



# Working on the Canal – Then & Now

## Teachers’ Guidance Notes

### Learning Objectives

- To discover the people who earned their living on the canal in the past and the people who work on or around it today
- To understand how these jobs have changed over time
- To learn about how the canal has been and continues to be maintained

### Resources

- Fact Files: Jobs on the canal circa 1900 and present day
- Comparing canal jobs table
- [Canal & River Trust YouTube channel](#) – What we do, Humans of the Waterways and Our People playlists are particularly relevant
- [All About Canals pages 10 and 11](#)
- [Building and Carrying Topic Pack](#)

### Activity Instructions

Learners will compare canal jobs in the past and present using the information sheet and photos as well as undertaking their own research. They will look for similarities and differences and suggest reasons for any changes, recording them in a table. Afterwards they will select a photograph of a job and create a freeze frame (tableau) of that job.

#### Freeze Frame Explanation

A freeze frame (tableau) is a silent, motionless depiction of a scene. Learners work together in groups to represent part of a film or photograph through dramatisation. They use their bodies to make a picture capturing a moment in time. They can represent people, objects or abstract concepts like emotion or atmosphere. As there are no lines to learn, freeze frames can help shyer performers to gain confidence. This can then be developed to include the thoughts of the people they are representing and as inspiration for the beginning of a short drama piece.

#### Starter Activity Ideas:

Research jobs in the past and today using the Fact Files as a starting point.



Watch some of the films on the Canal & River Trust YouTube channel to learn about the varied jobs maintaining the canal today.

#### Brief for Learners:

Canals have always needed a lot of care to prevent leakages and keep them clear. They still do! Modern technology has changed the way canals are maintained but some traditional techniques are still used. The use of the canal has changed too and this affects the type of businesses alongside the canal.



**Activity 1:** Compare canal jobs past and present. Think about the historic jobs and their modern day equivalents.

**Discuss:** How have the jobs changed? Why do you think they have changed? What tools did/do they use? What did/do they wear? What were/are the conditions like?

Are there any jobs today that do not have an historic equivalent? Consider tourism and conservation.

Record your answers in the ‘Comparing canal jobs table’ and then discuss as a class.

**Activity 2:** Choose a photograph of one of the jobs and create a freeze frame (tableau) of that scene. Think about what the person in the photo is thinking or feeling? Do they enjoy their job? You could dress up in costume or use props. Take photographs of your freeze frame and compare with the original photograph.

Afterwards you can unfreeze and act out the scene, recreating what is happening in the photo. This can either be done silently or you can add your own dialogue.

#### Further Activity Ideas:

Display the photos of your freeze frames next to the photos that you have represented as a comparison.



Have a conversation between a person working on the canal in the past with someone working on it today to see what is the same and what has changed.



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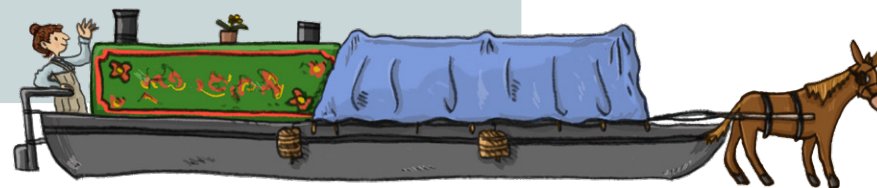
# Fact File: Working on the canal circa 1900

**FACT**



Transporting goods by canal provided employment for thousands of people.

The canal was owned by the **Shropshire Union Railways and Canal Company**. In addition to the people who operated the boats, they employed maintenance teams, wharf and warehouse managers.

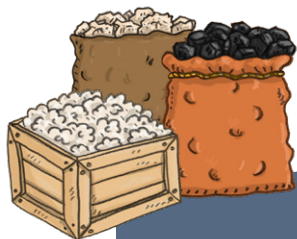


## On the Boats

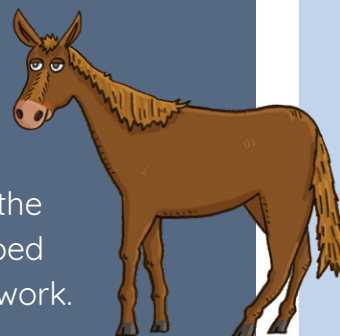
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A minimum of two people were needed to operate a horse-drawn canal boat. The **boatman** steered the boat while the **horse driver** walked along the towpath. Children as young as eight or nine worked as horse drivers, walking many miles with the horse, often for more than twelve hours a day. (See 'Comparing lives of rich and poor' for more information)



Horses were valuable and so were generally well treated. Many people were employed along the canal to look after them. **Grooms** ran canalside stables, **store keepers** sold feed while canal companies employed **inspectors** to check the animals were well cared for. Horseshoes only lasted four to six weeks so **farriers**, the blacksmiths who shod horses, had regular work.



Llangollen became a popular destination for **tourists**. The first **horse drawn boat** trips were run in 1881 from Llangollen Wharf. By 1890 Captain Samuel Jones was running **six pleasure boats**, the largest of which would hold 200 passengers, to keep up with growing demand. At that time he needed **seven men and five horses**.



