

THE SWIFT PACKET BOATS ON THE LANCASTER CANAL

A REVOLUTION IN PEOPLE TRANSPORTATION!

The first swift packet boat came into service on the 20th May 1833, with the Lancaster Gazette reporting that a regular timetable between Kendal and Preston had commenced on 9th July of the same year. The vessel used was iron-hulled, seventy-six feet long with a six-foot beam, and could carry one hundred and twenty passengers. Built by the Paisley Canal Co., she was shipped to Lancaster via Liverpool, and the trial run she completed between Preston and Lancaster the previous March took three hours and five minutes. Her name was "Water Witch".

The timetable of the day advertised a departure from Kendal at 6.00 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, with the return journeys on the intervening days leaving Preston at the more civilised time of 9.30 a.m. There was no service in either direction on Sundays. Including the stops needed to pick up and set down passengers, the whole journey took almost ten hours. The fare from Kendal to Preston in the first class cabin was six shillings, but by travelling second class this could be reduced to four shillings. Between Kendal and Lancaster or Lancaster and Preston the fares were three shillings and two shillings, first and second class respectively. For shorter distances the rate was 1d. (one old penny) per mile with a minimum fare of sixpence second class, or was three-half-pence a mile with a nine pence minimum fare for the added comfort of first class.

Although primarily a passenger service, the boats did carry small packets, with a fee of sixpence between Preston and Lancaster, or Lancaster and Kendal; for carriage for the full distance between the canal's termini the cost was one shilling (twelve old pence). Advertising posters of the time state that parcels would be "carefully conveyed and forwarded".

By March 1834 demand had increased and a second vessel – named "Swiftsure" – was in service. Again iron-hulled, but built by Thomas Vernon of Liverpool, she carried eighty passengers being slightly shorter than "Water Witch" – seventy four feet – and some six inches narrower. "Swiftsure" was herself shipped to Lancaster, on board the PS "John o'Gaunt", where she was fitted out in the canal company's yard.

Posters announcing the new improved service gave not only the sailing times from points along the Lancaster canal, but also details of the times that coaches leaving Manchester and Liverpool would rendezvous with the packet boats. A warning also given was that "In case of Stoppage of the Canal by Frost, the Coaches will be continued between Preston and Kendal".

A report to the Canal Co. dated February 1834 stated that in the first six months of service the "Water Witch" carried approx. 16,000 passengers. Two further boats – "Swallow" and "Crewdson" followed in 1835 and 1839 respectively. "Crewdson" was named after the then-chairman of the Lancaster Canal Company, the Kendal banker William Dilworth Crewdson. At seventy-two feet long, with a six-foot six-inch beam, she was also iron-hulled and built by the Lancaster Canal Company's own workmen.

These new boats achieved their popularity both because of their speed – an average of ten miles per hour – and the smoothness of their travel. In the days of unmade roads horse-drawn coach travel was extremely uncomfortable, and the packet boats must have

seemed luxurious indeed by comparison. Earlier packet boats had run between Preston and Lancaster, but they had an average journey time of fourteen hours!

The boats' long cabins were separated into the first and second class sections by a small bar from where, contemporary adverts stated, "Passengers may procure Refreshments in the Boat", served by a steward. In fine weather passengers were able to sit outside at the front and rear, whilst on inclement days the cabin, which was roofed with stout calico dressed with linseed oil, provided shelter.

Two horses were needed to pull one packet boat, and these had to be changed every four or five miles to maintain the boat's speed and not exhaust the animals. A postilion (usually a light-weight youth) rode one horse, driving them both with the reins, whilst the helmsman steered from the rear of the boat – regulating the speed of the horses by the use of a horn to slow them down or a whistle to speed them up. Stables were built alongside or near to the canal – some of these survive in converted form, with the one at Crooklands (to the south of Kendal) being the last to be restored and put use as the operating base for the Lancaster Canal Trust's summer trip boat, also named "Waterwitch".

The packet boats had priority over all other craft on the canal, which had to give way or risk having their towropes cut by the packet's crew. On reaching the locks at Tewitfield, passengers disembarked and walked along the towpath whilst the boat was taken through the locks.

It appears that the travellers sometimes changed boats here – to save time taking the craft through the flight of eight locks an empty boat would wait at the other end of the flight for the passengers to walk along and join it.

On reaching the entrance to towpath-less Hincaster Tunnel the horses would be unhitched and led along the horsepath over Tunnel Hill. Meanwhile the boat would either be "legged" by the boatmen, or hauled through by means of a rope attached to the south wall – the loops through which this passed are still to be seen set in the tunnel brickwork.

Both the termini at Kendal and Preston were covered over, so that passengers and packets were kept dry and relatively comfortable until the boat was ready for embarkation. The canal terminus area at Preston has been lost under part of the college – that stretch of canal being finally drained and infilled in 1964, whilst in Kendal the first half-mile of canal from the terminus to the gas works was drained in the 1930's. The factory of Gilbert, Gilkes and Gordon, turbine makers now occupies the area of the Kendal basin and wharves. At Lancaster the packet boats stopped alongside the packet boathouse (which still stands) – the boathouse was built at a skew to the canal to allow the long boats easy access onto the narrower canal.

The packet boat service continued until 1846 when the opening of the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway, with its Kendal and Windermere branch, finally enticed away the packet boat passengers onto an even faster mode of transport.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FAST PACKET BOATS?

After being withdrawn from service in 1846, two of the boats - believed to be "Swiftsure" and "Crewdson" (the latter having been renamed "Water Witch II") – were put into storage in the boathouse in Aldcliffe Road, Lancaster, and there remained, possibly until the end

of the century. Some years ago an archaeological investigation was undertaken to establish if one of the boats remained in the sediment below the water line. The dig concluded that there were no boats left in the boat house mud. It is known that "Water Witch II" was altered for use as an inspection boat for the engineer, Mr. Thurston, on the Lancaster Canal, whilst another source claimed that the "Swiftsure" was subsequently broken up or removed.

By 1914 "Water Witch II" was no longer required by the canal company, and she was given to Lancaster Corporation which arranged to display her on the canalside at Aldcliffe Lodge, where she remained for the next fourteen years. In March 1929, having been the subject of vandalism for some time, she was broken up by the Borough Surveyor's men.

A letter from the canal engineer, I. H. Thurston, dated 17th December 1912, gives the information that he believed the original "Water Witch" and "Swiftsure" to have been transferred to the Crinan Canal in Scotland, in 1856. Enquiries to the British Waterways Crinan Canal manager and the Scottish National Archives to establish if this happened, and what subsequently became of the boats, have proved unsuccessful.

Of the fate of the "Swallow" nothing is known, but it may have been she and not the "Swiftsure" which was stored in the Lancaster boathouse until around 1900 if the information in Thurston's letter is accurate.

What seems fairly clear is that none of the Lancaster Canal's four original fast packet boats survive... unless, of course, you know differently...?

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