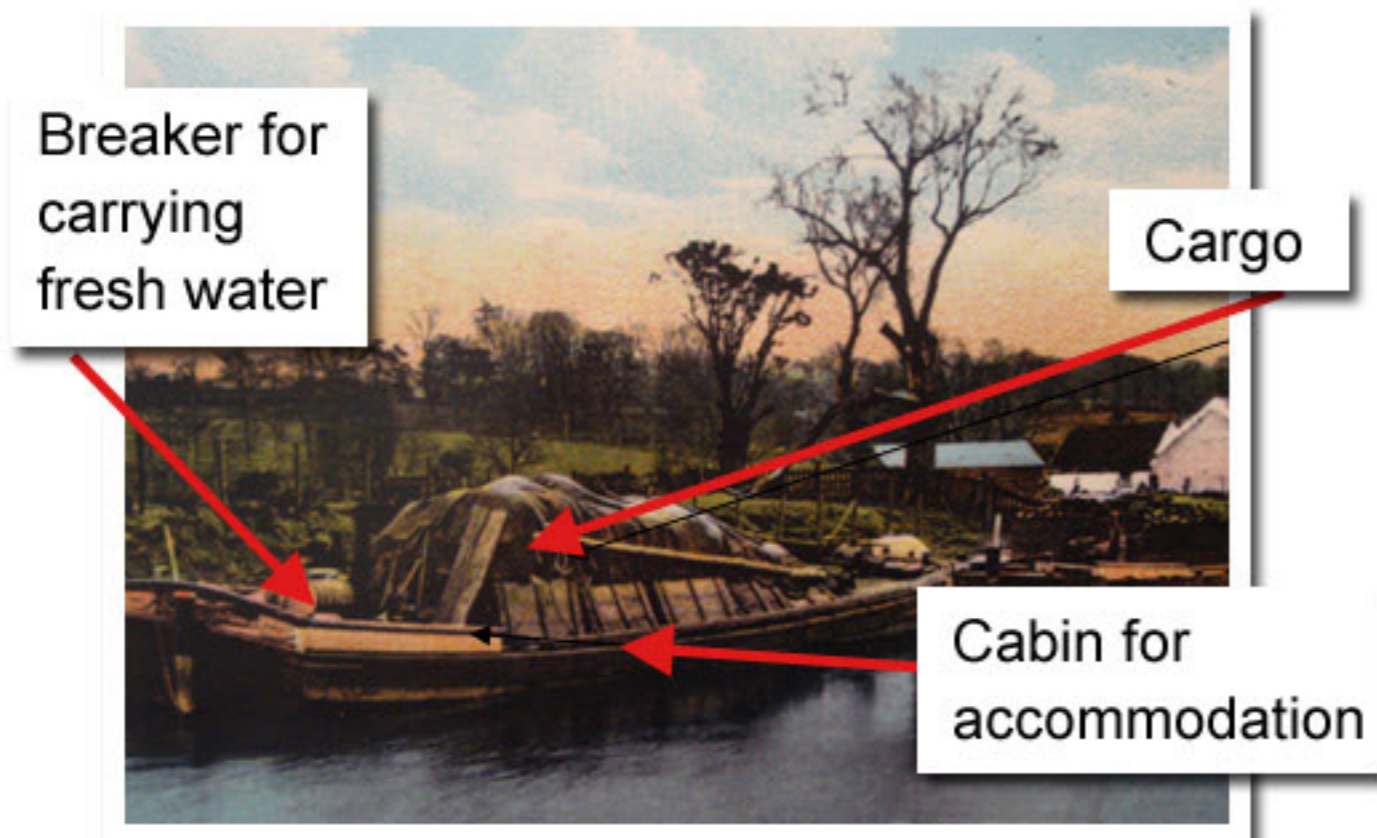


What is a lighter?

