor down and row over to jetty with your warping line and heave yourself in.

There were several potential hazards in the passage to Nottingham. The first was the wide Humber estuary which had currents so strong that they could break the back or even completely overturn cargo boats which became stricken on the shifting sand banks. Then there was the Trent where boats could still be marooned in low water for days at a time despite the corporation's improvements of the 1920s. Les Reid:

You needed the knowledge, which you picked up from the skipper you were with. In days gone by there was nothing written about the navigation so it was all word of mouth passed down. If you went aground somewhere you probably spent twelve hours looking at that spot and thinking 'I'm not going to come here again.' Every boatman wrote down the leads between the sandbanks in the Humber and you would be looking at your wash and noting where a sandbank had altered its position in the river so you would go more that way or a bit this way. But there were no charts of the Trent. You could buy charts of the Humber but the problem with that was they often needed to be upgraded every month because the river changed as quickly as that. If you didn't play it by ear you might get your ear clipped.

↓ Les Reid at Newark Nether Lock in around 1960

Les Reid

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The Gersham Teal towed by Greendale in rough seas in the Humber Estuary en route to the Trent. The cargo on this occasion was one hundred tons of tinned tomatoes

Les Reid / Newark Heritage Barge

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Dumb boats at Trent Falls, where the Trent joins the Humber

Les Davey

Barrie Taylor:

I knew nothing about the river when I started and there was a man on this one boat called Waterways Charlie who said, 'every time I go out on the river I'm an apprentice' - because it was always a little low, or high, or it was a raging flood – and boats could get right into the fields beside the river when it was flooded. We would do two hours on the tiller and two off. And years later I went down the river and thought, 'I don't remember this' and it because that was the two hours I was off the tiller and fast asleep in the fo'c'sle.

What did the boatmen do when their boats became stuck for days at a time in the Trent?

Barrie Taylor:

Whatever you could. Rabbiting. Fishing. Mushroom-picking. We slept aboard but they had a small cabin at the front and there were living quarters on the tugs. But on ours there was a small cabin at the back made for a family if a man brought his wife and kids with him. And the junior mates, which is what I was, used to keep in the fo'c'sle at the front which was very small.

The Hull Trade was a year-round business and coping with the cold in winter was another problem.

Les Davey:

It could be hard work and in mid-winter it was a lot worse. All the ropes froze so you had to put them in the cabin at night. It was freezing and a lot worse on open water than it was on the land. One of my mates wore a tea cosy on his head!

All the Trent boats, from dumb boats to oil tankers, were also at the mercy of the tides.

Les Davey:

It would take fourteen hours to get from Hull to the depot. But you had to go by the tides. You can't just leave a harbour or dock when you want - you have to go with the tides and so we had to play it by ear.

David Burton:

