

## Trading Stories, Working Lives

**Graham Barker dips into Loughborough's canal history in search of his boatmen ancestors, the Polkeys.**

As you stroll along the canal towpaths near Loughborough, inquisitive dogs poke their noses out from barge doorways. Wood smoke tangs the air. And pleasure boats sit, wrapped up, patiently waiting for a fair-weather jaunt.



*Loughborough Wharf*

It's hard to imagine this peaceful backwater was once a busy thoroughfare, a channel for trade from the 1780s. Where modern apartment blocks now cluster around Loughborough Wharf, barge horses clip-clopped their way, transporting coal to Leicester and Nottingham. It was here that my Polkey ancestors worked as boatmen. But how, I wondered, did it come about?

The Polkeys had not always been boatmen. John Polkey (1720-1765) moved from Melton to Loughborough to further his trade as a pipe-maker. His son John (1748-1813) was a framework knitter and appears as "John Polkey of Loughborough, stockinger" in the 1800 poll book.

Our canal connection begins with stockinger John's four sons – John, George, William and Thomas Polkey. The first recorded mention of them being boatmen comes in 1815, but it seems likely that they started on the canals as teenagers from the 1790s. In the 1826 poll book, all four are boatmen:

Polkey, George, coal dealer,	Loughborough.....	f			
-----	----- boatman,	ditto	....	f	
-----	Thomas, ditto,	ditto	.....	f	
-----	William, labourer,	ditto	.....	f	
-----	John, boatman,	ditto	.....	f	
-----	Thomas, lace-maker,	ditto	.....	f	
-----	William, boatman,	ditto	.....	f	
-----	John, ditto,	ditto	.....	f	

Working on the canals was to dominate the Polkey family story for three generations. It's a story that begins not with water, but with coal. By the late eighteenth century, with industrialisation, demand for coal was rocketing. But output from the Leicestershire and Derbyshire coalfields had to be carried mainly by packhorse and mule. It was a slow and costly business. Similarly, transport connections to the capital were difficult, as the Victoria County History records:

“The trade between Leicester and London, in view of the bad state of the roads throughout the county, was conducted slowly and circuitously by sea and river. Coastal brigs brought merchandise from the capital to Gainsborough where it was transferred to ‘Trent boats’ for carriage upstream, the final stage of the journey overland to Leicester being performed by wagon. As late as 1780 the grocers of Leicester were obliged to lay in six months’ stock in October, to ensure a supply against the chances of adverse winds, storms at sea, and floods or frosts on the Trent.”

Such difficulties provided the impetus to canalise sections of the River Soar. After two Acts of Parliament, the Loughborough Navigation opened in 1778, running for nine miles, from Loughborough Wharf to the River Trent. “Loughborough at once prospered in consequence,” writes local historian Jack Simmons, and “Derbyshire coal began to pour into Loughborough... to lower the price there by as much as 40%.”

Heading southwards, the prospect of a canal from Loughborough to Leicester proved more controversial. The idea was first mooted in 1779, canal engineer William Jessop undertook a survey, and the scheme promoters foresaw the opportunity:

“...[to bring] building timber, bark for tanners, and salt from Cheshire... iron, deal, wine, logwood and dye-stuffs from further afield. In return, Leicester could export grain, malt, flour, cheese, Swithland slate and Barrow lime, and greater quantities of wool for the Yorkshire trade.”

Leicestershire landowners, on the other hand, feared that their riverside meadows would be rendered boggy by flooding, the bargemen would destroy their peace, and their gardens and woods would be exposed to plunder.

Without the support of an influential landowner, the Leicester scheme stalled for over a decade. By 1791, however, 'Canal Mania' had seized the nation; Parliament approved 21 new waterways in 1793 alone and the Leicester-Loughborough canal finally opened in 1794. It was immediately successful. In Leicester, the canalside and public wharf by Belgrave Gate became the focal point for new industry. As the Leicester Herald reported on 23 June 1792:

“The banks of the Soar in the vicinity of this town already wear the appearance of increasing commerce. Speculations are increasing, Wharfs are preparing, and manufactories are erecting to welcome the approach of our expected Navigation.”

