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Postcard depicting City Road Basin in 1828. The London Canal Museum Archives. Photo taken by author.

**Community, Connection, and Conflict; The Liminal
Spaces of the Regent's Canal and the Industrial
Transition of London (1812-1900)**

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Honors Thesis Submission: Oberlin College History Department

Advisor: Professor Ellen Wurtzel

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Introduction



Fig 1. Coin produced to commemorate the opening of the Regent's Canal in 1820. The London Canal Museum Archive. Photo taken (poorly) by author

The Regent's Canal was first opened to the public on a sunny afternoon in early August of 1820 after eight years of planning and construction. Londoners flocked to Regent's Park dressed in their Sunday best to celebrate this space of both natural tranquility and industrial transportation. This new canal was not only a continuous passage throughout the entirety of northern London but also connected the city to the greater British canal system as a whole. Coins like the one pictured above were made to commemorate this momentous occasion. Named after the Prince Regent himself, this waterway was designed with the seemingly impossible goal of bringing both economic success and beauty to the heart of London. The Prince Regent would pass just ten years after the canal had officially opened. He would not live to see his namesake become a place of scandal and filth where Parliament itself would eventually be pressured to

intervene. However, many of the individuals who received these commemorative coins would witness the Regent's Canal transition into a waterway with an entirely different social and economic significance than was envisioned by its builders.

This study seeks to understand the social and economic changes that took place on the banks of the Regent's in the 19th century through E.P. Thompson's conception of how the developments that occurred during the industrial revolution affected the everyday lives of individuals. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson writes that "the Industrial Revolution was not a settled social context but a phase of transition between two different ways of life."¹ This quote states that the industrial revolution should be understood not as an immediate cultural shift, but instead as a period of gradual social, economic, and cultural changes. The industrial revolution did not immediately alter people's lived realities the moment the first factories opened their doors. Instead, there were multiple different stages of development that slowly transformed the culture of the working-class and economy from that of artisans to factory workers. The Regent's Canal existed as an economic asset of London while modes of industrial transportation transitioned from horse-drawn wagons to coal-burning trains thus, the history of this liminal structure embodies this idea of the industrial transition. I will explore the legacy of this canal from the year of its proposal, 1812, to the year 1900² to provide insight into the complications and messiness urban communities experienced during the period of immense change that took place during this, "transition between two different ways of life."³

This transition is present not only in the social legacy of this waterway, but is also inherent in its physical nature. Compared to other modes of industrial transportation (specifically

¹ E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2013). 418

² The Regent's legacy extends past the year 1900 however, in the early 20th century, the Canal became repurposed for wartime production and distribution during WWI. This radically changed the ways in which the canal was used and thus, I am concluding this study at the turn of the century.

³ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. 418.

trains) the degree of naturalness the medium of water possesses made the canals as a whole liminal structures in this greater transition towards the industrial. Modern structures of transportation such as rails or highways have only one function; the movement of goods and people. Canals however are able to be used as green spaces of leisure and basins of industry, two extremes that exist on the opposite ends of the industrial transition. To 19th-century Londoners, the Regent's Canal was a liminal structure as it promoted economic activity while simultaneously providing a space where individuals could come in contact with nature. The Regent's Canal was so much more than a passage for goods and services, it was peoples' backyards, fishing grounds, and community space as well. This dual-nature made the banks of the Regent's not only economically profitable but also deeply personal to both the unfixed working-class community who lived and worked on the canal and the citizens of London.

As the first man-made transit structure to run from the west to the east side of London, the Regent's Canal had and still has a profound impact on both Londoners and the city itself. By examining this waterway as more than just a brief moment in the greater development of British industrial transportation and instead focusing on the social and cultural legacy of this space, I argue that the Regent's Canal embodies E.P. Thompson's idea of the industrial transition, ultimately revealing how a rich history of community, connection, and conflict manifested in this liminal space during the 19th century and beyond.

This is largely a working-class history. This group of individuals rarely had the opportunity to describe the events of their lives in their own words, therefore, the names and specific stories of many of the people that this work is centered around have not been recorded. The general population of workers specific to the Regent's Canal and most central to this study is the narrowboaters.⁴ They are the individuals who lived, worked, and ultimately caused conflict

⁴ These individuals have been called many different names. Some sources call them "bargemen" others refer to them

on the Regent's Canal because their semi-nomadic⁵ lifestyles were seen as problematic by Christianizing organizations, those who owned property along the canal, Victorian reformers, and Parliament.

This story begins with John Nash, the architect to the Prince Regent and planner of the canal itself. John Nash built the Regent's Canal as part of the Regent's Canal Company. The majority of the other men who were part of this organization are not relevant to this specific study, and thus, will only be collectively referred to as the Regent's Canal Company. Without their oversights the narrowboaters would have never become a population which Parliament and the Victorian reformers sought to change. The most adamant of these reformers was George Smith (of Coalville).⁶ Nash, The Regent's Canal Company, and George Smith (of Coalville) all significantly underestimated the agency that the narrowboaters would display to preserve their ways of life and culture during these decades of conflict and attempted control.

Literature Review

The city of London has been traditionally left out of historic conversations about the British industrial revolution. In the words of the 19th-century journalist J.L. Hammond, the industrial revolution was "like a storm that passed over London and broke elsewhere."⁷ This history is instead centered around the coal producing midlands and cities full of textile factories such as Manchester and Liverpool.⁸ In the late 20th century, thinkers such as Raphael Samuel

as "water gypsies." The latter will be explored in detail in Chapter three. For the sake of this study I have chosen to call them "narrowboaters" after the narrowboats which they inhabited. There is not a clear consensus on what these individuals should be called however, many modern non-academic sources produced by those who currently live and work on the canals refer to themselves as such.

⁵ Term used intentionally as there is no certainty as to how many of these individuals lived solely on boats before the later half of the 19th century.

⁶ Another relatively important figure to this story is also named George Smith. The George Smith discussed here will always be referred to as George Smith (Of Coalville) while the George Smith introduced in chapter three will always be referred to as George Charles Smith.

⁷ Quoted in Clifford "The River Lea in West Ham," 46, originally from J.L. Hammond, "The Industrial Revolution and Discontent," *New Statesman* 21 (March 1925).

⁸ Peter Maw; Terry Wyke, Alan Kidd "Canals, Rivers and the Industrial City: Manchester's Industrial Waterfront, 1790-1850." *The Economic History Review* 65, no.3 (2012):1495-1523

critiqued this analysis by arguing that too much emphasis had been placed on the emergence of large factories in the study of industrialization.⁹ L.D. Schwarz built upon this critique stating that London's industrial manufacturing economy was centered around finishing trades.¹⁰ He concludes that instead of factories, in London "the assembly line ran through the street, where the material, in its different stages of completion, was carried from one manufacturer to another."¹¹ This project will explore the industrial transition of London through Schwarz's idea of finishing trades which emphasizes spaces of transportation that were as important to the success of the industrial revolution as factories and other centers of mass manufacturing.

Recently, scholars have also focused on the unique ways in which London expanded during this period of industrialization compared to other British cities. Terry Farrell states that the city of London needs to be recognized as a "natural city, collectively planned over time, built by many hands working with natural form, with no grand overarching, superimposed design hand or ordering plans".¹² This "natural"¹³ evolution needs to be acknowledged in the conversation of why London's industrial history is so different than that of other English cities. Unlike other urban industrial centers in England, the landscape of 19th-century London was not formed around industrial structures that brought economic activity and opportunities to the city. Instead, industrial structures had to be built around the pre-existing urban landscape. Additionally, as the capital of England, industrial structures in London were formed with specific cultural considerations such as the preexisting characteristics of elite areas and institutions. A large factory could not be placed next to the British Museum, thus, the industrial transition of

⁹ Samuel, Raphael. "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain." *History Workshop Journal* 3, no. 1 (1977): 6–72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/3.1.6>.

¹⁰ For-purchase goods made by artisans and other skilled workers.

¹¹ L. D. Schwarz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force, and Living Conditions, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 33.

¹² Terry Farrell, *Shaping London: the Patterns and Forms That Make the Metropolis* (Chichester: Wiley, 2010). 12.

¹³ The word natural will also be used when discussing green spaces. When referring to Terry Farrell's idea of the "natural" the word will always be in quotations.

London began from a radically different place. This is reflected in the way the Regent's itself was planned and executed and also offers this project a lens through which we can understand how a massive, unifying structure like the Regent's Canal complicated pre-existing spatial and social patterns of London. Furthermore, the degree of agency individuals and groups of people had over the structures of the city itself implied in this "naturalness" demonstrates how the social value of the Regent's Canal was able to radically change.

In this relatively new conversation of London as an industrial power, historians either treat canals as the precursor to trains or as an odd blip in the general historic timeline. Prominent historian Roy Porter's *London; A Social History* notes the Regent's contributions to London's economy stating that it "provid[ed] a direct link between London and the Midlands, and bringing business to its terminus at the Paddington Basin ... it linked all of North London to the national canal network and brought trade to Hackey, Hoxton, St Pancras, and Camden Town."¹⁴ Despite its clear importance, the canal is not mentioned again in this text; however, the development of the railroad industry is discussed in detail.¹⁵ The lack of information about this waterway in Porter's text is likely because just twenty years after the Regent's was opened to the public, England invested its resources into a new form of transportation, trains. Between the years of 1839 and 1855,¹⁶ canals all over the country were purchased by railway companies and were filled in for tracks. Trains swiftly replaced canals as the main mode of industrial transportation. Therefore, historic texts are often centered around the development and success of the railroad industry instead of these waterways.

Roy Porter's approach to this subject is consistent with other scholarly work on Industrial London. Canals are often no more than a brief mention or a footnote in sources covering this

¹⁴ Roy Porter, *London, a Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). 228.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 348, 448.

¹⁶ Castonguay Stéphane and Matthew Dominic Evenden, *Urban Rivers* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 45.

history. Several shorter articles have been written exclusively about British canals, however, they are often written in tandem with another topic such as Gerald Turnbull's *Canals, Coal and Regional Growth During the Industrial Revolution* and do not focus much on London. Not only is this story of canals generally missing from the historic narrative around British industrialization, but London is also largely absent from the history of canals. Additionally, these sources often focus only on the golden age of canals, which spanned from the late 18th century to the late 1830s. My study will expand this narrative by looking beyond the most economically profitable years of the canal system to understand the ways in which people interacted with the Regent's Canal and its inhabitants after the rail transportation changed industry standards. When historians have discussed canals in the period after the rail industry came into existence, they have focused on the narrowboaters. Many of these individuals and their families lived on the narrowboats they used to transport goods. As will be discussed in greater detail later, their semi-nomadic lifestyle and other unique aspects of narrowboat life led the British public to cast these individuals as social pariahs of a non-British race. They gained a poor reputation of constant drinking, stupidity, filth, vulgarity, and generally were seen as immoral people.