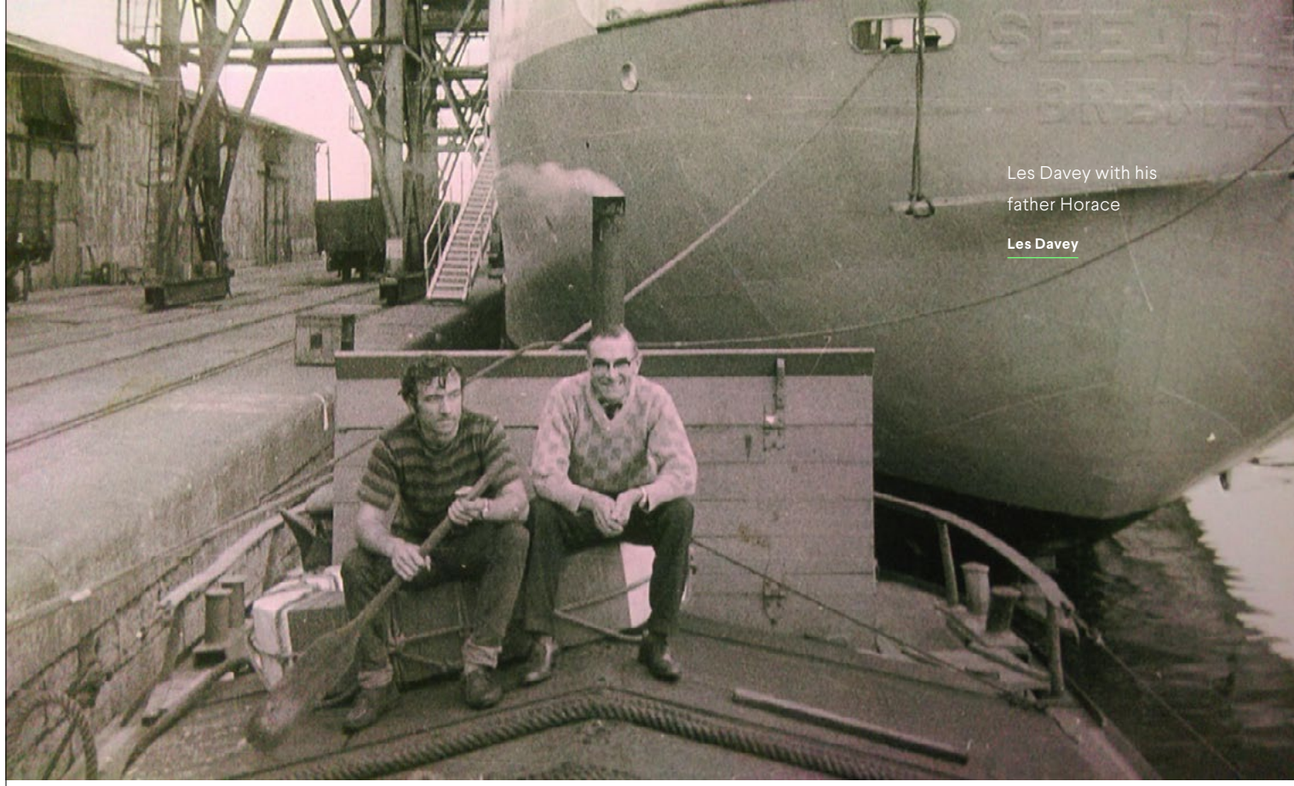
On the other side of Newark, where it's tidal, if you didn't get the time right you'd be stuck there until the tide came back. If the river was high we could get from Hull to Nottingham in a day and a half. Then we'd load up and come back and that would take two days.

Les Reid:

On the Trent you kept working until you stopped and whatever sandbank you stopped on, that was it. Then you waited until the next tide came on. You could get a situation at Torksey Castle [in Lincolnshire] where there would be fifty or sixty barges running gravel and empty petrol barges coming down. You might have fifty boats all cluttered and trying to get past each other and waiting to go with the next tide. Some would have swung round across each other on the ebb tide. An hour later they would all be gone again. At one time, all the way down the Trent, if you looked at it from a bird's eye view, you would see boats stopped like this at different places waiting for the next tide.

Finally, at Nottingham, heavily-laden dumb boats heading to No.2 Warehouse had to make a ninety degree turn into the basin without means of power. This could be a difficult maneouvre for inexperienced junior mates, as Les Davey found out:

I dropped a clanger going through Trent Lane basin because there was a certain way of doing it. I got good at lassoing bollards, you know, and I lassoed this bollard just as I was turning into the basin and I moored it up. Well, the skipper played hell with me because we weren't supposed to do it like that. What you were supposed to do, as I learned, was to put a rope on the bollard and then just tighten it around and then take the tension off slightly as you went into the basin.



Les Davey with his father Horace

Les Davey

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Les Davey's brother Robert, who served as his mate, with a load of timber in the hold of their dumb boat at Trent Lane Depot

Les Davey

“On the Trent you kept working until you stopped and whatever sandbank you stopped on, that was it.

Barrie Taylor:

Where we tied up at Nottingham depended on the cargo. It would be phoned up ahead and the tug skipper would have instructions about where to drop you off. If you were going outside the basin then it was fairly easy because you could let go of your rope and have enough 'weigh' on to tie up. But if you were going in the basin you had to have a little bit more 'weigh' because it's a ninety degree turn off the river and very, very narrow so you had to be very careful about how you got in there. It was hard work for me because what you had to do after being let go by the tug was to take your towing spring, which was four inches thick and forty feet long, and pull it up onto the boat by hand and lie it on deck. It wasn't like pulling in your mother's washing line. It was fairly heavy once you got to the rope.