Tan yards, bleaching works, lime kilns and iron foundries clustered around the waterside and, from 1821, the gas works rose up to dominate the skyline.

One less successful element of the enterprise was the Charnwood Forest Canal – a branch line through hilly terrain to the Swannington and Coleorton coalfields. It comprised two horse-drawn railways with a stretch of canal in between, from Thringstone Bridge to Loughborough Road. However, the original idea of manoeuvring coal trucks onto barges proved impossible, the extra cost of decanting coal from truck to barge rendered it uneconomic, and a burst reservoir dam in 1799 finally caused its closure.

Notwithstanding this glitch, by 1820, the canal was used to transport 115,000 tons of coal, and 11,500 tons of other freight a year. The Loughborough Navigation Co – benefitting from cheap 'navvy' labour in its construction – was a phenomenal success. In 1824, its £100 shares stood at £4,600 and even in 1833, with the threat of railway competition, they were still worth £1,240. The Leicester Navigation Co's finances were less spectacular, but it prospered steadily, bolstered in 1814 by connecting with the Grand Junction Canal in Northamptonshire.

Operating coal barges was heavy, dirty work. Boatmen could often be away for weeks at a time, delivering and returning with cargo. Unlike some boat families, the Polkeys didn't seem to live on-board long-term; at the 1841 census, most of the family lived on Canal Bank, Bridge Street and Rushes, and the Polkey women worked in lace-making, cotton seaming, or the angora factory. It was a close-knit, waterside community.



*Loughborough Lock*

With their trusty, hard-worked horses, boatmen would negotiate locks and bridges. The journey northwards to Trent Junction – via six locks – took them through Normanton on Soar, Kegworth and Ratcliffe on Soar. On the journey southwards, the Soar twists sinuously through Barrow on Soar, Mountsorrel, Thurmaston, Birstall and Belgrave – and 10 locks – before reaching the Leicester wharf.

The Polkeys might have worked for the Loughborough Navigation Co itself, plied their own trade, or worked for one of several conveyance companies. In 'River, Canal and Coastal Carriers in the East Midlands, c1660–1840', Philip Riden (University of Nottingham) records a number of carriers at Loughborough. Most active amongst them were Pickford & Co and Ella, Coleman & Co ("wharfingers and carriers by water, also, dealers in deals, timber, iron &c."). Pigot's 1828 directory details the daily comings and goings at Loughborough Wharf:

**CONVEYANCE BY  
WATER.**  
To LONDON, Pickford & Co.'s *Fly Boats*,  
every Tuesday and Thursday morning.  
To MANCHESTER, Pickford and Co.'s  
*Fly Boats*, same days—& Ella, Coleman  
and Co.'s, two or three times a week.  
To NOTTINGHAM, Pickford and Co.  
& Ella Coleman & Co.'s *Fly Boats*, daily.

My search for newspaper snippets ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)) reveals an alarming number of encounters with the local constabulary. Polkey men were apprehended for drunken brawls, petty thefts, assaults, and being “an idle and disorderly person”; by modern day standards it suggests a somewhat chaotic family life. Two Polkeys were even transported to Australia: in 1835, 13-year old John Polkey was found guilty of “feloniously stealing twenty red herrings from the shop of Mr Thomas Cooke of Loughborough, grocer” and sentenced to seven years’ transportation, and in 1851 boatman John Polkey was transported for ten years for felony.

But it’s the canal-related articles that most capture my interest, for example:

1836: “Thomas Polkey, boatman, was charged with stealing a silver watch from Thomas Jowitt, a brother sailor, that is, of the freshwater breed of Jack tars.” Polkey was found “on board his boat, near Brookesby Mill” but this seems to have been a playful incident between drunken old friends, resulting in much laughter at the court hearing and an acquittal.