L.T.C. Rolt, the author of several influential texts about canals, continued this narrative in the 20th century. In his 1944 book *Narrowboat*, 1950 text *The Inland Waterways of England*, and 1969 piece *Navigable Waterways* he promotes these incorrect racial theories and negative stereotypes. Many of the texts published about these individuals are either tainted by bias primary sources produced by reformers such as George Smith (of Coalville)¹⁷ or are written by those passionate about canals. The latter group of people that seek to push back against the negative light historians such as L.T.C. Rolt has cast over the historic population of

¹⁷ A lot of the methods by which George Smith of Coalville gathered data were unreliable and likely reflected his own personal bias. This will be discussed further later in the text.

narrowboaters by writing of them only in overwhelmingly positive ways. However, as made present to me through Harry Hanson's 1975 work, *The Canal Boatmen 1760-1914*, the reality of these individuals' conduct lies somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. George Smith (of Coalville)'s sources strategically exaggerated the negative aspects of canal workers to appeal to Parliament. In contrast, sources produced by canal enthusiasts strategically exaggerate the positive aspects of canal workers in an attempt to alter the historic narrative. My work will look outside of this dichotomy by using the nuanced approach of Hanson's work to formulate larger arguments about where this reputation came from and why it persisted for so long.

Finally, this project engages with the work of historians such as Laura Williams who have studied both the social and physical meaning of green spaces in London and other early modern European cities. She argues that green spaces were seen as important to the health and spiritual well-being of individuals in urbanizing cities. I will apply these ideas from her work, "Green Space and the Growth of the City" to the process of industrialization as a whole. I will expand and put into conversation with each other the work of the authors and thinkers above to illuminate the ways in which the liminal space of the Regent's Canal possess a rich historic legacy that embodies the community, culture, and complications of the industrial transition of London.

Methodology

This project is centered around a wide variety of sources including maps, archival documents housed at the London Canal Museum, newspaper entries, fiction, and primary sources discussing the existence of traveling working-class populations in England. The narrowboaters were largely illiterate during this time period. Thus, they did not produce many primary sources themselves. To compensate for this lack of information I have used Harry Hanson's

comprehensive collection of information about life on the canals as he was able to collect a variety of oral histories and information from narrowboaters themselves. Nonetheless, there are limitations in creating a historic narrative without having access to these individuals' own accounts. The arguments I make about the narrowboaters should not be read as coming directly from the population itself. It is instead the narrative I have gathered from sources that detail the ways in which this population generally interacted with and existed on the Regent's and other British Canals.

I have referenced a variety of newspaper and journal articles written in the later half of the 19th-century from *The Times*, Charles Dickens' publication *Household Worlds*, and the *British Medical Journal*. These sources detail complaints, descriptions of pollution, and charming stories of life on the canal which shed light on the perspective of the general public. Maps and other images are used to understand the physical characteristics of this space. Fiction and George Smith (of Coalville)'s 1875 source titled *Our Canal Population: The Sad Condition of the Women and Children, — With Remedy. An Appeal to my Fellow Country Men and Women* are used to understand the ways in which the aforementioned negative stereotypes of narrowboaters were disseminated to the greater British public. Official documents such as censuses, acts, and recorded responses to proposals provide other useful information on the canal's history and use while also showing how official figures exercised control over and responded to the history of the Regent's. Unfortunately, this is the area where I had the hardest time accessing sources through virtual archives. There is room for this thesis to be built further in the future specifically regarding questions of ownership, maintenance, and the boundaries of public and private.

Chapter Division

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first, titled “Green Spaces and Saw Mills; The Dual Nature of the Regent’s Canal,” discusses how this body of water had to adapt to the preexisting social and spatial values of London including a legacy of elite leisure while simultaneously bringing a new path of industrial trade through the city. To preserve the already established characteristics of London, the Regent’s Canal, a working-class space, was built to skirt and accommodate spaces of high society, leisure, and nature. The second chapter, “Blurred Lines; What John Nash and the Regent’s Canal Company Failed to Predict,” delves into how the lived reality along the banks of the canal was radically different from what the Regent’s Canal Company so carefully planned as the designers seemed to overlook the fact that a canal would promote movement. This created conflict as previously separate classes of people were brought closer together than ever before and as the city of London progressed further into the processes of industrialization.

The final chapter, “‘Water Gypsies,’ and Railways; Narrowboaters After the End of the Golden Age,” seeks to understand the failed forced cultural assimilation of canal workers through the 1877 and 1884 Canal Acts as the age of canals came to an end. By centering earlier reform efforts that took place in London, I assert that these events had little to do with the workers themselves but, instead with their value to first London, and more broadly the rest of the United Kingdom, as industry transitioned away from semi-nomadic transportation workers and towards permanent rail operators. In my conclusion, I have expanded these ideas to discuss the agency of working-class people and the historic memory of spaces of transition. By re-examining the history of the Regent's Canal, this project sees this waterway and the transient people who lived and worked on it as central to the industrial process in London.

Chapter 1: Green Spaces and Saw Mills; The Dual Nature of the Regent's Canal

The Regent's Canal has become completely naturalized into the landscape of North London. It lines Regent's Park, snakes around the borough of Shoreditch, and is hardly noticeable flowing behind the countless construction projects at King's Cross. It is hard to believe that there was a time, only two centuries ago, when this winding body of water was one of the first structures to connect the city of London to the greater British canal system. This chapter will explore the origin of the Regent's Canal while touching upon the history of British canals, the importance of the Regent's, John Nash, and the dual-nature of this waterway to demonstrate how the Regent's Canal was designed to physically reflect the idea of the transitional industrialization of London.

The city of London was surprisingly late to the canal-building game. The Regent's Canal opened ten years after the period of rapid British canal construction between the years of 1790 and 1810 ended. This frenzy of building, dubbed "canal-mania" by historians, began a few decades after the Duke of Bridgewater opened the Bridgewater Canal in 1761. The Duke's Canal connected his coal mines in Worsley to factories in Manchester. Transportation by water offset the heavyweight of coal thus allowing the Duke to move his product at a fraction of the cost and time. Canal transportation was so successful that the price of coal in Manchester fell by half within a year of the canal's opening.¹⁸ Other producers and consumers of heavy natural resources began to build their own canals which ran through developing cities and rolling rural landscapes. Soon, most of England would be connected by these artificial bodies of water for the first time. Or, as Terry Farrell puts it, "The whole lot were connected up as effectively as an electrical wiring circuit that literally empowered all the disparate water parts of England."¹⁹ In the span of

¹⁸ A. L. Thomas, "The Duke of Bridgewater and the Canal Era," *Geography* 21, no. 4 (1936) 298.

¹⁹ Farrell, *Shaping London*.

only a few decades, these previously separate areas were linked by artificial waterways. This moment of canal-based connection was the beginning of the “transition” transportation and the culture around it would undergo in England through the industrial revolution.

In London specifically, the implementation of this new system of transportation completely flipped the economic relationship between the city and the rest of England on its head. Before the canals, London was the center of production and population growth. Most economic opportunities, politics, and cultural events took place in this urban area. However, by providing a current-free, cheap, and reliable form of water transit to the Midlands and North, canals made these two massive regions into new centers of industry and British life. Cities such as Leeds, Manchester, Bristol, and Birmingham became the heart of this new age of production. Thus, “the balance of population and economic activity was swung from south to north.”²⁰ London was no longer the only urban powerhouse in England.

Why the Regent’s Canal?

In these rapidly developing Midland and Northern cities, these new canals shaped “intra-urban patterns”²¹ of development as factories popped up along the sides of canal banks and waterfronts expanded. The relationship between the Regent’s Canal and the pre-existing urban patterns of London was different. Unlike the canals in cities such as Manchester, the Regent’s was built through an already developed space instead of being the driving force behind urban development. The Regent’s Canal had to accommodate and adapt to certain boroughs that already catered to specific populations of people, individuals that already owned and had a say over the plots of land the canal ran through, and the general preexisting map of London. One of these landowners was William Agar who opposed the Regent’s planned route through his

²⁰ Gerard Turnbull, “Canals, Coal and Regional Growth During the Industrial Revolution,” *The Economic History Review* 40, no. 4 (1987): 558.

²¹ Maw, Wyke, and Kidd, “Canals, Rivers, and the Industrial City,” 495.

property. Despite his efforts, he was not able to alter the course of the waterway. However, he did manage to sue the Regent's Canal Company for a handsome sum of money.²²²³ Agar was just one of the individuals the Company had to try and appease as they created a canal that was designed to reflect and run through many of the preexisting characteristics and structures of London while simultaneously trying to advance the city further into this process of industrial transition.

The industrial transition of London exists not only in the physical spaces of the canal but also in the hotly debated²⁴ question of which canal was the first in the area and, more broadly, what even constitutes one of these waterways. These questions begin with the fact that it can be hard to discern or decide what is a canal and what is a river or stream. Canals occupied a fairly liminal space in the industrial and cultural legacy of the city as the medium of water blurs the lines between the pre-industrial and the industrial. The beginning and end dates of a method of transportation such as trains are very clear as the rail network brought entirely new structures and forms of movement to the city. Considering the economic and cultural legacy of the Thames in London, canals can be seen instead as the introduction of a very old way of moving into new areas via the construction of artificial waterways.

The debate about the status of the Regent's Canal centers around two different groups of man-made waterways that are often dubbed the first canals in London; Limehouse Cut/Paddington Basin and the River Lee Navigation. These early sub-canal or *canalized* waterways demonstrate the beginnings of this transition that were taking place in the transportation industry of London before the Regent's Canal existed. Both the River Lee

²² "William Agar; Miser or Philanthropist?" Agar. London Canal Museum. Accessed April 14, 2021. <https://www.canalmuseum.org.uk/history/agar.htm>.

²³ William Agar's wife went on to create Agar's town, a notorious working-class community Charles Dickens often wrote of right by the Regent's Canal.

²⁴ By debate I am referring to the fact that different authorities refer to different waterways as the first or oldest canal in London. On the Canal and River Trust website they call Limehouse Basin the oldest canal in London while the official website for the River Lee dubs itself the same. Furthermore, when I was volunteering at the London Canal Museum certain canal enthusiasts strongly argued that it was Paddington Basin. There seems to be a general disagreement as to which body of water is the "first" as there is debate over what counts as a canal.

Navigation and Limehouse Cut were approved under The River Lee Act of 1766.²⁵ The River Lee (also spelled Lea) runs from the Thames up to Hertford and has been used by British individuals since the Roman times both for agricultural irrigation and the transportation of grain. Its natural course was first altered in 1425 to improve navigation and install tolls to benefit private landowners whose property lined the river.²⁶ Minor improvements continued to be made to this waterway until the River Lee Act majorly altered its natural course with locks, completely new sections, and the construction of Limehouse Cut, the structure that now connects the Regent's Canal to the Thames.²⁷

In London's history of water-based transportation, the River Lee Act marks the beginning of this transition towards the industrial, especially with the adaptation of the new lock technology popularized by the Bridgewater Canal five years earlier. Completed in 1771, these new improvements made the Lee Navigation a site of future industry. However, there are two complications in viewing the Lee as the first canal in London. Primarily, the Lee existed and was used long before it was altered. In this study, canals are defined as a man-made waterway. These untouched or only slightly altered sections of the river contradict this definition. Additionally, viewing canals in this context as a product of industrialization, the over two hundred year period in which the Lee was altered poses an additional set of problems as many of the earlier changes to the river were not made for industrial purposes. Thus, it makes more sense to call the Lee a *canalized* river instead of a canal as it is a river that has been altered and enhanced with canal technology.