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# Fact File: Working on the canal circa 1900

## On the Canal Side

**Wharves**, where goods were loaded and unloaded, were busy places.

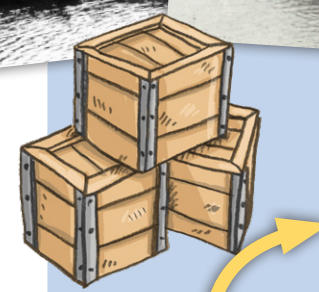
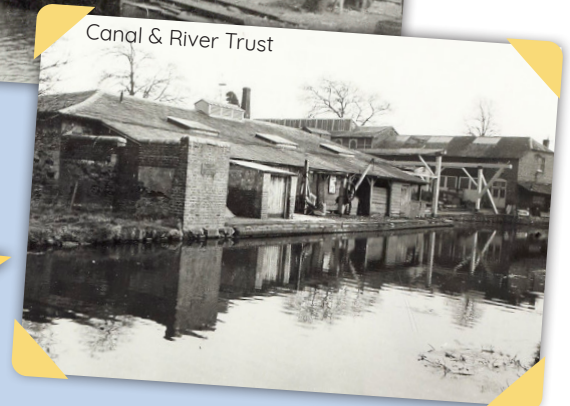
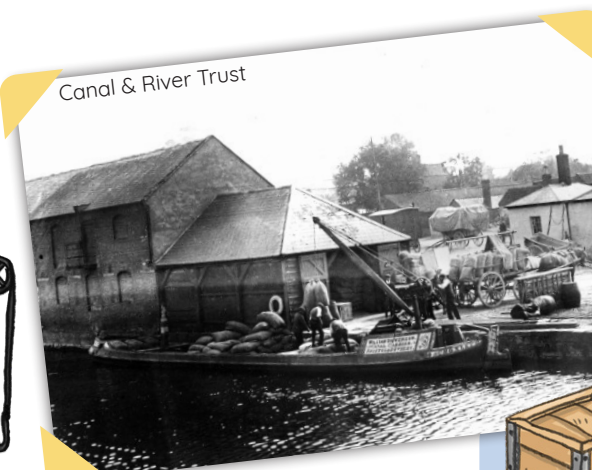
**Wharfingers** managed the wharves and often lived on site in houses built by the canal company.

**Labourers** were employed to load and unload cargoes, using small cranes and pulleys.

**Carpenters** were needed to repair and replace locks. **Blacksmiths** were needed to repair or replace iron items. The maintenance yard at Ellesmere, Shropshire had its own carpentry workshop and blacksmith's forge.



**Toll keepers** collected the money or tolls people paid to use the canals.



**Boatbuilding and maintenance** were very important. There was a dry dock and boatyard at Trevor Basin where between five and ten people were employed maintaining the boats. A few boats were built there too.

**Inn keepers** provided refreshments and accommodation along the canal.







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# Fact File: Working on the canal circa 1900

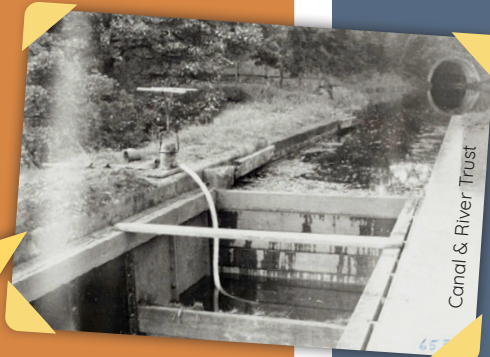
## Maintaining the Canal

Keeping the canal in good working order was a big task.

**Canal inspectors** checked the state of the canal regularly.

**Lengthsmen** each had a 'length' of canal to look after. Their job was to patrol their length, checking water levels, cutting back vegetation, doing minor repairs, looking out for leaks and making sure the canal edges were safe.

**Maintenance gangs** dealt with bigger tasks. If necessary they used wooden 'stop planks' to block off a section of the canal so that it could be drained while the repairs were done.



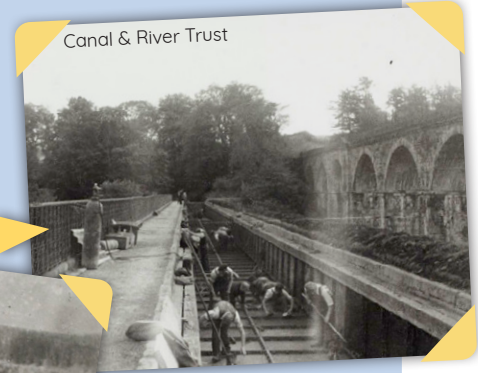
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Canals banks had to be repaired frequently. Sometimes machines called **pile drivers** were used to drive giant stakes called piles into the edge of the bank to give extra protection.

The aqueducts were drained regularly to be inspected for damage and cleared of silt so the water flowed freely.



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Mud and debris built up on the canal bottom, reducing the depth of the canal. Dredging boats with mechanical scoops were used to dig out the mud.