Barges on the waterways in Ireland were always called "lighters". The reason for this is that the draught (depth) of a canal boat is not as deep as for a seafaring boat. This is because canals are usually quite shallow and the seafaring boats need additional stability for the open water. The Lagan Navigation, due to the size of the locks and the nature of the river stretches, could not accommodate boats larger than 62 feet long and 14 foot 6 inches wide with a draft of 5 foot 6 inches carrying 78 tons. The lighters were horse drawn, some had sails used to travel across Lough Neagh, though most would have been towed by a tugboat. In later years the introduction of the engine meant many lighters no longer required the hauler and his horse and they could tow a second boat making the trip quicker and more profitable.



The lightermen

The men who operated the boats were known as "lightermen". The Lightermen and their families usually lived on board the boat. The job of the lighterman was to transport the cargo between Belfast and Lough Neagh as quickly and efficiently as possible. Each lighter had a small cabin with a coal-fired stove for heating and cooking, two small cupboards, a folding table with bench seats (which doubled as beds at night) and additional beds on a raised platform. This would have been all the accommodation for

the lighterman and his family, which may well have been quite large. In the 19th century, it would have been quite rare for the children of lightermen to go to school. Most of the families would have stayed working on the canals.

The main cargoes on the boats would have been coal to power the factories and mills in the Lagan Valley and linen from the same factories and mills. Other cargoes included flour, turf, tiles, sand and farm produce. Sometimes the lighters would take much more sinister cargoes. There is a very old churchyard at Drumbeg Church and there are records of body-snatchers transporting bodies by barge for medical research at Queen's University.



Robert Stewart's Lighter 1785

The journey along the canal

The lighters would go under sail or tugboat until they reached the first lock at Stranmillis. There could have been between eighteen and thirty lighters gathering here. They each had to pay a toll and the lock keeper would have kept a record of their tonnage, cargo etc. which would have been checked again at the end of the journey. The way that they checked the tonnage was to look at how low the boat sat in the water. They would estimate how low the boat would sit in the water with, for example, a certain tonnage of coal on board. A line was drawn on the side of the boat to indicate where the water would be. At

the end of the journey, this was checked again to make sure that no cargo had been removed. The regulators, known as “gaugers,” were also employed as custom and excise men.

The journey time between Belfast and Lough Neagh was approximately two days. The lighters would usually find somewhere to “lie up” for the night. There was a “lying up” area just upstream of Lock No 3.

Dorothy McBrides memories of canal traffic

“There would have been about five boats a day. The canal boats would mostly come by during the day, it was not fair to the horses to travel through the night. The lightermen usually pulled in when it got dark and if they were at our house, they would come in and have tea. The boatmen had cabins on the boats, wooden bunks to sleep on, not very dressy but they were functional.

I remember some of their names, Ned Larkin and Black Jack or was it Black John; he was a man who had a long black beard. I remember them because they would have come to yarn with my father, to sit in the shop with a storm lantern until all hours of the night. It was mainly coal, grain, taken to somewhere in Aghalee, and sometimes timber on the barges. When I was around 9 or 10 we were allowed to go on a barge as far as Edenderry and we would come back, usually we had wee old bicycles, old rickety things. The river men were lovely men, they looked after you, made sure you were all right. Only one man I remember had his wife with him, she was not like a woman: a very tough lady, she travelled with her husband, she wore dark long clothes and was so sun tanned that she was nearly mahogany in colour.

They managed; they had a wee stove in their cabins, they survived with very little in those days. I don't remember children on the boats.

They would nearly always have dogs; they would have got off at the locks and run around. The horses all had names; they were beautiful, nearly like shire horses, big hooves, very docile. There was the odd time there were two horses pulling a barge, but mostly there was one. I think the boatmen were employees, I don't think they owned the barges, the lighters. There were two or three men on the boat, a lot of the time one would have got off and walked with the horse along the towpath. I remember that so well. We would have run down when my father said there was a lighter coming, my sister and I and maybe my brother would have run down half way round the corner to Stranmillis, and would have found them walking with the horse. They were very, very good to their horses because that was part of their lives. They were nice horses too, working horses.”



Lightermen, “Hell’s Fire” Jack McCann and Johnny McVeigh