²⁵ River Lee Act, 1766, 12 Geo. 2, c. 51.

²⁶ Statutes 3, 1424, Hen. c. 5.

²⁷ "The Lee Navigation," The River Lee Navigation (The London Canal Museum)
<https://www.canalmuseum.org.uk/history/lee.htm>.

The Limehouse Cut and Paddington Basin have also been called the first canals in London. The Lea Navigation demonstrated how the liminality of these spaces creates a gray area where natural water bodies are sometimes categorized as canals. The Basin and Cut on the other hand, reflect London's "natural" development. Although both are artificial waterways built solely for commercial purposes, they still do not meet the criteria for being the first canals in London in the context of this study. The purpose behind the Cut creates two problems. The Cut was not built to support the rapidly changing industries of the North and Midlands but, instead was constructed to alleviate congestion in the already booming ports of the Thames. Additionally, it did not create new pathways of connection or transportation such as the Bridgewater. Instead, it created an easier pathway in an already established route.

Paddington Basin was built at the end of the Grand Junction Canal in 1801. Although it is a definite canal, the canal it was built for begins in Northamptonshire, not London. Until the Regent's Canal was built, products that were transported to London via The Grand Junction Canal would be loaded onto carts to be transported further into the city at this Basin. This area did not bring canal trade to London but, instead was a space where the canal trade of the Midlands ended.²⁸

Instead of being thought of as the first canals, The Lee Navigation, Limehouse Cut, and Paddington Basin should be seen as the early implementation of technology that would later be used to bring materials to London via the Regent's Canal. Both of these spaces were important to the industry of London. Nonetheless, they were not specific to London and/or established new modes of artificial inland water transit. The Regent's ends right before Limehouse Cut at Limehouse Basin and begins at Paddington Basin. These two locations would be used throughout

²⁸ Observer "Brief Remarks on the Proposed Regent's Canal" *Printed for J. Hatchard, Bookseller to Her Majesty* No.190 (1812) 12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/60244572>

the 19th century as the place in which the industry of the Regent's Canal would be connected to the rest of England. The River Lea, Limehouse Cut, and Paddington Basin were not the first canals, but instead London's first steps towards the canal trade. From 1425 to 1771 and eventually, to 1820 when the Cut was connected to the Regent's, one can see the ways in which British individuals slowly changed and created waterways to meet their changing economic needs in London.

The fact that Paddington Basin and Limehouse Cut existed separately for roughly twenty years before they were connected by the Regent's reflects Terry Farrell's aforementioned ideas about the development of London. When we understand London as a "natural" city we see this unplanned growth reflected in how the two ends of the Regent's were built before the middle as there was no "grand overarching" plan. Developing late, but naturally, and connecting the easternmost point of the Grand Junction Canal to the Cut and the Thames in the west, the Regent's provided a link which would transition London towards the type of economic advancements the rest of the country was engaged in. It is for this reason that this study views the Regent's Canal as the beginning and embodiment of this form of industrial transit in London. Not only was it intended for the industrial transportation of coal which was unique to ideas of "canal mania" but, it also developed in a way unique to the industrial transition of the city of London itself which, as we will see shortly, would have two very different faces.

On Paddington Basin



Fig 2. Postcard depicting Paddington Basin before the Regent's Canal from *The Paddington Packet on the Grand Junction Canal*. The London Canal Museum Archives. Photo taken by author.

The Regent's Canal was the product of three different men, a sudden death, and a decade of planning. In 1801, the auditor of the Grand Junction Canal Company, Thomas Homer,²⁹ displayed financial data to parliament that supported the expansion of the Grand Junction Canal. Officials showed little interest in his ideas until 1802 when Homer began practicing with Wentworth Brinley. Together they drew up a far more detailed proposal for a canal that would link Paddington Basin with Limehouse Cut and the Thames. After receiving positive and promising feedback, they began making preparations to further develop this plan until Brinley died suddenly in his sleep in 1807. Homer virtually abandoned this idea after his partner's death and settled by Paddington Basin as a lawyer. For extra income he also ran a leisure boat service

²⁹ Those familiar with this history may recognize Thomas Homer as the fraudulent secretary of the Regent's Canal Company who was sentenced to seven years of hard labor in Australia for the embezzlement of funds. Although this is a fascinating story that had definite consequences for the waterway, I have chosen to leave this piece of this history out of this chapter as its main focus is the physical space of the canal.

called the Paddington Packet which is pictured above. Before it was closed in 1816, passengers could ride the Packet from Paddington Basin all the way to Camden.³⁰

The body of water that would become the Regent's Canal would not come to fruition until repropoed by John Nash to George IV, the Prince Regent, as part of a master plan to redevelop massive swaths of central north London. It seems as if John Nash knew about Homer's previous work as Thomas Homer was a founding member of the Regent's Canal Company. Perhaps Homer's leisure boat demonstrated to Nash that this canal could be far more than just a path for industrial transportation.³¹

In 1810, John Nash became the architect to the Prince Regent. He produced a number of influential structures including Regent's Street, Buckingham Palace, the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, and countless other buildings for elite Londoners. Compared to Nash's portfolio of high-class, residential, political, and commercial spaces, the Regent's Canal seems out of place. Canals were not flashy structures like Buckingham Palace, they also extended over a much larger and more varied swath of land than the large buildings in specific neighborhoods Nash was used to. The Regent's Canal is specifically eight and a half miles long and passes through numerous boroughs. Nash would have to make this structure "fit" into radically different landscapes including both the pre-established quaint residential area of Little Venice and the notorious neighborhoods of East London.

Additionally, Nash's projects often displaced working class people to make way for structures that would serve these elite. Regent's Street is a prominent example of this phenomenon. An 1818 pamphlet written by Charles Pitt, a surveyor of Adams Street, denounced Nash's building practices. During this time, Pitt served as a representative for the leaseholders

³⁰ "Thomas Homer 1761-1839," Thomas Homer - Villain of the Regent's Canal (The London Canal Museum), <https://canalmuseum.org.uk/history/homer.htm>.

³¹ John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980).

and tenants whose property was affected by the project. Pitt states that the construction of Regent's Street would tear down the working-class neighborhoods of north central London and connect this area to Piccadilly Circus through a grand commercial boulevard that would bring luxury consumption and aristocratic living to the area. He argues that the Regent's Street plan was cheating the residents and leaseholders of Westminster of their lawful rights as Englishmen. Pitt was not successful in preventing this development or in getting the working-class residents of Westminster fairly reimbursed for their property.³² However, he was successful in rallying public support for the concerns detailed in his pamphlet. These concerns grew so prominent that John Nash ended up releasing a statement including an apology for the "metropolitan improvements" he helped make under the Prince Regent just eleven years later.³³

This pamphlet and Nash's apology demonstrates that Nash was unprepared to take on massive public projects such as Regent's Park, Canal, and Street. Before working for the prince, the majority of his designs were for private residences and churches.³⁴ Thus, although he was capable of producing beautiful spaces, he did not have any experience with larger public structures in major cities and generally designed for high-society before accepting the position of architect to the Prince Regent. The Regent's Canal was supposed to be a structure that would appeal to high-society while simultaneously serving the same working class Nash evicted in the building of Regent's Street. In both of these projects he did not consider what the needs of this population were or how they would interact with this space. This lack of experience would create

³² Charles Pitt, *Exposition of Some Particulars Respecting the Plan and Expenses of the New Street: Comparison of the Original Estimates, with the Actual Expenditure; Extracts from the Parliamentary Reports ; Conduct of Various Officers and Surveyors; Reports of Compensation Causes; Together with Memorials and Correspondence between the Author and the Commissioners; in Four Parts* (London, UK: Published by the author, no. 12, Adam-Street, Adelphi; and sold also by all booksellers in town and country. (Entered at Stationers-Hall.), 1818).

³³ John Summerson, "John Nash's 'Statement', 1829," *Architectural History* 34 (1991): 196. doi:10.2307/1568599.

³⁴ Summerson. *The Life and Work of John Nash*.

issues, especially in a complicated massive structure like the canal. Nash's inexperience and oversight will shape the physical, spatial, and social problems explored in the next two chapters.

The Dual-Nature of the Canal

The Regent's Canal that was proposed by Thomas Homer and Wentworth Brinley was primarily for the transportation of coal. Nash's completed plans for the canal however, cannot be divorced from its initial proposal as part of Regent's Park. John Nash's redevelopment of this area turned the park into the public grounds it is known as today. Before then, it was used as a hunting ground and a private green-space for the royal family and other social elites.³⁵ Nash did not design a canal just for the transportation of coal, he also incorporated these cultural and spatial legacies of nature and leisure. Thus, the Regent's Canal was planned with basins of industry for the working-class/poor and green spaces for wealthier Londoners. The coexistence of these two physically and socially separate spaces was built into Nash's plan.

The dual nature of this space was not solely Nash's idea or simply an afterthought to appease Londoners. There has been a long legacy of urban developers and social elites creating spaces of leisure as a sort of anecdote to the negative qualities brought about by urban expansion, demographic growth, and industrialization. These patterns of development allowed London to engage in this industrial transformation while offering good health and areas of wealth and high culture to its residents. To preserve these wealthier areas, different sections of the Regent's Canal were built with radically different physical features that reflected the social intentions of the space. A set of maps from 1850 of anonymous authorship held at the London Canal Museum details just how different the spaces of the canal could be.

³⁵ John Summerson, "The Beginnings of Regents Park," *Architectural History* 20 (1977): 56-99.

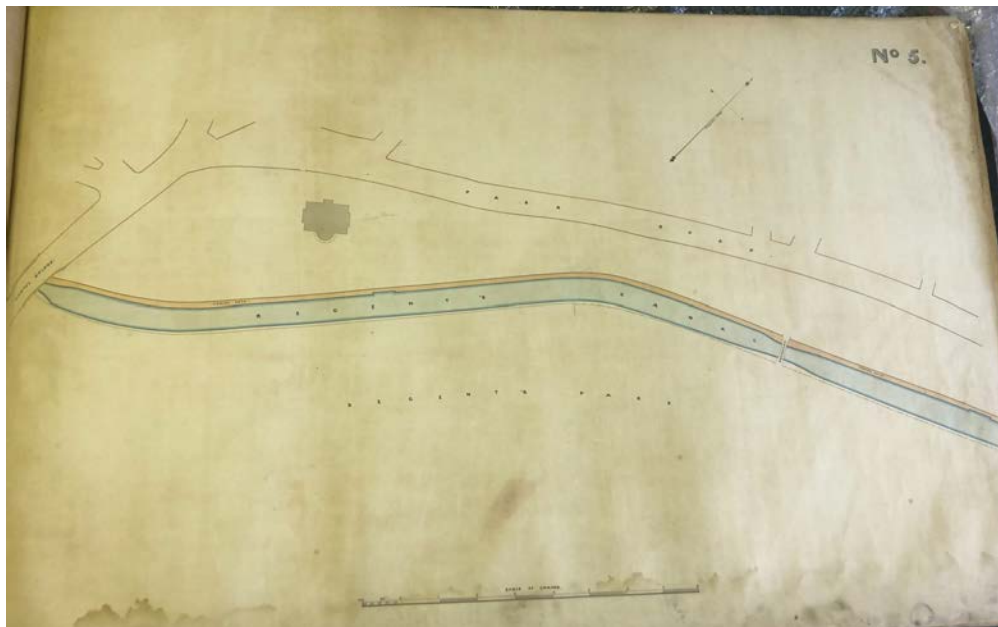


Fig 3. Map depicting the Eastern side of Regent's Park from *Survey of the Regent's Canal made by order of the Committee of Directors*, 1850, The London Canal Museum Archive. Photo taken by author.