Unforeseen accidents on the water were also part of life. People fell overboard, boats sank and even occasionally caught fire. David Burton:

I remember that one of the boats sank in the Humber and my dad had to dash up there so his boss loaned him his Jowett Javelin to get up there and he did it an hour and a half because the car was so fast! One day we were also unloading some oxyacetylene tanks at Trent Lane. They were dropped on to tyres on the wharf but this one went off and shot into the river. It's still in there somewhere. Someone with a magnet could find it although they might think it's a torpedo.

One day, at Nottingham, a man who worked for Direct Delivery Services fell overboard from his tug - with disastrous consequences for leisure craft moored near Lady Bay Bridge.

Les Davey:

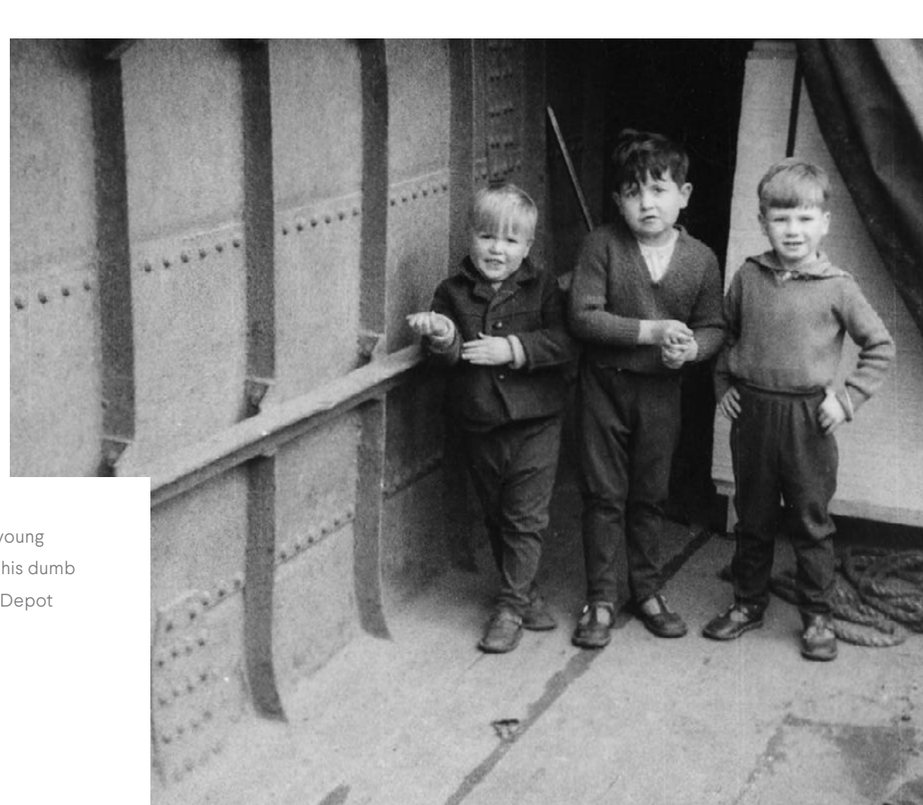
I pulled him out but his cargo boat was going adrift. So I jumped onto it hoping to get a boat hook and pull it in. But there was nothing – not a boat hook, a rope, nothing, Not even an anchor. I just drifted down at the mercy of the currents and that's when the boat hit the bridge. It bounced off and crashed into one of eight pleasure boats that were moored there. Well, the drifting boat had one hundred tons of wheat in it so you can imagine what happened! It smashed into one nice clinker-built boat and crushed it like it was a match box. Down it went. That was about 1965. I never mentioned it to anyone and I don't know what happened about it.

Although many of the boatmen were Hull men there were others such as Barrie Taylor and Les Davey who were from Nottingham. And for them mooring at the depot overnight meant that they had time to go home and see their families. Barrie Taylor, who was from St Ann's, says:

When I was at Nottingham I used to go home because I appreciated home cooking! You soon got fed up cooking for yourself. There were no bars or cafes around in those days because everything was rationed. They would also give you a railway pass to come home at weekends but you had to be away for three weeks to get that.

Les Davey:

If it was a Friday it was a pay day and if I was going up the Trent to Nottingham it made me feel good.



