

Haulers were the men who led the horses along the towpath. They would gather in the early morning at Molly Ward's Lock (Stranmillis) or Ellis' Gut (Lough Neagh) where they would wait for the lighters. The lightermen chose the hauler by throwing them a rope and employed them or "gave them the haul" for that cargo delivery. All haulers had to have a license which they would purchase from the Lagan Navigation Company each year. The lightermen were in charge of the haulers and would constantly give them instructions during the haul. Some of them, especially "Hellfire Jack McCann" would be very demanding constantly trying to get horse and hauler to move faster, after all time was money.

The haulers were often farmers' sons and the horses, bought from the agricultural sector, were deemed unsuitable for ploughing or too ill tempered to work with. On the canal towpath, even the most unruly horse could be made to work, if the alternative was to fall in the water rather than follow the line the hauler set out. Unlike the horses on the farm the load (sometimes in excess of 70 tonnes), that they pulled, was not directly behind them, the boat would either be to the left or the right so they had to have a special piece of harness called a "swingle-tree" which stopped the ropes and chains ("traces") from rubbing against the horse.

Swingle tree



As well as walking along the towpath, which would have been demanding enough, when they approached the lock, the hauler had to unhitch the horse from the lighter, run along to the locks

and help with the whole process of getting the boat through the lock. Then he would have to hitch up his horse again at the other side and head off for the next lock.

One journey would normally take two days so at night, after a long days walk, the hauler would make sure his horse was well looked after. He would then spend the night sleeping on the deck of the lighter or in the cabin with the lighterman and his family. The Lagan Navigation Company did not permit the locks to be open at night. Lock keepers would be fined if they allowed any lighter to pass without written permission from the Company's management, meaning the haulers got a rest whether they wanted it or not. If the delivery fell behind, the time could only be made up during the day.



This picture shows a horse pulling a lighter towards Lock No. 6 at Drumbridge. The hauler is the man walking along the towpath. The boat is just about to go under the bridge so the horse is walking through the water to "line it up" properly. The hauler is a man named Johnnie Douglas. On board the boat are the lighterman Attie Mullan and his wife Jane.