The first image, pictured above, depicts Regent's Park and the leisure side of the canal. Despite its lack of detail, it actually tells us a lot about the space. South of the canal are the rolling hills of the park. North of it is a mansion built as waterfront property. This grand building is just one of the several expensive houses built on the banks of the Regent's in numerous locations across the city. The openness of the space allowed for a variety of recreational activities such as the children fishing in Regent's Park, pictured below.

Green spaces had a two-fold nature in the city of London. The rolling hills of rural England were long considered vital to British culture itself, so much so that late 19th-century thinkers³⁶ believed that, "without access to wild nature the English would spiritually perish."³⁷ The incorporation of green spaces in dense urban areas allowed the British to maintain this access to nature that was considered vital to the moral well-being of individuals. Additionally, from the

³⁶ By thinkers I am mostly referring to G.M. Trevelyan's influential ideas about the value of land.

³⁷ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Charlottesville, Québec: Braille Jymico Inc., 2008), 2.

1500s to the 1700s the rapid population growth and cramped living conditions of cities such as London brought pestilence, pests, and generally unsanitary conditions to city streets. Open green spaces were created for the elites of the city as the anecdote to the health problems of dense and dirty urban communities.³⁸ The Regent's Canal and Park were planned with this two-fold nature in mind.



Fig. 4. Two Children Fishing on the Canal in Regent's Park, likely late 19th century
Children Fishing, The London Canal Museum Archive

The above pictured scene of children fishing in Regent's Park not only showcases how certain areas of the canal were sights of leisure but also that particular spaces on the banks of the Regent's were imagined as offsetting the negative qualities of industrialization itself. As 19-century changes in production brought pollution and industrial grime closer to the homes of the wealthy than ever before, these cultural notions of green spaces and well-being green spaces became even more prominent. According to Laura Williams, "Urban greening," was thought to

³⁸ James Clifford Riley, *The Eighteenth-Century Campaign to Avoid Disease* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1987). 8.

promote the “physical and moral welfare of the individual and urban society.”³⁹ These areas offered fresh air, circulation, and time outside which was important to the prosperity and happiness of populations in rapidly densifying and industrializing cities. They provided, “a buffer zone between the individual and urban society”⁴⁰ in both aspects of health and spirituality. Richard Sennett likens the city to a human body and argues that these spaces were imagined as the “lungs of cities” in which wealthier individuals “were meant to circulate round these enclosed parks, breathing their fresh air just as the blood is refreshed by the lungs.”⁴¹ Regent’s Park and the sections of the canal that ran through it were places where Londoners could find refuge from the oppressive environment of the industrializing city.

This idea not only speaks to the health benefits these spaces were thought to have but also, what they symbolized socially. Williams writes that, “the development and frequenting of public space helped to offset the disquiet at what was perceived to be the increasingly individualistic and materialistic character of the city.”⁴² Green spaces such as Regent’s Park, and the activities that took place in these settings, were both the social and medical antithesis to the changes the Regent’s Canal brought to London. Through the carefully planned leisure side of this canal, the city of London was able to preserve elements of high-class living and recreational beauty along the banks of a structure that’s purpose was also to promote industrialization. The green spaces of the Regent’s demonstrate how these banks were transitional spaces that could be utilized by Londoners in non-industrial ways that ultimately provided some sort of alleviation from the industrial transition the Regent’s Canal brought to the city of London.

³⁹ J. F. Merritt and Laura Williams, “‘To Recreate and Refresh Their Spirites in the Sweet and Wholesome Ayre’: Green Space and the Growth of the City,” *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 186.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴¹ Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: the Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London, U.K.: Penguin, 2002). 325.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.



Fig 5. Map depicting City Road Basin from *Survey of the Regent's Canal made by order of the Committee of Directors*, 1850, The London Canal Museum Archive. Photo taken by author.

The above map portrays City Road Basin, the industrial side of the Regent's Canal. Compared to the first image, it is crowded with different structures represented by gray blocks. These would have been different distilleries, factories, gas works, and wharves. These maps seem like they came from two far away places however, these locations are within walking distance from one another. This area this map depicts was designed to be intentionally separate both physically and socially from these aforementioned spaces of leisure. As discussed in the introduction, the industrial economy of London was one of "finishing" trades. Industrialism in London was not characterized by the massive textile mills of Lacaster but, instead timber "piled up high to the heavens," lining the docks by the Thames waiting to be, "made up into all sorts of things" as "saw-mills buzz on the bank, cabinet and cigar box makers, turners of spiles and shivers, hewers of wood, are busy all about."⁴³ This excerpt describes a similar environment to what a 19th-century individual may have experienced at the above pictured City Road Basin.

⁴³ Benjamin Ellis Martin, "London By Canal, Through." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 857.

The basins along the Regent's Canal had built-in space for not only transport wharves but also production. These alcoves of industry were especially important as they allowed larger industrial buildings to be built while preserving the preexisting structures of neighborhoods. One prominent 19th-century businesses strategically placed on the above pictured City Road Basin were the City Saw Mills. An 1853 passage describing a day at City Saw Mills, illustrates how these basins promoted pockets of industry:

In the place of houses, and shops, and well-dressed people, he is suddenly in the midst of coke, lime, slate, and stucco works, and he sees few other passers-by than workmen in their ordinary work-a-day clothes, sometimes very much whitened and soiled with dust. Well, in the immediate neighborhood of the Canal-basin— at the end of Wenlock-road, in fact— we come to the City Saw Mills, the largest establishment of the kind in London, or perhaps the world.⁴⁴

The juxtaposition of well-dressed people and the workers covered in dust walking to and from one of the largest mill establishments in the area demonstrates how the formation of industry around these basins permitted the planners of the Regent's Canal to cultivate the close coexistence of radically different spaces. The setting of City Road Basin allowed this 1853 visitor to experience a high-end residential neighborhood and what he perceived to be one of the largest mills possibly in the world just blocks away from each other.

Nash planned two different worlds along the banks of the Regent's Canal. The coexistence of green-spaces and sawmills was partially implemented to preserve pre-existing characteristics of leisure, beauty, and luxury in the city of London while simultaneously promoting industrial growth. This duality was also implemented to alleviate the industrial nature of this waterway itself. Industry was a crucial piece of the Regent's Canal however; considering Nash's general architectural focus of the elite and the ways in which green space was used to create "a buffer zone between the individual and urban society"⁴⁵ in London, it becomes apparent

⁴⁴ "A Day at the City Saw Mills, Regent's-Canal Basin, City-Road, London," January 1, 1853. 98-99.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Green Space and the Growth of the City*. 194.

that there was a degree of anti-industrialism in the careful duality of Nash's industrial project. What he and the rest of the Regent's Canal Company seemed to fail to realize is that the canal promoted mobility and ultimately, they would have very little control over how these spaces were used and by whom. The next chapter will explore the ways in which this structure would transition out of Nash and the Regent's Canal Company's control.

Chapter 2: Blurred Lines; What John Nash and the Regent's Canal Company Failed to

Predict

“Many a London working man, from even the poorest areas, learnt fishing skills and had contact with nature along the canal banks.”

- Terry Farrell, *Shaping London* (126)



Figure 6. Illustration of boys fishing on the banks of the Regent's Canal from *London By Canal, Through* Martin, Benjamin Ellis Harper's *New Monthly Magazine*; Dec 1, 1884; 70, Periodicals Archive Online pg. 857

A 19th-century illustration depicts several young children fishing and relaxing on the banks of an industrial section of the Regent's Canal. This leisurely scene seems idyllic, but in fact was contrary to John Nash and the Regent's Canal Company's idea of intended social and

spatial separation as explored in the last chapter. This scene of children performing acts of leisure in industrial spaces demonstrates that these men were not able to prevent poor and working-class Londoners from using this space in alternative ways once it was open to the public. The unplanned uses of the waterway would lead to decades of environmental and social conflict as Nash and the Company's failure to consider the fact that this canal would promote movement would bring previously separate classes of people closer together than ever before. Ultimately, these unplanned uses would bring this industrial transition into the backyards of those who wanted nothing to do with it.

Nash and the Regent's Canal Company were not without warning that their planned canal could cause problems. An anonymous 1812 source published by an observer of the Regent's Canal Proposal details a list of concerns that contains three potential points of social contention. Points six, seven, and twelve express concerns about, "the introduction of bargemen and others into lands heretofore private," ... "the unhealthiness of 300 acres of standing water," and, "the insecurity to the public, from persons passing through a line of country for nine miles at all times of the night."⁴⁶ This chapter will explore how these three predictive concerns would quickly materialize on the banks of the Regent's Canal through the ways in which individuals blurred Nash's lines of spatial separation.

Narrowboaters

The bargemen referenced above were part of a population who contributed heavily to the blurring between green spaces and industrial areas: the narrowboaters. Identifiable by their extraordinarily bright coloring, intricate decorations, and with a width of no more than seven feet, the narrowboat and those who lived on board became iconic to the canals. The boats were capable of not only hauling coal but also of being used as a home. The front and back section of

⁴⁶ Observer, "Brief Remarks on the Proposed Regent's Canal," 1812.

the ship contained living quarters for a maximum of four people, often two adults and two children, while the long narrow section connecting the two was used to store the material being transported. When canals were first built, the significantly smaller “flyboat” was used to transport cargo along short distances. Longer journeys were completed by “slow boats” which included, but were not limited to, narrowboats. These boats were designed to fit the spaces of British canals. The towpaths on the canals were the perfect width for the horses that pulled the boats and the boats were the perfect width so that two could pass each other on these narrow waterways. Many of the early long-distance boat families maintained a fixed house by the banks. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, when canals reached the end of their “golden age,” bargemen and their families spent more and more time away from their homes. Before this period of time, there was an undeniable presence of family boats nonetheless, changing conditions forced these workers to live almost solely on narrowboats during the later half of the 19th century. Thus, the narrowboat families came into existence and would use the Regent’s Canal in ways that were unforeseen by Nash and the Company.⁴⁷⁴⁸

Those living and working on narrowboats were distinct from other members of the British⁴⁹ working class. Instead of living in the cramped housing synonymous with the East side of London and working in large, hot, smoke-filled factories; narrowboaters lived, worked, and relaxed in and around their small unfixed boathouses. This unique setting led to the creation of a working community with their own specific rituals, way of dress, and dialect.