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Les Davey's three young sons in the hold of his dumb boat at Trent Lane Depot

Les Davey

The wharf frontage at Meadow Lane Depot, Nottingham, with two of our Trent Fleet motor vessels alongside. Coils of imported wire are being discharged on to our own lorries for direct delivery to customers

Nottingham – Midlands entrance to the Humber ports

by Navigator

To describe adequately in a short article what goes on at our Nottingham Depot premises at Trent Lane and Meadow Lane is almost an impossible task. As in many of our activities, diversity and versatility is immediately apparent there, and the staff will gladly tackle any commercial enterprise which will contribute to Waterways' income.

Let's start at Trent Lane and first have a walk through the ferro-concrete warehouse there, built in 1933 for the former Trent Navigation Company. This building, surrounded by extensive open storage space, is sited on the edge of the Trent with an open basin adjoining, so that vessels can be discharged direct to storage by four electrically powered hoists. Another, larger, hoist is available for delivery to road vehicles and spiral chutes serve all floors for dealing with cased and bagged commodities. A large, modern single-storey warehouse adjoins the multi-storey building.

What do they store there? I was amazed at the variety. Bonemeal; wood pulp in sheets (used for making drip mats!) imported from Finland; Dutch strawboard in cut sheets of all sizes; small reels of paper and Australian flour in 140 lb. sacks, all imported through Hull and discharged overside into our own Trent fleet. On another floor was stored locally-made granular weedkiller of a type we use on our canal system. Chemicals made in Scotland and ferro-silicon in cases from Norway added to the variety. Something we're all familiar with but probably never give a thought to where they're stored, I saw there also – coconuts for fairgrounds. These we receive in bulk and distribute all over the country.

Next we'll have a peep into the grain warehouse. In this steel-framed building are 22 bins, each able to hold 70 tons in bulk. Two archimedean screws are used to discharge *via* ducts from the bins, which are on either side of a clear central gangway, into which vehicles come to load there under cover. Vacuum plant is used to discharge vessels moored to the quay just outside, the flexible discharge pipes being coupled to

Left and below:
Pages from British Waterways magazine Waterways in 1967 celebrating the work of its staff at the Trent Lane and Meadow Lane depots

British Waterways / Canals & River Trust

fixed ducts which lead to whichever bins have to be filled.

In smaller warehouses ferro-silicon and ferro-manganese ores, used in making alloy steels, are stored in drums for delivery to the firm's customers throughout the country.

As in any commercial enterprise, much of the success of this Depot depends upon the service our clients get from our staff. At Trent Lane we have three men who've given over 45 years' service to Waterways – Foreman Harry Clark is one: Jack Pinnington and Fred Smith, whose presentations we reported last month, are the others. Arthur Kirk, too, is past his 20 years' mark, while Harry Carter, the fifth man in our photograph, has been with us 4 years.

Now we'll go along to Meadow Lane, about half a mile upstream, not far from the famous Trent Bridge. Here is Meadow Lane Depot and the administrative centre for our Nottingham Depots and road transport, as well as the Nottingham Area Engineer's office. Before we look round the offices, we'll see what business is dealt with on the wharves.

Once again, variety is most noticeable, so let's pick out a few of the more interesting items and trace their origin. Blockboard and plywood from Spain, Malaysia, Israel, Singapore, Finland and Russia is an important commodity handled and stored here, and 90 per cent comes in by barge. Cooking fats and edible oils are stored for distribution throughout the region and another unusual item handled is special paper for printing banknotes. Six barges of wood pulp from Hull were among recent shipments when I visited Nottingham and among exports dealt with continually are steel tubes. These are stored here as soon as manufactured, and we make up and despatch orders which are taken in our fleet and loaded direct into ships at Hull.

In the modern prefabricated concrete warehouse building reels of paper of every description and crates of plywood were stacked up to the roof. I did notice that everything was stored on pallets, the buildings being designed for goods handling by fork-lift truck.

I was very interested to learn that almost half the firms for whom we store goods here are based in the Birmingham area. The excellent water connection between Nottingham and the East coast ports handling Continental trade evidently has many advantages which the keen "Brummy" businessmen are quick to appreciate. One Birmingham firm I know well imports high-tensile steel rod from Sweden *via* Hull and by boat to Nottingham for drawing into wire for steel wire ropes, and a tyre manufacturer similarly imports the wire used in his products.