Ice was a big problem in winter as the boats couldn't move if the canal froze. Canal companies had specially built **ice-breaker boats**, pulled by teams of horses, that could smash through all but the thickest ice.

**www.**

Browse the [Canal & River Trust archive](#) for more images. Tip - search for things like: Llangollen Canal, maintenance, horses, boat people.



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# Fact File: Working on the canal today

## FACT



Llangollen Canal is well used today but for leisure not trade. It is one of the most popular canals for boating holidays in the UK and still supports many businesses alongside the water.

Llangollen Canal is part of the 2000 miles of waterway in England and Wales that is looked after by the **Canal & River Trust**. They employ a wide range of people from **engineers, inspectors** and **waterway operatives** to **ecologists, heritage advisors** and **visitor centre staff**.



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## On the Water

**Trevor Basin** remains the hub for canal activity. 19 holiday boats plus day boats are based there. Some companies run boat trips across the aqueduct. Others lead canoe trips across it. More holiday boats can be hired from **Chirk Marina**.



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The **horse drawn boat trips** from Llangollen Wharf to Chain Bridge and Horseshoe Falls have been running for over 100 years. They are very popular and employ over 30 staff during the summer. Each boat still has a **boatman** and a **horse driver**.



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# Fact File: Working on the canal today

## On the Canal Side

Large teams of **carpenters, painters, mechanics, electricians** and **cleaners** work to service the holiday boats. The dry dock at Trevor Basin is still used for boat repairs and maintenance.



**Pubs** along the canal now serve visitors and locals rather than thirsty boatmen and workers. The former engineer's house at Trevor Basin is now a pub. A former chapel near the canal and the old warehouse at Llangollen Wharf are now **tea rooms**.



© Jo Danson

There is even a canal boat café!



www.



### Links

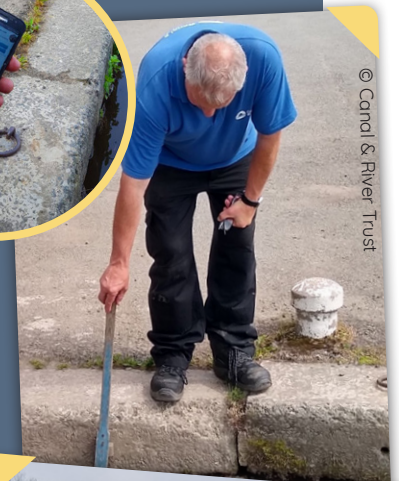
- [Boat Trips & Boat Hire](#)
- [Mandi and Dave's Café Boat](#)
- [Horse Drawn Boats](#)

## Maintaining the Canal

**Technology** has transformed canal maintenance. Mobile phones are important tools. **Digital photos** can report problems swiftly. **Electronic monitors** linked to a phone app are used to record water levels although staff are still trained to measure water levels manually using a dip stick in case technology fails!



**Drones** get close views of inaccessible sections. **Modern dredging machines** are used to stop the canal silting up. Staff have **vehicles** so can cover much larger areas than the lengthsman of yesteryear.



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Much of the canal is now lined with **concrete** rather than **puddled clay**. Some old methods have stood the test of time e.g. **stop planks** are still used.



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# Fact File: Working on the canal today

## Maintaining the Canal

**Waterway Operatives** are responsible for day-to-day maintenance. They talk to visitors and boat users and also work with volunteers, leading work parties.

**Watch:** [Meet Hayley at Pontcysyllte.](#)

**Asset Inspectors** check the canal to look for problems that they swiftly report to the management team using modern technology.

**Canal Engineers** find solutions to fix problems such as landslides, collapsed walls or blockages.

**Watch:** [Timelapse film showing the rebuilding of Hurlleston Locks.](#)

**Project Managers** work with the engineers to safely deliver projects such as improving towpaths, repairing bridges or fixing a canal breach. In addition to the Canal & River Trust staff, **contractors** are employed for specialist work.



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**Ecologists** look after the wildlife and habitats of the canal.

**Heritage Advisors** ensure that the historic features of the canals are conserved and explained.

Staff work together as a **team**. For example, the engineers would inspect the aqueduct to decide when it needed draining and maintenance. The Project Manager would co-ordinate everyone, working with the engineers and contractors to carry out the draining and inspection / repair of the trough and making sure the work was carried out safely and to budget. Specialist contractors would abseil to remove vegetation, overseen by the Project Manager with support from the Waterway Operatives.

**Watch:** [Draining Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.](#)

A **Visitor Centre Manager** runs the Centre at Trevor Basin in one of the former workshops. Here people can find out about the history of the canal and local attractions.

**Volunteers** are really important in helping to look after the canal. Jobs include assisting with practical tasks, improving access, wildlife surveys, picking litter, staffing visitor centres and running events.



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# Comparing Jobs on the Canal

Choose a job from 1900 and a modern job to compare.

Try and choose jobs that have some similarities eg both maintaining the canal.  
Consider things like what did they wear? What tools did they use?



Historic job description	Modern day job description	How has the job changed?	Why do you think it has changed?