The British population was aware of the fact that these workers were a very distinct group of individuals. In 1841, Reverend John Davies of Wales recorded that narrowboaters were:

⁴⁷ Wendy Freer and Gill Foster, *Canal Boatmen's Missions* (Oxford, UK: Railway & Canal Historical Society, 2004). 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁹ British is used here intentionally because of the unfixed nature of this population. A family that was in London one week could be in Manchester the next. Thus, although narrowboaters were living and working in the city, they were not specifically Londoners. The population as a whole will be discussed in this study as they frequented London.

A Class of Men quite *sui Generis*. Their Habits and their whole Lives are detached as it were from those around them. They associate altogether; and their Feelings and Views lead me to think of them quite a Class of Men *sui Generis*.⁵⁰

These people led different lives from the average British worker, so much so that the British public considered them outsiders. This “*sui Generis*” or uniqueness was displayed by their colorful style of dress which was contrasted with heavy crude boots they wore to avoid dock splinters. Due to their tendency to only marry other narrowboaters, they developed distinct and insular customs. For instance, when a narrowboat couple was married, the newly-weds would decorate their vessel with white ribbons tied to the funnel, wild flowers on the roof, and occasionally a caged bird as well. These individuals, when compared to other 19th-century workers, lived a fantastically colorful life expressed through their way of dress and home decor.⁵¹

Narrowboaters were not just distinguishable by their physical appearances and spaces. According to canal historian Harry Hanson, the narrowboaters developed their own vocabulary and way of speaking that went far beyond the typical jargon of coworkers. Workers would be identified by two different names. Their birth name and their *bye-name* or nickname. Hanson records the *bye-names* of several different individuals including Mrs. Phillips, a poor boatwoman who was known as Banbury Bess.⁵²

Their distinct ways of speaking developed partly because they were largely illiterate up until the turn of the 20th century. The narrowboaters had no formal education thus, their general speech patterns were full of mispronunciations, a limited vocabulary, and misuses of words. My personal favorite is that the Shropshire Union Canal, shortened to Salop, became known as the “Sloppy Cut” to the narrowboaters.⁵³ Additionally, this lack of vocabulary caused narrowboaters to overuse certain profanities in their general speech in a way that was quite jarring to the general

⁵⁰ Harry Hanson, *The Canal Boatmen, 1760-1914* (Gloucester, UK: Alan Sutton, 1984). 166.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 173.

public. Words alone were not the only thing that made narrowboaters' speech unique. According to a 1866 observation used by Hanson the narrowboaters:

Still speak in the curious tremolo in which the experience of the generations has taught them it is most effective to address their steeds. A bargee who did not encourage his horse with an expression sounding something like 'K---a-----a----am a---ap' would be at once detected as an amateur.⁵⁴

As a tightly-knit semi-nomadic group, their values and general ways of conduct were heavily influenced by life on the canals as expressed in the ways in which the presence of horses altered their speech patterns. The canals and canal trade preserved their way of life and culture.

However, the Regent's Canal would bring this population and all of its "*sui Generis*" uncomfortably close to those residing in London.

The Bathing Conflict

The narrowboaters were planned to be confined to the industrial section of the Regent's Canal with the rest of the working class. John Nash seemed to overlook the fact that unlike those who worked in factories or on the docks, the narrowboaters did not have to return to a home separate from the canal overnight. To the wealthy landowners by the Regent's, their presence was a nuisance, especially in regards to bathing. During the late Regency and early Victorian era, as industrialization caused waterways to become highly polluted while simultaneously increasing the availability of goods, it became popular to bathe and generally keep oneself clean using personal basins and tubs. Nonetheless, this was not a luxury provided to the poor and working class who continued to bathe wherever there was accessible water, no matter how public or sanitary. To the narrowboaters, the Regent's Canal was an obvious place to clean their bodies. However, not everyone was fond of this communal practice especially those whose backyards were on the banks of the Regent's.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

On July 30th, 1859 an issue of a London newspaper, *The Times*, contained a complaint to the editor from a man who lived in Camden by the canal under the alias Paterfamilias. He writes:

Sir, — I reside in the King's-road, Camden Town, and the canal runs close to the back of my garden. My neighbors on each side of me are highly respectable (mostly women), and none of us nor our families can enjoy our gardens in the evening on account of the disgusting conduct of should I say at least 100 men and boys who frequent the canal for the purpose of bathing. I can assure you, Sir, that from before 8 until past 10 o' clock p.m. the noise is frightful; they make use of the most horrid oaths and obscene language, accompanied by gestures of the most horrible nature, while the yell of the whole of them is shocking. The children cannot sleep. And the adults, driven in doors, cannot read or talk on account of the noise. I have applied to the police, who have occasionally sent a constable, who remains for about five minutes, and does not return for days. Under these circumstances I venture to lay our case before you, promising the most effectual means of obtaining relief from the nuisance in question.⁵⁵

The author of this complaint experienced these working-class bargemen's presence on his waterfront property in ways that he considers a "nuisance." By specifically complaining about his community's inability to read and enjoy their gardens (perform activities of leisure) because of the industrial population of the narrowboaters, he provides a clear example of the clashes that took place on the Regent's when these spheres of private leisurely life and industry collided.

His use of the alias "Paterfamilias" establishes himself as a powerful male figure who speaks for his residential community. He then sets a clear dichotomy between the permanent residents of his neighborhood and those moored⁵⁶ near their houses by emphasizing how he and his neighbors are both "respectable" and "mostly women." This phrasing references the prominent idea of female innocence in the Victorian era. The noise and presence of these bathers would be far too much for these delicate beings to handle. It is also likely that this is why Paterfamilias only writes of men bathing in the canal even though women too would have been living and working alongside these individuals on their family boats. Those who lived and worked on narrowboats were often characterized as the most drunk, least educated, and rowdiest

⁵⁵ Paterfamilias. "Bathing In The Regent's Canal." *Times*, July 30, 1859, 12.

⁵⁶ The process by which one ties up a narrowboat for the night; docking.

population of workers. Therefore, the phrase “respectable” is used intentionally to emphasize the dichotomy between these shouting bathers and the residents of this high-class neighborhood.

From this quote it is also apparent that Paterfamilias has called upon the police to stop this “nuisance” multiple times. To Paterfamilias’ dismay, they do very little. This lack of action relates to the complex legacy of ownership and responsibility of the Regent’s Canal as a mixed-use space. Built by the Regent’s Canal Company,⁵⁷ there was some degree of ownership and responsibility back in 1820. However, this legacy of ownership quickly became a gray area as home owners began to feel as if they should control the sections of canal that ran through their property. These questions of property rights are not relevant when discussing other modes of transportation used in later stages of the industrial transition. One is not able to claim that the railway tracks behind their house are part of their property. They are clearly the responsibility and under the jurisdiction of a railway line. However, the fact that individuals such as Paterfamilias felt that the Regent’s was part of their private outdoor spaces complicated the lines of responsibility and ownership. When narrowboaters were bathing in the canal, the man who wrote this complaint may not have been able to fish in the body of water that he viewed as an asset of his home. These questions of responsibility, rights, and ownership along the Regent’s highlight the ways in which the dual-nature of this early industrial structure caused complications.

How did this carefully planned structure named after the King Regent himself become a sight of such confusion and conflict four short decades after its conception? The answer lies back in the faults of John Nash as a designer. John Nash had a tendency to ignore the social use of spaces he could not control in his projects.⁵⁸ Examining Nash’s pattern of planning flaws in this

⁵⁷ Because of COVID-19 I have been unable to receive the minutes of the Regent’s Canal Company from the National Archive in London. I apologize for the lack of specific information.

⁵⁸ Laurel Flinn, “Social and Spatial Politics in the Construction of Regent Street,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (April 2012): 364-390.

fashion helps us understand why these unintended uses of the canal created problems such as the one brought up by Paterfamilias. Although John Nash and the Regent's Canal Company may have planned for certain areas, such as the length of the canal that ran through Regent's Park that is shown below, to be used as sites of high-class leisure, he failed to see that he could not avoid industrial uses from manifesting in the very same spaces. John Nash did not anticipate the agency non-elite Londoners would have to interact with the Regent's as they pleased.

Regent's Park

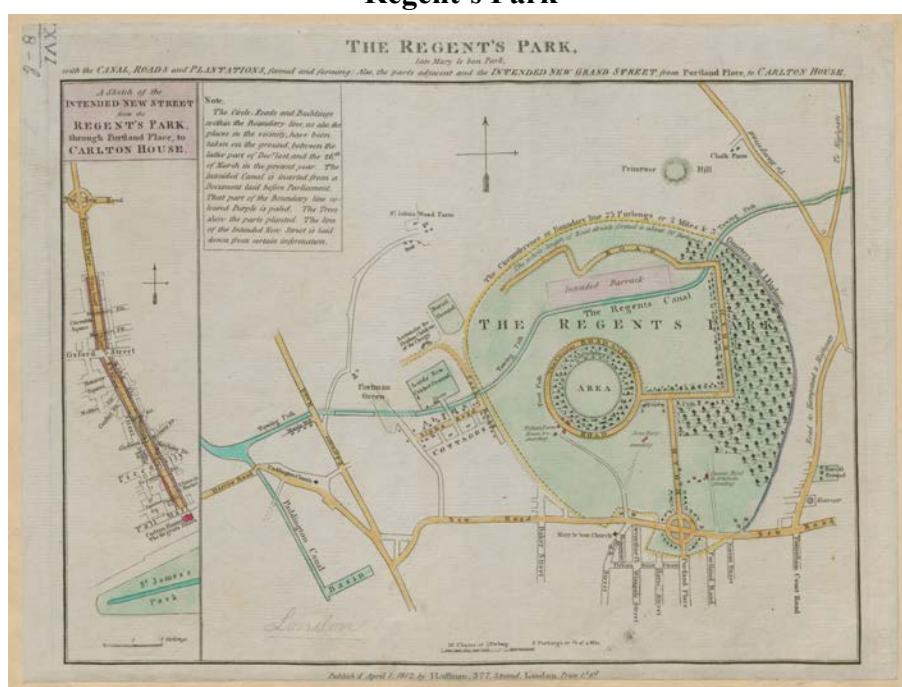


Fig 7: John Nash. *The Regent's Park; late Mary le bon Park, with the Canal Roads and Plantations, formed and forming: Also the parts adjacent and the Intended new grand street, from Portland Place, to Carlton House, 1812, map, The British Library*
<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/plan-of-regents-park#>

This 1812 map made as part of Nash's proposal shows just how thoroughly every piece of Regent's Park was planned out. Unlike other leisure spaces of the time, this proposal is far more than just a park. It also includes a proposed road, canal, and residential area. Designed together, these structures were planned to control the movement of individuals interacting with this area. The new road circling the outside of this green space was meant to accommodate the

majority of the traffic around the park. Several natural outcroppings and buildings were removed to make sure that individuals and carriages could move about the perimeter at optimal speeds. Nash attempted to create “arteries” by which he could control the flow of bodies to ultimately keep the park a sight of tranquil leisure. In contrast to the ring, the canal cuts directly through the park. Its path was altered several different times during the designing process as Nash tried to plan how it would be least disruptive to his planned belt of movement around Regent’s Park.⁵⁹

Crossing the northern half of the park, this section of the Regent’s Canal was supposed to be a site of beauty. To Nash’s disappointment the canal ended up bringing not only working-class narrowboaters through his idealized space of high-class leisure but also, waste. In the 1880s, the separation of the industrial and green portion of the canal became even weaker as the pollution from the aforementioned basins found their way into Regent’s Park and residential areas along the canal. An observation from the local Marylebone authorities in an issue from *The Times* from July 1883 reports that they had:

found the dead bodies of animals that had been allowed to float for some time. About ten yards east from Primrose-hill bridge there was a very offensive deposit of black mud 3ft in depth of which samples were taken. He had examined the water chemically and found it five or six times more impure than the Thames.⁶⁰

The medium of water meant that the pollution from the industrial production on the basins of the canal quickly disseminated throughout the entirety of the waterway. Thick sludge and mud was found in the residential areas and parks that quickly became a health concern. A passage written just two months later from the *British Medical Journal* again calls attention to the condition of the Regent’s Canal which, “[had] again become a subject of public discussion, and already letters [had] appeared attributing to it the present outbreak of fever in North London.”⁶¹ Not only did

⁵⁹ Sennett, Richard. *Flesh and Stone*. 1994.