Cement products made by Britain's largest cement group are stored and delivered to builders' merchants in the Midlands from Meadow Lane, and Tuborg lager from Denmark arrives there regularly by barge for the

Part of our Nottingham road delivery fleet, with the River Trent in the background. A bulk grain articulated lorry is seen top, left; trailers loaded with cased goods are in the foreground ready to be sheeted-up. Driver Joe Rowlson is receiving his Delivery Notes while a loaded rigid four-wheeler is just about to pull away from the wharf for a local delivery

Our photographer snapped this happy-looking Trent Lane team on the footbridge over the basin entrance there. Left to right are: Jack Pinnington, Fred Smith, Foreman Harry Clark, Harry Carter and Arthur Kirk

The Pleasure Park

Rather at odds with the activity at the depot was the nearby presence of a small but much loved fairground variously called Colwick Pleasure Park, Riverside Pleasure Park or simply the Pleasure Park. The fairground, located at the riverbank immediately downstream of the depot, sprung up every year and had various children's rides including swing boats and a chair ride. There was also ice cream, imported sand and a paddling pool in the river enclosed by railings. Although modest by today's standards, the little fairground was greatly enjoyed by thousands of families in the 1940s, '50s and '60s and part of the fun was how you travelled there. While some people got to the fair on foot by walking down Trent Lane the other main approach was the river as a passenger on one of the many little pleasure craft that operated from near Trent Bridge. In addition a one-legged entrepreneur known as Peg-Leg, owing to his single leg, operated a modest ferry service – a rowing boat - that went directly across the river for the cost of a penny. Susan Read, a Radford girl born in 1938 who moved to Lady Bay later in life, was taken to the fair just after the war on a craft that set off from the embankment:

We used to go on one of the river boats that used to shuttle over there from the embankment. The one ride I remember there is the swing boats because that was what you looked for since you'd been on the water. It was always exciting going on the river and really that was one of the reasons for going to the pleasure park. I was taken by a maiden aunt who was always lecturing about temperance and later was a Panthers fan who yelled her head off whenever she saw them play.

There were several operators running pleasure craft from near Trent Bridge in those days including Brookhouses, Cyril Baggaley and boat builders Percy Taylor and Tom Trevithick. Colin Rawlson, who took over Trevithick's boat yard in Lenton following the death of Tom Trevithick in the 1980s, got his first job in boats in the fifties working for Percy Taylor who ran three 30ft craft on the river called Success, Victoria and Sunrise. These and the boats operated by the other companies together provided a regular shuttle service to the foot of Trent Lane:

We used to take them from the embankment to Colwick, drop them off, go a little bit further and then turn around to pick people up. It was continuous. We operated from midday until 5pm but they didn't all want to go to the Pleasure Park because some people just wanted a round trip.

Over the years, though, the number of visitors who wanted to visit the Pleasure Park dwindled. Colin puts this down to the increasing opportunities for travel that became available in the 1960s and seventies:

During the war, when people didn't have much money, and couldn't travel very far, a trip to Trent Bridge was a big day out for working people who visited in their thousands. But when people could afford cars in the 1960s and seventies they could drive over Trent Bridge to Skegness and the business died basically.

Rather at odds with the activity at the depot was the nearby presence of a small but much loved fairground. The fairground, located at the riverbank immediately downstream of the depot, sprung up every year and had various children's rides including swing boats and a chair ride

Decline

Just as visitors to the Pleasure Park fell in the 1970s, so did river trade on the Trent. The decline in freight reaching Trent Lane Depot and Meadow Lane was gradual, but it was still a decline. Total transported tonnage on the river reached more than a million tonnes in 1964 but in the 1970s the trend was downhill and ten years later, in 1974, the figures was 455,000 tonnes. In another decade it was 300,000 tonnes and by 1994 it was just 170,000. The impact of this on Trent Lane Depot was obvious. Although the depot would see a little traffic in the years ahead British Waterways closed the site down in the early 1980s. A motor barge, the Gladys Lillian, made regular deliveries of sand from Gunthorpe to Trent Lane in 1996 but apart from this Trent Lane Depot's life as a working port was over. Although there was a brief revival in tanker deliveries to Colwick in the late 1980s this wasn't a trade which benefitted Trent Lane. In the late 1970s there was talk of using European funding to develop the Trent and Trent Lane so the port could accommodate container shipping directly from the Europort at Rotterdam. 'An industrial gateway to the Common Market,' was how one TV news report described the scheme. However, the plan came to nothing and a consultants' report in 1981 stated that the scheme could not be made to be cost-effective.

