

INVESTIGATING THE GENEALOGY OF CANAL CARRIERS

Ray Shill

There is a window in Sedgley parish church which commemorates Eliza Fellows, the wife of James Fellows, a canal carrier. The memorial was placed there at the instigation of a grateful family, and in particular, one son, Joshua Fellows. Joshua became a successful canal carrier and was one of the founders of the firm Fellows, Morton & Clayton: perhaps one of the best-known of the carrying firms. This article examines some of the carriers who, like Joshua Fellows, were based in the West Midlands.

For the forty years between 1800 and 1840, canal transport was the most efficient means of taking goods across the country. There was a host of carriers, who competed with each other on the same routes, plying the length of Britain's waterways at a time when there were no major railways and the roads were poor. It was a cut-throat business, and several lost money and became bankrupt. Fellows, Morton & Clayton once had the largest canal carrying business in the country, which grew despite serious competition from the railways, which took a considerable amount of traffic from the canals. Though quite late entrants to the carrying trade, Fellows, Morton & Clayton's fortunes prospered while others waned.

Carriers worked the estuaries and rivers before canals made their appearance. The canal system was quite complex, comprising a number of separate canals owned by private companies, each with their own rates and tolls. There were certain strategic places where canal met canal or river, and exchanges of goods were made between carriers, often with a complex of warehouses being built for such exchanges. As the canal system developed, so did the number of carriers who used them. Each carrier employed a number of staff, who were often widely distributed. In addition to the boatmen who worked the vessels, there were porters, clerks and agents at each of the carrier's depots, which, in the case of the larger carriers, comprised a sizeable work-force.

For the genealogist, the canal trader offers a challenge. They came from a variety of backgrounds: some were entrepreneur businessmen seeking a fortune in a new field, others were boatmen setting up on their own. Several were merchants who carried firstly for themselves and later for others. Often, mention can be found of them in canal company records, many of which are held at the Public Record Office. A good source is the trade directories which list the destinations to which the carriers operated. Another useful source is carriers' advertisements in local newspapers, especially those of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Tracing their history, however, has many pitfalls, and traditional genealogical methods may not produce results. In the case of successful traders, documents such as wills may survive. At the other end of the scale, information may not survive, or may never have been recorded. Not every boatmen had his children baptised, registered their birth after 1837.

JOHN WHITEHOUSE & SONS

The canal carriers John Whitehouse & Sons was established by John Whitehouse of Dudley. His name appears in commercial directories as early as 1805, as a road carrier operating his waggons between Dudley, Birmingham and the Greyhound Inn in Grub Street London.¹ When the firm entered the canal carrying trade is not known for certain, but in August 1817 they made an application to the Worcester & Birmingham Canal Company for a reduction of the tonnage dues on nails.²

John Whitehouse's has been one of the hardest families to trace. His was a common surname in the Black Country, particularly around Sedgley, Tipton and West Bromwich. There were important ironmasters of this name, such as Henry Bickerton Whitehouse, who owned the Wallbrook and later the Priorsfield furnaces; there was also Benjamin Whitehouse, who was a successful boiler-maker in West Bromwich. Many Whitehouses were ordinary people, working at such trades as gun-lock filers, miners, labourers, and even boatmen. With so common a name, it is difficult to identify an individual John Whitehouse in sources such as the International Genealogical Index.

References to some of the family names is to be found in rate books for the Crescent Wharves in Birmingham, where John Whitehouse & Sons had a major depot.³ William, John and Joseph Whitehouse are referred to as occupiers of one of the wharves. An agreement for the lease of the wharf was signed in 1827 between the owners of the wharf, the Birmingham Canal Company, and Nancy, William and John Whitehouse of Dudley.⁴ William is also referred to in letters in the Boulton & Watt collection, and he appears to have been in charge of

the family business at the Crescent. These references clearly relate to the sons of John Whitehouse, who was dead by 1827. The West Bromwich historian Lissimore refers to the marriage of two of the Whitehouse brothers, William and John, marrying two daughters of John Granger, and both marriages are recorded in the parish register of All Saints Church, West Bromwich.⁵

Most, if not all, of the Whitehouse children were baptised at All Saints. As other men named John Whitehouse are mentioned at this period in the registers, it is difficult to segregate references to the carrier. All but one of the baptismal entries pre-date 1813, so there is no clue to fathers' occupations, but fortunately, Martha, the youngest daughter, was baptised in 1814, the entry showing her as the daughter of John Whitehouse of Dudley, carrier, and his wife Ann.⁶ All Saints registers record two marriages of a John Whitehouse to an Ann, both of whom had children subsequently baptised there; however, the most probable candidate for the carrier's wife is Ann Grice. Like all genealogical problems, there is an inconsistency. The Crescent Wharf lease of 1827 suggests that Nancy was the name of John's wife, her name appearing first as though she were heir to the estate. Ann may have preferred to be known as Nancy, making it difficult to relate the names of the children of John and Ann with the baptismal entries at All Saints.