⁶⁰ "The Regent’s Canal.- In consequence of serious." *Times*, July 26, 1883, 7. *The Times Digital Archive*.

⁶¹ "The Regent's Canal." *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1186 (1883): 589.

Nash's ignorance cause social tensions, his failure to understand how water would disseminate pollution throughout the entirety of the canal also likely caused an outbreak of fever. His oversights turned this green space which was supposed to alleviate the ailments of industrialization into a place that negatively affected the health of Londoners.

The pollution of the waterbody itself is a reflection of just how intertwined these intentionally separated zones were. The report from the British medical journal states that some of the pollution was from the dumping of waste from the zoological gardens in Regent's Park. The above quoted report from *The Times* says the pollution by Marylebone park was largely also natural, resulting from dead animals. In contrast, another complaint from *The Times* in 1883 gets deeper into the sources of this pollution writing that at these basins, just blocks away from residential areas, there is a, "heavy fetid smell" that, "proceeds from these fermenting masses of foul liquid, and differs from ordinary bad smells, if carefully noticed, in possessing a peculiar sourness." Once these "masses of foul liquid" dries it, "still possesses a very unpleasant odours and the canal boats containing it, if detained anywhere at tunnels, locks, or at night, must not be the most pleasant [to] neighbors."⁶² Even those who didn't live directly near the canal at the time of this observance seems to not be able to escape the smell as:

The fermenting mass is allowed to drain into the sewers, and in dry weather, when the thick ozzings of these docks necessarily lodge along the course of the drains, a foul, sour air, similar to that which pervades the atmosphere from Edgware-road to Paddington Station, finds its way through the sinks and drains into nearly every house in the district.⁶³

Industry had changed since the 1810's. Railways were now lining the banks of the canal and narrowboats, which were formally pulled by horses, were beginning to instead be powered by coal and steam. The result was a degree of industrial waste which the canal was not built to support. This black sludge which "preaved[ed] the atmosphere from Edgware-road to Paddington

⁶² "Supply of Water to the Metropolis." *Athenaeum* (London, England: 1830), no. 1195 (1850): 998-99.

⁶³ Ibid.

Station"⁶⁴ became a smelly nuisance for canal workers, private residences, and even those far from the banks of the Regent's alike. The pollution present in the later half of the 19th century is the physical manifestation of both the poor planning of Nash and the transition to new modes of industrial transportation.

The Boys' Canal

Narrowboaters were not the only group of individuals who utilized the banks of the canal in unintended ways. A common character among these polluted waterways were the "boys" of the Regent's Canal. The everyday rituals of London's working class and poor also "blurred" these lines of industry and leisure. The everydayness of these instances have made it so there is not an abundance of sources from the 19th century that capture these behaviors. One of the few that depicts these unplanned scenes of working-class leisure on the Regent's Canal is an article titled "Through London by Canal" that was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* on December 1st, 1884. The writer, a man named Benjamin Ellis Martin, travels the entirety of the Regent's Canal and describes what he sees along the way. After exiting Regent's Park he writes:

Boys! No picture of the canal would be complete without them. 'Men may come and men may go;' the canal may change its character in each new quarter through which it passes; but the Boy remains, always the same, all along its course, playing on its tow-path, basking on its banks, hanging over its bridges, climbing its walls.⁶⁵

Writing in the 1880s, he was describing the era of dynamic change that the Regent's Canal, and more broadly all canals, experienced after the arrival of railroads that will be explored further in the next chapter. Martin expresses how despite the economic and physical instability of the Regent's in this moment, the social uses, specifically those of the youth, remained unchanged.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 865-866.

Furthermore, the towpaths and water of the canal remained the backyards of these children living in “shabby brick tenements” that were “directly on the canal.”⁶⁶

Although the wealth of these boys’ families were not clearly stated, one can assume Martin observed poorer children as he writes, “They are not Good Boys; not nice clean boys with shiny hats, and sound boots, and starched collars over their jaunty jackets” ... “This one never wore a collar nor owned a whole pair of shoes: sometimes he is enshrouded in a dilapidated jacket a world too big for him.”⁶⁷ Martin’s text demonstrates that the “boys” who used the space of the canal were poor and working-class. This “not good boy” then becomes a character that is written to embody this greater group of children. “He displays with pride a large bottle full of dirty water, in which gasp three or four microscopic fish, flabby and moribund. ‘Them’s tiddlers, they is. *Wot* are they good for? Oh, we keeps ‘em a long time.’ ... “When he is not fishing he is playing in the water” ... “or her wades in up to his thighs, his trousers tucked carefully up only to his knees, dragging after him a pleasure boat.”⁶⁸ Although this boy is not real, this passage gives the reader insight into what this culture of community canal use was like. The joy this boy experiences in the murky waters of the Regent’s had no intended place on these industrial towpaths.

Nash’s planned scenes of leisure were specific to the wealthier classes and specific to green spaces like Regent’s Park. Leisure was not necessarily supposed to be for the poor and furthermore, there was no planned room for this young boy and the “tiddlers” he plays with on this section of the canal. Everyday actions of working-class and poor Londonders like this imaginary boy complicated Nash’s ideas of separation as they interacted with the Regent’s Canal in ways that made its towpaths neither industrious nor a formal site of leisure. Instead, in this

⁶⁶ Martin “London by Canal, Through.” 859.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 866.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

moment captured by Benjamin Martin, the Regent's is a playground of a young boy who gives this space its own unique value.

The lived reality of the Regent's Canal was radically different than the imagined body of water Nash, the Company, and the Prince Regent planned. They planned a canal for the London they were living in at the time and did not look towards the future, what it may hold, or the agency individuals would have in interacting with spaces as they wished. The working-class and poor populations of London interacted with the canal as a site of leisure in areas that were never intended to be used in that fashion, the mobility of the narrowboat families disrupted these planned class-separations, and the movement of water brought the physical waste of industrialism to the planned spaces of beauty and high-society such as Regent's Park. The Regent's Canal and the people who interacted with it were unable to be controlled.

Looking back to the 1812 source written about the proposal of the Regent's Canal, all of these unplanned uses and the issues they created were oversights of obvious problems that had been brought to John Nash and the Company's attention. The 1812 pamphlet was printed for John Hatchard, the owner of a popular bookshop in Piccadilly, London. We can assume Nash had access to this information as the pamphlet was made for distribution and to be read by the public. The "300 acres" of still water *did* create environmental and health problems, the "introduction of bargemen" onto private lands *did* cause conflicts as demonstrated by the Paterfamilias incident, and the general constant movement of people along and to the canal brought previously separated populations uncomfortably close together. Narrowboaters, and life on the canal as a whole, rapidly gained an unsavory reputation as the agency of working-class and poor individuals disintegrated these lines of spatial and social separation.

Chapter 3: “Water Gypsies,” and Railways; Narrowboaters After the End of the

Golden-Age



Fig 8. Rail station by the banks on the Regent's canal in Regent's park. Likely late 19th century London, The London Canal Museum, London.

“I advocate [for] the entire prohibition of women and children living and working on canal boats,”⁶⁹ wrote George Smith (of Coalville) in 1875. His words were indicative of a new social reform movement that he was spearheading. This movement would threaten to tear the fabric of the narrowboat community and families apart. Smith advocated for this prohibition as decades of negative stereotypes against narrowboaters and a general sense of social unrest intensified against the backdrop of a dying industry.

In the mid-19th century, “canal-mania” was quickly fading as the United Kingdom transitioned into a period of rapid construction similarly dubbed “railway-mania.” This new “mania” would ultimately lead to the end of the age of canals and drastically change the lives of narrowboaters forever.⁷⁰ During this period of time, several different companies tried to turn the Regent’s Canal into a railway as it offered a direct passage through northern London. Investors

⁶⁹ George Smith, *Our Canal Population: the Sad Condition of the Women and Children, with Remedy; an Appeal to My Fellow Country Men and Women* (London, UK: Haughton and Co., 1875). 17.

⁷⁰ Railway mania technically refers to not only the sheer amount of rails built in the 1840’s but, also the stock market bubble created by this period of rapid construction and investment. There are some interesting economic comparisons to make between the two “manias” however, this will not be explored in this study as economics are not the focus of this thesis.

failed to raise enough money to do so. Instead, rail companies built stations like the one pictured above all along the banks of the canal. They stood as a stark reminder that the era of canal transportation was coming to a close as this far faster method of rail transit became more and more prominent. This chapter will explore how mounting social and economic tensions, tied to the rise of the rail industry, drastically changed the way canal families were allowed to exist and furthermore, how the Regent's Canal functioned as a whole. Nonetheless, these two new elements, rail competition and this era of reform, did not exist separately. This study argues that reform efforts were directed at canal workers with great intensity largely because the economy of London, and more broadly England as a whole, was transitioning away from canals, where these individuals lived and worked, and towards trains ultimately, making the workers themselves seem redundant and out of date. The narrowboaters became seen as a population in need of strategic assimilation. This was an intentional transition away from canals and towards a new form of industrial life, railways.

Floating Chapels; A London Initiative

The movement to reform the culture of those living and working on the canals was present in London long before it took hold elsewhere. In 1827, just seven years after the Regent's Canal was opened to the public, George Charles Smith (not to be confused George Smith (of Coalville)) of the Soldiers' and Seamens' Bethel Union opened the first floating chapel right by City Road Basin on the Regent's. These religious organizations sought to spread literacy, morality, and of course, Christianity to those involved with water trades such as sailors and soldiers. George Charles Smith was the first to create a floating chapel directed towards the narrowboaters or, bargemen specifically.⁷¹ At his institution, "boatmen's children could attend

⁷¹ Freer and Foster, *Canal Boatmen's Missions*. 13.