So what were the reasons for the decline of the old Hull Trade? Even in the 1930s and forties there was a concern that some businesses were avoiding river freight tolls at Nottingham by taking their cargo off boats at Newark and then transporting it by lorry to its final destination. Yet, by and large, river transport remained commercially attractive because the cargo boats were mostly punctual and the carriage costs were kept low enough to compete with road and rail. But over time investment in road and rail, and their speed, made them better transport options and this was despite the later introduction on the Trent of bigger and more cost-effective cargo boats. Les Reid, who went to Trent Lane in the 1970s to rescue a boat called Charles William, which had been left there because it had no cargo to bring back downstream, says:

There wasn't one single factor but bit by bit things chipped away at the trade. The tanker trade was chipped away by pipelines being put in to the East Midlands from Wales. New regulations came in which cost more. The railways were getting investment to increase the loads they could carry and roads were also a big investment while the rivers weren't. World trade also changed and Britain couldn't rely any more on the colonies as these countries were getting independence so exports to these countries finished. And the last big factor was containerisation. People look at other countries today, where freight is still transported on the waterways, and say, 'look, they can do it' but they have longer runs and here we are limited by the river and structures such as Town Bridge at Newark, bends in the river and tides so we can't really increase the size of the boats very much.

The 1981 consultants' report, commissioned by British Waterways and Nottinghamshire County Council, concluded that there was no cost-effective way of improving the Trent navigation that could attract enough tonnage to justify the costs of those improvements. By this time boatmen such as Les Davey and Barrie Taylor had already been out of the Hull Trade for some years. Les says:

I had to pack it in about 1972 because my three sons were getting into trouble because I wasn't there for them. Pinching bottles of milk. Not real crime but I had to chuck it in.

Les continued to work on the Trent as skipper of a 30ft British Waterways craft, the Allegra. 'I used to take all the bosses on what they called 'bank inspections' but there was always a load of booze on board!'

Like Les, Barrie Taylor also stayed on the water:

I came out of the Hull Trade after three years and worked for the 'Heavy Gang' at Beeston, repairing locks and weirs. I'd never been on the river above Nottingham before. It was beautiful. But I never went back to the Hull Trade after that. It was dying out then. They had these bigger boats and could carry 200 tons but I don't think it was well managed. I ended up as a tug skipper and dredged the channel.

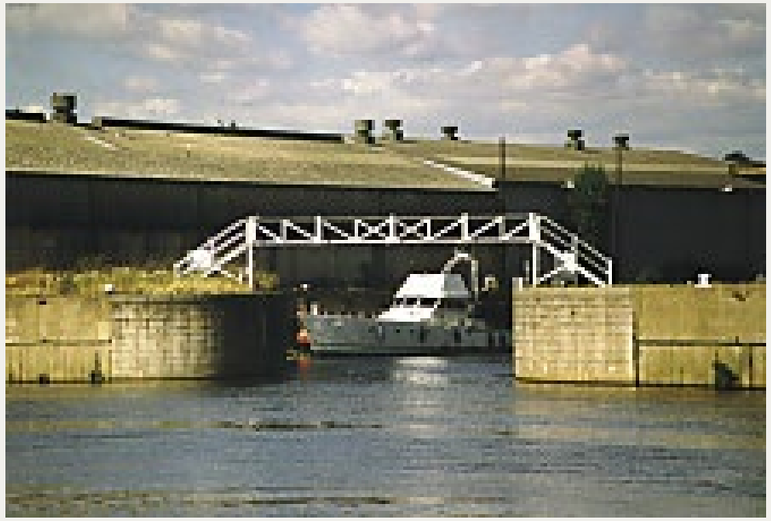
Yet, regardless of the opinions of consultants, the decline of the business makes little sense to the boatmen when they take into account the tonnages carried by the boats and their lower environment impact compared with road haulage. As David Burton says:

The main factor was quickness of supply since the boats could take two days to get to Nottingham. But those boats used to carry hundreds of tons between them. How many lorries would it take to move that? Think of the pollution and the difference in cost.