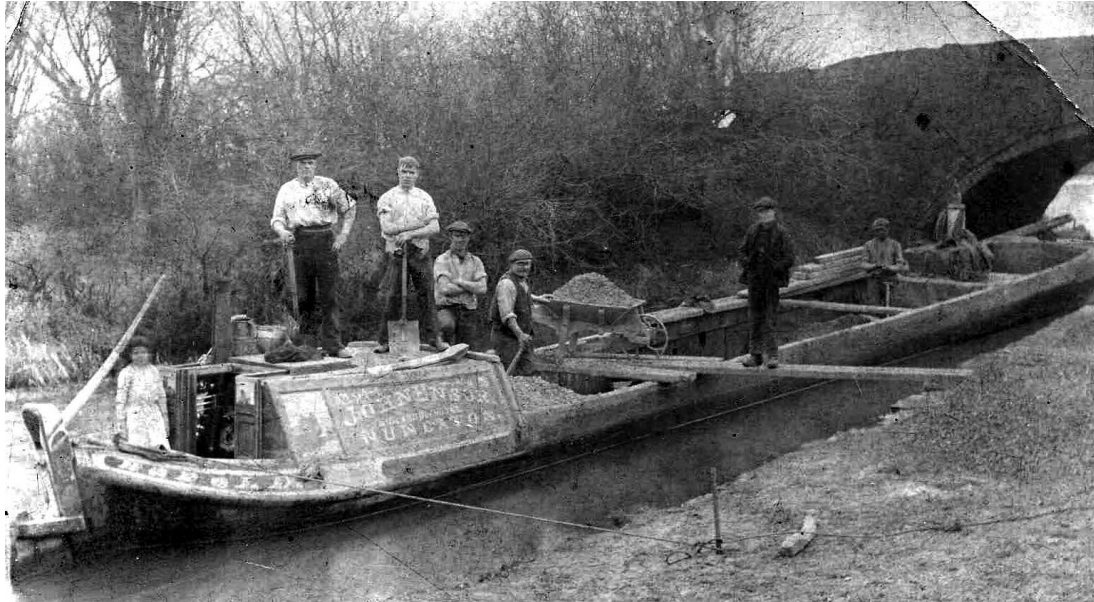
1836: Thomas Polkey “charged by John Snow, gauger of the Junction Chain, with damaging the same – fined 10s and costs”. Chain Bridge stands at the junction of the Loughborough and Leicester Navigations and took its name from a chain strung underneath it each night to stop boats avoiding the tolls.

1841: “Boy Saved From Drowning: On Tuesday week, a boy named Polkey, of Loughborough, was passing the lock near to that place, with a waggon-rope over his shoulder, and was supposed to have been overbalanced by it, which caused him to fall into the lock. The lock-keeper, Mr Berrington, hearing his cries, ran to his assistance as soon as possible, and after much trouble succeeded in getting him out. The poor little fellow was very ill for some time, but ultimately so far recovered as to be taken home.

In December 1847, George and William Polkey – brothers and first generation boatmen – die within a day of one another. “They were buried together, and what is still more remarkable, their former wives were also buried together some years since [both died in Jan 1824].” As my fellow family historian, Andrew Polkey, writes, “The ceremony must have been a major event for the Polkeys and was perhaps the last occasion for a family gathering before the exodus of the 1850s,” when the younger generations began to move further afield.

By this time, the railway had begun to take on the canal’s cargo-carrying business. The Leicester and Swannington Railway opened in 1832 and by 1840 the Midland Counties Railway had connected Loughborough with Nottingham, Derby, Leicester and Rugby.

The family fortunes reflected this shift. In the 1841 census there were five Polkey boatmen, by 1861 there were only two. Some moved away – such as Thomas Polkey, a “canal boat legger” through the 1.75-mile long Blisworth Tunnel in Northants. Others became coal merchants and higglers, railway workers, petrificationers, and, in one case, the manufacturer of Polkey railway lamps.



No images of the Polkey boatmen exist – they operated at a time before photography – but old canal photos can still evoke an image of their tough working lives. And when I’m next strolling along the Loughborough towpaths, I’ll listen out for echoes of my ancestors, navigating their way through locks and under bridges, carrying coal to fuel local industry and warm Leicestershire’s homes.