Sunday school[s] where they would receive religious instruction and be taught to read.”⁷² Not much was recorded about this first chapel except for the fact that it soon grew too small for the mass of narrowboaters and other individuals who wanted to take advantage of the free services being offered.⁷³ Before the end of the 19th century five chapels, broadly called boatmen's missions, had been established all across the length of the Regent’s Canal.⁷⁴

These narrowboat-focused religious organizations spread from London to the rest of the U.K. canal system before the turn of the 20th century. London had six of these chapels, making it not only the city with the first floating chapel, but also the city possessing the second most of these institutions. The city of Birmingham had seven locations; however, it also possessed 100 miles of canals, the most in all of Europe.⁷⁵ London had a disproportionate number of boatmen’s missions considering the fact that the Regent’s was and still is less than ten miles long. There was a London-specific focus to this network of organizations. Those who invested time and money into floating chapels specifically valued the Christianization of narrowboaters in the city of London. Additionally, the early presence of these chapels implies that narrowboaters were considered outsiders in need of some sort of reform in London far before these efforts were popularized throughout the rest of the country. Only seven years after the Regent’s was opened, people were already trying to “better” those who lived and worked on this waterway.

The desire religious organizations felt to reform these individuals along the banks of the Regent’s likely relates to the spatial problems that arose from the original planned physical and social separation of industry and leisure on the canal. The “blurring” of these sections made the presence of narrowboaters a constant source of conflict in the backyards of the permanent

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ The history of these chapels is really fascinating. Unfortunately, I will not be able to get into much detail during this study. For more information I suggest reading Wendy Freer and Gill Foster’s *Canal Boatmen's Missions*.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 62.

residents of London and the spaces of leisure they frequented. They moved through and existed in spaces the working class was not expected to be in. This population was more noticeable compared to the greater British working class who were largely sequestered in factories and the poorer boroughs of the city. Thus, in London, organizations like George Charles Smith's existed to Christianize and alter this population of misfits into "proper" British individuals.

The efforts to reform the lives of narrowboaters all began or were centered around London. However, because this population was semi-nomadic, as this chapter continues to discuss this group of individuals, it will be hard to speak specifically of London. Nonetheless, Victorian reformers lived, worked, and were in contact with politics in this city making the narrowboaters' presence in London specifically relevant both politically and culturally. The logistical and social problems created by planning oversights made by Nash and the Regent's Canal Company created spatial conflict and issues that affected the daily lives of Londoners throughout the city. Thus, these efforts to reform and change this population are all intertwined with this urban center and its residents. After all, Londoners were the first to commit resources and time to alter the lives of bargemen and their families at George Charles Smith's floating chapel on City Road Basin where narrowboaters were given the opportunity to come into contact with Christianity, education, and sobriety.

The Victorian Era and Reform

Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in the year 1837 and began a reign of liberal social reform for working-class and poor populations. These reforms manifested in ways that monitored working-poor individuals in urban centers through physical locations. These values had been popularized by the Reform Act passed five years earlier which was the product of the Methodist, Evangelical, and Church of England's desire to achieve higher "moral" (religious)

standards throughout all levels of British society. Victorians sought to assist poor and working-class people through religion, education, democracy, and sobriety. One of the more infamous products of these reform efforts was the establishment of workhouses;⁷⁶ places where poor individuals, disabled people, the sick, elderly, orphans, abandoned children, and unmarried adult women were given access to basic necessities such as shelter, food, and clothing in return for hard labor.⁷⁷ These institutions, dubbed “prisons for the poor”⁷⁸ by Richard Oastler, a well known radical and opposer of Victorian reform efforts, were intentionally designed as places of squalor so only those who were truly desperate would utilize these services. Pamphlets were published against these inhumane conditions and the poor that the workhouses were designed to assist participated in countless demonstrations and riots against the “threat” of the workhouse.⁷⁹

The establishment of these institutions meant that reformers were able to maintain relative control over the working class and poor. These people were subject to strict codes of conduct in the workhouse and the general working population was able to be reformed via factory regulation such as mandatory public schooling, the introduction of religious texts into working-class household life, limited hours, and child labor laws.⁸⁰ These reform efforts were tied to a physical location. Thus, the narrowboaters and their families were not affected by these initial reform efforts as their labor and living-conditions took place outside the main institutions through which Victorian reformers exercised their policies and efforts.

⁷⁶ Workhouses were technically established in 1834 under the Poor Law three years before Victoria took the throne. However, they are often characterized by this time period as they are often referred to as “Victorian Workhouses.”

⁷⁷ Higginbotham, Peter. “The New Poor Law.” *The Workhouse; The Story of an Institution...* Accessed April 9, 2021. <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/newpoorlaw.shtml>.

⁷⁸ Marcus, *The Book of Murder!: Vade-Mecum for the Commissioners and Guardians of the New Poor Law throughout Great Britain and Ireland: Being an Exact Reprint of the Infamous Essay on the Possibility of Limiting Populousness: with a Refutation of the Malthusian Doctrine* (London, UK: Printed by J. Hill, and now re-printed for the instruction of the labourer, by W. Dugdale, 1839) 4.

⁷⁹ David R. Green, “Pauper Protests: Power and Resistance in Early Nineteenth-Century London Workhouses,” *Social History* 31, no. 2 (May 2006): 137-15.

⁸⁰ “Workhouse Voices,” The National Archives (The National Archives, October 20, 2020), <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/workhouse-voices/>.

The bargemen and their families were a group of working-poor individuals who did not fit into Victorian reformers' new idealized population of morally righteous and well-educated working-class and poor Londoners. Furthermore, they posed additional challenges to developing urban systems as their travelling lifestyle made it nearly impossible to get any complete recorded information about their population. Another benefit the workhouses and factories offered to Victorian England was the ability to enroll working-class and poor individuals in systems where they could be accounted for through censuses and other forms of demographic data collections/records. As narrowboaters were not part of either of these institutions or, in many cases tied to a location at all, they were unable to participate in education programs, religious organizations, and were generally an inconsistency in all censuses and other formal records. This inability to “fit” was only worsened by the advancement of the rail industry.

Railway Competition

Richard Trevithick invented the Steam Locomotive in 1802, several years before plans for the Regent’s Canal were officially made. Smaller private railways existed all over the U.K. after the mid-1810s however, they provided no competition to the canal network as they were very disconnected and only appropriate for local use.⁸¹ This all changed in the period of time between 1840 and 1850. During this decade of “mania” 10,000 plus km of railway tracks were rapidly constructed to connect these previously isolated smaller rail lines. Between just the years of 1844 and 1846 alone, 10,010 km of track were built that today make up over half of the 18,000 km of tracks that form the modern rail network of the U.K.. Transportation of goods via. trains quickly began to reduce the popularity of the canal-transit industry as they were able to carry more goods than narrowboats, travel farther, faster, and carry more people. Those who previously invested in canals were now investing in the transportation mode of the future, steam

⁸¹ Porter, *London: a Social History*. 197-198.

locomotives. In response, canal companies had to significantly decrease their prices which not only made the industry as a whole less profitable but also decreased the quality of pay, and therefore, life for those who worked on the canals.⁸²

Railways did not immediately replace canals. There were several decades when the two coexisted as means of industrial transportation. According to an 1883 report, in the year 1852 23,000 tons of coal were carried to London via. canals, 317,000 tons of coal came to the city by rail, and 3,330,000 came from sea vessels. In 1882, three decades later, only 8,000 tons of coal were brought to London by canal, 3,826,000 tons were brought by sea, and railway's share skyrocketed to 6,750,000 tons of coal. Railways became not only the main method of inland transportation but also, the main mode of industrial transit in general.⁸³ Nonetheless, the canals were not completely replaced or erased. Several inland waterways, including the Regent's and the Grand Junction Canal, remained relatively unaltered and were still used for the private transportation of goods and people up until 1948 when the remaining canals were nationalized during WWII. However, the culture and general daily lives of those living and working on the canals was systematically altered through bureaucracy, religion, and formal legislation. This began with George Charles Smith's floating chapels. Unlike these institutions, Victorian reformers after George Smith (of Coalville) did not grant the narrowboaters any agency and instead sought more forceful routes of change.

Non-British Travelers

The speed at which trains could travel meant that journeys that previously took multiple days could now be made in time for the patriarch of a family to return home for dinner. As London's perception of what a transit worker should be changed, the bargemen and his families

⁸² B. R. Mitchell, "The Coming of the Railway and United Kingdom Economic Growth," *The Journal of Economic History* 24, no. 3 (September 1964): 315-336.

⁸³ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 87.

became othered in British society to such an extent that they were no longer considered British. This other-ness is reflected in historic depictions and the 19th-century reputation that canal workers had. In 1950, influential canal historian L.T.C. Rolt wrote about the first narrowboaters after the Bridgewater Canal was completed stating that, “the new occupation demanded no knowledge of navigation; on the contrary it involved the management of horses in which the gypsy excelled. Moreover, he could take his wife and children with him as he had always been accustomed.”⁸⁴ This statement draws upon the false racial origin-theory of those living and working on the canals. The belief that narrowboaters came from nomadic populations in Eastern Europe has been around since the early 19th century and lasted many decades. Census data examining surnames proves that only a handful of narrowboaters in all of England could potentially be of Romani descent, disapproving the idea that there was any geographic difference between the origin of these individuals and the general population of those living and working in England.⁸⁵ The only thing that separated these people from the rest of the British working class was their cultural differences and tendency to live on boats.

Nonetheless, the nomadic-ness of this population is not so black and white. Some families lived, worked together, and participated in the unique culture explored in the last chapter from the very beginning of the canal system. However, many other families maintained a separate fixed house and rented a narrowboat for transportation up until the period of rail-mania. These bargmen would only sleep on their vessels during longer journeys. The nomadic aspect of the canals became far more present after canal prices were slashed due to railway competition. Men working on the narrowboats could no longer afford to maintain their vessel and house thus, they were forced to take their family aboard with them and participate in a way of life that would

⁸⁴ L.T. C. Rolt, *The Inland Waterways of England* (London, UK: Allen and Unwin., 1979) 174.

⁸⁵ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*, Appendix I; *Notes on the registers of boats and barges, 1795 -gypsy names.*

make reformers and the general public uneasy.⁸⁶ Rail competition made these nomadic families more present than ever before on the banks of the Regent's and canals across the country.



Fig 9. Water drinking can hand-painted in 1896, Northampton Museum, Northampton. Photographed by Tony Lewery in Tony Lewery, *Rose, Castle and Canal*. Fig 1, Pp. 44.

The disdain felt towards the narrowboaters can be seen in the reception of these workers' distinct artistic style called Castle and Rose. Similar to the narrowboats, this style is characterized by colorful and intricate designs that often displayed, as its title implies, castles and flowers. These motifs were used to decorate virtually every surface and object aboard the boats including the water pitcher pictured above. While working for Charles Dickens' publication *Household Worlds* in 1858, John Hollingshead⁸⁷ noted this specific practice writing that, "the boatman lavishes all his taste: all his rude, uncultivated love for the fine arts, upon the external and internal ornaments of his floating home."⁸⁸ Today, historians such as Harry Hanson, believe

⁸⁶ Freer and Foster, *Canal Boatmen's Missions*. 3.