Art, architecture and TV

Trent Lane Depot’s post-industrial existence

After British Waterways disposed of the depot in the early 1980s the site was put to various uses including road haulage, TV drama and public art. The depot’s main nonindustrial claim to fame began in 1990 with the arrival of TV crews who were making new episodes of the Central Television series Boon, starring the late Michael Elphick as firemanturned-private investigator Ken Boon, David Daker and Neil Morrissey. Boon’s Crawford-Boon security office, seen in three series of the show, was located at the fictional ‘Trent Wharf’ and was in reality a small rather non-descript single-storey building at the depot. A footbridge seen in the show was actually the old footbridge over the mouth of the depot basin, now gone. All the time these scenes were filmed the depot was being used in real-life by a road haulage company.



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The old footbridge over the basin entrance as seen in Boon

Martin Underwood

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Michael Elphick (on the BSA) with fellow cast members in Boon

Central Television

In 2008 the depot's austere post-industrial ambience was put to another good use when the exterior of No.1 Warehouse was used as a cinematic backdrop for an art project called Hinterland. This project, devised by Nottingham curator Jennie Syson, set out to examine various cultural aspects of a ten mile stretch of the Trent in and close to Nottingham. One night in 2006 invited passengers on the Trent leisure craft Nottingham Princess cruised up the river past the depot and saw the tall exterior of No.1 Warehouse come alive with the projected image of a dancing handyman from Reykjavik called Birgir. Created by Icelandic film-maker Helena Jonsdottir, the film gave viewers 'a very different landscape to the one that surrounded them on the Trent,' as Jennie Syson wrote later. 'Birgir was inspired to dance by glacial lakes and volcanic rocks, and this projection provided a portal to this unusually barren wilderness, common in Iceland.'

Chris Matthews, a Nottingham historian who has written about Trent Lane Depot, also took part in Hinterland and wrote a short history of the site in the Hinterland book using photographs of the empty warehouses. These were published in black and white which emphasised the buildings' brutal lines. The warehouses tended to polarise opinion. For fans of the depot, such as Chris Matthews, the old warehouses had intrinsic value as examples of interwar concrete architecture. But for some local people the empty and decaying warehouses, with their faded exterior lettering, had become an eye-sore. And their eventual clearance by the Homes and Communities Agency in 2012, which paved the way for redevelopment of the site by Blueprint, was not lamented. As Susan Read, who has lived across the river from the depot site since 1974, says: "I didn't think the warehouses had a lot of architectural merit although they were what you might call 'examples of' – examples of that kind of style."