The eldest son to survive to manhood was William Whitehouse, born in 1790. (There may have been an elder son, Thomas, who died in infancy.) William married Elizabeth Granger in 1814, and after living in Dudley for a time, they set up home in West Bromwich, where they were recorded on the 1841 census.⁷ Together with his brother John junior (born in 1792), William eventually took over the family business. The records of John Granger's estate survive in the Caddick & Yates collection, and these provide useful insights into the Whitehouse family. John junior married Elizabeth's sister, Sarah Granger, and owned both The Turk's Head, a public house on Bromford Lane, and a considerable piece of land behind the public house, in an area of West Bromwich known as The Lyng.⁸ When Granger died, John Granger junior took over The Turk's Head, while his three daughters received the property behind the public house, and John and William Whitehouse eventually gained control of this land. William Whitehouse died in 1850, but the business of canal carrying had by then been given up, as the Whitehouse brothers had sold their interest to the Grand Junction Canal Carrying Company in 1848.

John Whitehouse junior and his wife Sarah set up home in Dudley, presumably in 1817.⁹ By 1820 the elder John had died, and John junior was listed as a carrier in the local directory.¹⁰ The 1851 census showed John and Sarah living at New Road in Dudley, and John, aged 58, is described as a proprietor of coal mines. There was evidently some uncertainty about his place of birth, as the entry simply reads "Not known, Warwickshire". When he died in 1869, a dispute over his estate led to Chancery proceedings, and the surviving documents relating to these include a copy of his brother William's will.

JOHN WHITEHOUSE & SONS'
London, Liverpool, Chester, Manchester,
Bristol and Worcester,

FLY & STAGE BOATS;

Leave at their Wharf, TIPTON and BIRMINGHAM, for LONDON, every TUESDAY, THURSDAY, and SATURDAY, in four Days, by which Conveyance, Goods are forwarded to all Parts of the Counties of WARWICK, NORTHAMPTON, HUNTINGDON, BUCKINGHAM, BEDFORD, HERTFORD, &c. &c. Load at Wharf No. 7, PADDINGTON, every SATURDAY, MONDAY, and WEDNESDAY, and deliver Goods with the greatest regularity, in four Days, to DUBLIN, BIRMINGHAM, and all Parts adjacent; Agents by whom Goods are received, and every Particular will be given (on Application) viz.—James Holt, Lee Inn, Aldersbury, LONDON; James Holt, Greyhound Inn, Great Street, LONDON; William Holt, Wharf No. 7, Paddington, LONDON, and N. & G. Wastons, Crescent Wharf, BIRMINGHAM.

To LIVERPOOL, MANCHESTER, CHESTER, and all Parts of LANCASHIRE, CHESTER, YORKSHIRE, &c. &c. every TUESDAY and FRIDAY morning, and every THURSDAY and MONDAY Morning, and at MANCHESTER, every TUESDAY and FRIDAY Morning; load at MANCHESTER the same Evening, and PRESTON BROOK, with LIVERPOOL, CHESTER, &c. Goods, on the following Mornings, and arrive at TIPTON, and BIRMINGHAM, every TUESDAY and FRIDAY Mornings (except) by which Conveyance, Goods will pass with the utmost dispatch; for Particulars please to apply to these Agents, or to the Agents by whom Goods are received, and Particulars given, Alfred Wood, Duke's Dock, No. 38, Campbell Street, near the Duke's Dock, LIVERPOOL; Thomas Orleton, Castle Field Wharf, MANCHESTER; Peter Leadbeater, Preston Brook, near WARRINGTON, and N. & G. Wastons, Crescent Wharf, BIRMINGHAM.