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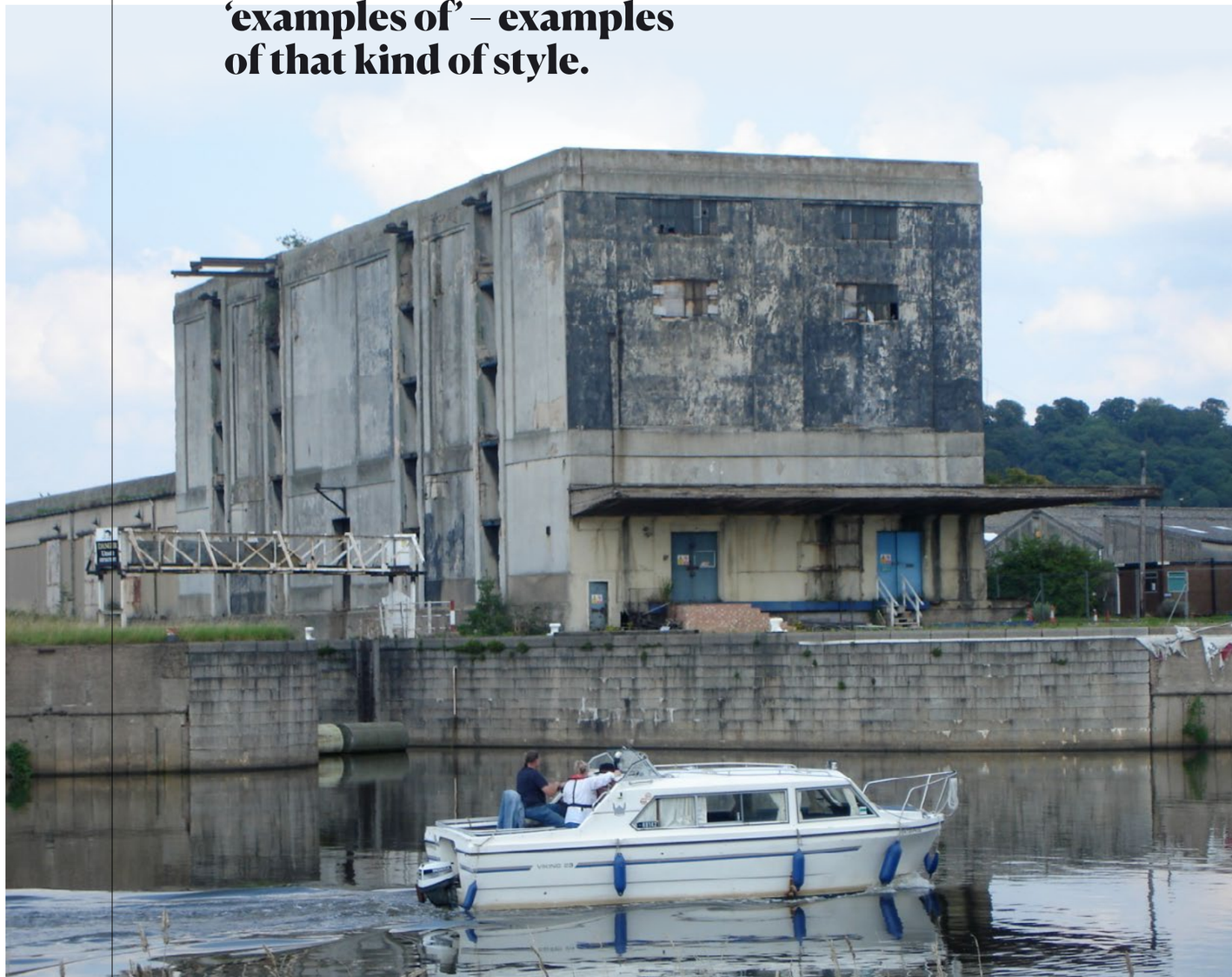

↓ No.2 Warehouse not long before its clearance

Chris Matthews

Susan, who lives in Holme Road – the same road where DH Lawrence's character Paul Morel had his lodgings in Sons and Lovers - has seen from her windows how the riverside has changed in this part of Nottingham over the past forty odd years. And if anyone could have witnessed all the changes along this short stretch of the river - between Trent Bridge and Colwick Park – since Lawrence's time then they might also mention the building of floodbank defences after the floods of 1947, completion of Holme Pierrepont watersports park in the 1970s, the conversion of Lady Bay Bridge from rail to road use and its re-opening in the 1980s and the rise of new homes and apartments along the Trent waterfront in former industrial spaces such as Trent Lane Depot. As of 2016 this new chapter in the story of the old depot site, its redevelopment as the Trent Basin residential development, was just beginning. But through all these changes the Trent has kept running 'dark and full' - a river that is a faithful neighbor to those who live on its banks and both a silent witness and symbol of how a city can remain true to itself but keep changing.

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The view of the river as it was seen from Susan Read's home in Holme Road, Lady Bay, in 1974. Trent Lane Depot would have been just to the left of this view. The watercolour was painted by a friend of her father's

Susan Read

A Roman post-script: in April 1929, while Trent Lane Depot was being built, workmen who were dredging the river nearby pulled up an old oak beam measuring 40ft in length. The beam was quickly thought to be part of an old Roman bridge over the Trent. Despite its possible archaeological value, councillors on the Trent Navigation Committee resolved 'that the relic be sold.' But after making efforts to sell the 'relic' corporation officials had received only one offer of three pounds. Since it would cost this amount to actually deliver the beam the councillors further resolved to dump it in the filling behind the river wall at Trent Lane Depot. Fortunately for archaeology, and the city's history, the councillors were almost certainly wrong to identify the beam as Roman as there is no known Roman bridge over the Trent in Nottingham...

The author would like to thank all the people who gave up their time to be interviewed and/or provide photographs for this book: Janet Cassady, Les Davey, Chris Matthews, Colin Rawlson, Susan Read, Les Reid, Martin Underwood and Barrie Ward

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