BRISTOL and WORCESTER Stage Boats, twice a week, and every Spring. By this Conveyance, Goods are forwarded with the utmost Dispatch and Facility, to and from DUDLEY, BIRMINGHAM, BRISTOL, and all Parts of the WEST OF ENGLAND, SOUTH WALES, &c. Goods are received and forwarded by their Agents, as under, by whom every Particular (on Application) will be given—viz., John Doves, Fair House, and William Doves, Head of the Quay, BRISTOL; William Price, Longmore, WORCESTER, and N. & G. Wastons, Crescent Wharf, BIRMINGHAM.

Independent of the above Conveyances, SLOW BOATS are provided for the Conveyance of Carriage, Iron, &c. to all the above mentioned Places, and which will be conveyed on the most reasonable Terms.

LOCK-UP-BOATS are provided for the safe Conveyance of Wine, Spirits, and other Goods, in case of stoppage on the Canals, by Frost, &c. Goods will, (if required) be forwarded by Land Conveyance.

J. W. and SONS beg Leave to solicit the Attention of their Friends to the above Conveyances, which will be conducted on the most regular scale; at the same time they beg Leave to return their most sincere Thanks to their Friends, for the very liberal Encouragement they have received, and which will always be their study to Merit.

Tipton Wharf, June 1st, 1819.

BIRMINGHAM
MACCLESFIELD
PRESTON, DUBLIN

Business card of John Whitehouse & Sons (BRL Boulton & Watt Collection)

The Genealogy of Canal Carriers - continued

The will is most informative, since it names as brothers Benjamin, Ephraim Henry, Joseph and Richard, and verifies the two sisters, Catherine who was married to Sivanus Edwards, and Ann, wife of Edward Holland. Other papers in the same deposit refer to agreements made with brother Benjamin, who apparently had no connection with the canal trade, but was employed as a bookkeeper, and lived in Wolverhampton.¹¹

Crescent Wharf, Birmingham. *12th Dec 1832*

FLY BOATS TO AND FROM LONDON

M. J. Whitehouse & Sons

DR. TO JOHN WHITEHOUSE AND SONS, CARRIERS per FLY BOATS, TO AND FROM London, Liverpool, Manchester, Worcester, and Bristol.

DR. TO JOHN WHITEHOUSE AND SONS, CARRIERS per FLY BOATS, TO AND FROM London, Liverpool, Manchester, Worcester, and Bristol.

GOODS.	FROM	WEIGHT.	AMOUNT.
<i>1.5 bushels</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>122 1/2</i>	<i>1/3</i>

Settled by J. & W. H.

Invoice issued by John Whitehouse & Sons for the carriage of goods from London to the Botanical Gardens, 10 December 1832 (BRL Archives Division)

The youngest Whitehouse brother, Joseph, remained in the carrying trade. Between 1851 and 1861 he moved from Dudley to West Bromwich, where, according to Harrison & Harrod's directory of 1861, he lived at Churchfield House. The census of that year describes his address as Church Vale, and lists him as a canal and railway carrier. After his death in 1868, the business was continued by his sons under the name of Joseph Whitehouse. They owned a number of boats, and carried iron goods, chiefly to Liverpool and Manchester, and ceased trading about 1886.

WILLIAM WHITEHOUSE & Co

In 1815 the firm of William Whitehouse & Co were listed as a carriers to Coventry, Birmingham and Dudley from the Axe. According to Holden's trade directory of 1816, this company were merchants in West Bromwich. They also appear to have been canal carriers: by 1805 William Whitehouse & Co of Tipton had three boats which were registered to travel over the Grand Junction Canal, and at least two of these were used for the coal trade to Paddington.¹²

This company issued trade tokens, which were accepted in the Bilston, Tipton and West Bromwich district.¹³ Boulton & Watt supplied them with small coinage between 1807 and 1808.¹⁴ At this time there was a shortage of small coins, and Boulton & Watt supplied several local bankers, coal masters and even canal carriers with coins. The names of William Judd, Robert Skey, Thomas Sherratt, Samuel Danks are also mentioned in their ledgers. William Whitehouse & Co received over £1,300 in small coin during this period, far in excess of what a normal carrier would require, suggesting that they had business interests beside the carrying trade.¹⁵ Whitehouse & Co may have been connected with Whitehouse & Galan, who were Liverpool merchants, and through whom Boulton & Co shipped United States dollars to America. There are references to Whitehouse & Galan being paid for carriage, but it is unclear whether they used their own transport or used other carriers. William Whitehouse & Co were evidently succeeded by John Whitehouse & Sons, who appeared in trade directories from 1818 as using both the Axe and Greyhound in the centre of London.¹⁶

Break here?