⁸⁷ 19th-century British journalist originally from the borough of Hoxton, London.

⁸⁸ John Hollingshead, "On The Canal," *Household Worlds*, Sept. 1858 (Internet Archive) 318.

that this artistic practice naturally developed as families began to spend more time on the narrowboats in the latter half of the 19th century as a way to decorate their homes.⁸⁹ However, earlier origin theories of the Castle and Rose style tell a very different story.



Fig 10. Decorating a narrow boat, Boat Maintenance Braunston Dock
in L.T. C. Rolt, *The Inland Waterways of England*. Plate 36.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries many people believed that this art style further proved the fact that narrowboaters were from Eastern Europe. The bright colors, bold lines, and intricate floral details paired with the nomadic life-style of the narrowboaters led individuals to believe the theory that these people were of Romani descent.⁹⁰ This belief, specifically in the later half of the 19th century can be attributed to the general social perception of Romani people at the time, the stereotypes assigned to the population of canal boaters, and the aforementioned reform efforts of Victorian England. During this time period the British were both fascinated with and feared the presence of nomadic Eastern European populations in their lands specifically, those of Romani descent. An ngram search reveals that the use of the term “gypsy” grew seven

⁸⁹ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*.168.

⁹⁰ Tony Lewery, “Rose, Castle and Canal: An Introduction to the Folk Art of English Narrow Canal Boats,” *Folklore* 106, no. 1-2 (1995): 57-58.

fold from the year 1840 to 1899. This population became conniving, mysterious, dangerous, and exotic figures in influential books such as Jane Austen's *Emma*, Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

In 1816, John Hoyland, a Quaker author, published *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of The Gypsies; Designed to Develop The Origin of this Singular People, and to Promote the Amelioration of the Condition*. This survey was a compilation of cultural and scientific claims that acted as one of the earliest British calls to change “the very destitute and abject condition of the Gypsey race,”⁹¹ through forced education and assimilation. Hoyland states that his source material for this survey comes from observations in the counties of Northampton, Bedford, and Herts. Surprisingly, the only geographic location that Hoyland writes a whole section about is London which lies outside of these specified counties. The presence of section five, “*The Present State of Gypsies in and about London*,” implies that the city of London was important to the education and assimilation efforts of “gypsy-travellers”.⁹² The presence of this chapter can be attributed to the cultural and political importance of the city of London. A central goal of this survey and others of its kind that sought to remedy the conditions of specific populations was to appeal to parliament. There were political gains to be made from focusing on London.

Although there was a small number of Romani individuals who seasonally migrated in and out of the city, the majority of the people who reformers such as John Hoyland wanted to forcefully educate were not actually Romani people but, instead other casual laborers who participated in seasonal migratory labor. This conflation of the two is where the term

⁹¹ David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 1.

⁹² John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gypsies Designed to Develop the Origin of This Singular People, and to Promote the Amelioration of Their Condition* (York, UK: Printed for the author, 1816) 175 - 197.

“gypsy-traveller” comes from. In *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society*, David Mayhall discusses how the otherness of those dubbed “Gypsies” truly relates to the “the relationship between travellers and the structures and mechanisms of a developing, capitalist state.”⁹³ This fear and fascination with those who lived nomadic lives in and around London had very little to do with race but instead, “the role of travellers as a mobile labor force and the pressure for change from modernising influences.”⁹⁴ The city of London no longer needed those in the transportation industry to be transitory figures in their economy.

It is because of this lack of necessity for nomadic workers that narrowboaters were categorized as of Romani descent. Interestingly, there seemed to be some acknowledgement that this population was different than the general Romani population Victorian England was fascinated with. The term often used specifically to refer to those who worked and lived on the British canals was “Water Gypsy” as if this population required some sort of modifier.⁹⁵ This term will be used throughout the rest of this study to reflect how this population was discussed and perceived in 19th-century England. It should not be seen as an attempt to make any false racial connections or claims between/about individuals of Romani descent and canal workers or as a derogatory term for those of Romani descent themselves.

A Vulgar Reputation

The Castle and Rose art style and the problematic racial theories formed around it were not the only attributes of the narrowboaters that the general British public was displeased with. Their language, drinking, familial ways of life, and religious engagement all became serious concerns to Victorian reformers. As mentioned in chapter two, canal workers often filled gaps in their vocabulary with profanity and other swears. Returning to the bathing incident explored

⁹³ Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society*. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁵ Rolt, *The Inland Waterways of England*. 176.

then, the anonymous complainer wrote that narrowboaters, “make use of the most horrid oaths and obscene language, accompanied by gestures of the most horrible nature.”⁹⁶ Their language was shocking to the average Londoner and this reputation was not helped by their tendency to drink. A London factory inspector noted that, “the social life of the barge population is most degraded. Both men and women drink frequently to excess.”⁹⁷ The British public grew not only displeased with but also concerned about how these people were living their lives and the disruption and even potentially danger they could present to the rest of London.

Victorian authors often used the trope of “water gypsies” and their backwards ways of life to teach moral lessons through the medium of children’s books. Several of these works were published and circulated throughout the late 19th century including *Water Gypsies (The Adventures of Tag, Rag and Bobtail)* from 1878, *Water Waifs* from 1882, and *Waif and Gipsy* from 1900. *Waif and Gipsy’s* inside cover states that it was printed for the London Sunday School Union. Thus, we can assume this was used to educate children through the church.

The book begins in a workhouse when a wealthy woman, Mrs. Stirling, sees, “a neat tidy lassie, with a very bright face”⁹⁸ and decides to take her on as a servant. This “lassie” is the protagonist of the story, a *waif*,⁹⁹ by the name of Nancy. After being caught wearing the lady of the house’s clothing Nancy runs away out of embarrassment and finds herself on the banks of a canal.¹⁰⁰ Here she encounters a bargeman by the name of Mike who had, “arrived late in the evening [and] was moored just below the village” where he had, “only remained long enough to go up into the village and lay in a store of drink” and steal a dog.¹⁰¹ Nancy approaches Mike

⁹⁶ Paterfamilias. "Bathing In The Regent's Canal."

⁹⁷ Harry Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 128.

⁹⁸ A. D. Philps, *Waif and Gipsy* (London, UK: Sunday School Union, 1900) 9.

⁹⁹ A poor abandoned child.

¹⁰⁰ It is not specified which canal the story takes place on however, as this book was for London Sunday Schools, we can assume some inspiration was drawn from the Regent’s or Grand Junction Canal.

¹⁰¹ A. D. Philps, *Waif and Gipsy*. 44-45.

asking him to take her to London or, as he calls it “Lunnon.” Mike and his wife Sal only agree to take Nancy aboard after she agrees to pay them all four shillings she has to her name. The author writes, “‘Has she got any money?’ was Sal’s reply, to whom money meant drink - the only pleasure she knew.”¹⁰² The author, Mrs. A.D. Philps,¹⁰³ is creating characters that embody the poverty, drunkenness, and crime that was associated with narrowboaters during the later half of the 19th century.

The story then returns to the comfortable home of Mrs. Stirling who goes to Nancy’s door to “call her and give her a kind word of encouragement.”¹⁰⁴ The lady of the house frets over Nancy’s well-being and finds “comfort” in the fact that, “she could still pray for the wanderer and commit her to God, asking that she might be kept from harm and evil, and that one day she might be brought back.”¹⁰⁵ Mrs. Stirling is portrayed as a good Christian and forgiving figure in contrast to the other matriarch of the story, Sal. Furthermore, Mike is described as “a stranger” who had moved in and out of Mrs. Stirling’s village in just a night.¹⁰⁶ This passage is strikingly similar to the earlier explored sixth and twelfth concerns brought up in the aforementioned source *Brief Remarks on the Proposed Regent’s Canal* which respectively question, “the introducing bargemen and others into lands heretofore private,” and “the insecurity to the public, from persons passing through a line of country for nine miles at all times of the night.”¹⁰⁷ Mrs. A.D. Philp’s tale is the manifestation of these fears.

¹⁰² Ibid., 46.

¹⁰³ I have not been able to find any information about who Mrs. A.D. Philps was. Nonetheless, since this was written for Sunday Schools, it can be assumed that she was associated with the Church.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁷ Observer, “Brief Remarks on the Proposed Regent’s Canal.” 1812.

George Smith of Coalville and the Drunken Family Boat

Books like *Waif and Gipsy* disseminated these negative associations throughout British society and inspired George Smith (of Coalville) to “remedy” their condition. Smith was the son of a poor bricklayer in the midlands. At the age of seven he was sent to work at the brickyards where he witnessed the daily mistreatment and exploitation of young children for industrial production. This traumatic experience motivated him to launch his first of many “crusades” against the conditions of the British working class with his 1871 pamphlet titled, *The Cry of the Children from the Brickyards of England*.¹⁰⁸ This pamphlet was very influential and led to the passage of the Factory (Brick and Tile Yards Extension) Act of 1871 which extended the protection of workers to children laboring in the brickyards.¹⁰⁹

According to Smith’s biographer Edwin Hodder,¹¹⁰ Smith was a peculiar man who often had a hard time distinguishing his “dreams”¹¹¹ from reality. After the success of his pamphlet and the fame/recognition that came with it he grew to believe that he was chosen by God to progress the British working class and poor towards moral righteousness and religion. George Smith (of Coalville) felt that all of England was watching and expecting him to embark on another of his “crusades.” The narrowboaters were already part of an extensive Christianization effort via floating chapels and had been causing social tension in the city of London for nearly half a century. They were an obvious target. George Smith (of Coalville) launched his “crusade” against the narrowboaters in 1874 in London. He successfully captured the hearts and minds of the British public by distributing articles about the state of children on the canals to readers in the

¹⁰⁸ George Smith, *The Cry of the Children from the Brickyards of England: a Statement and Appeal, with Remedy* (London, UK: Marshall Simpkin, 1879).

¹⁰⁹ Roy M. MacLeod, “Social Policy and the ‘Floating Population’. The Administration of the Canal Boats Acts 1877-1899,” *Past and Present* 35, no. 1 (December 1966): 107.

¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, Edwin Hodder’s work *George Smith (of Coalville): The Story of an Enthusiast* is currently out of print. However, Hanson’s work contains details from this source that are used to inform this section.

¹¹¹ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 120.

city. He would go on to majorly influence countless negative stereotypes and portrayals of those living and working on the canals up through the beginning of WW1.¹¹² Perhaps it was the sheer visibility of this population and pre existing spatial problems they created in London that enticed him to pursue the narrowboaters. Smith's work will be used to contextualize Mrs. A.D. Philp's text to ultimately understand who these individuals were thought to be and who they actually were.¹¹³¹¹⁴

In 1878 Smith published a collection of work pertaining to the narrowboaters in his text *Our Canal Population* which states that:

The boater has not been taught that it is his duty to do something for his country. His idea of life rises no higher than that of animals. They eat together, sleep together, drink together, live together, and die together in these filthy places, and that, according to their notion, is the beginning and end of life; nobody cares for them, and they care for nobody.¹¹⁵

In this quote he establishes the narrowboaters as a less than human population that exists outside of British society and must be assimilated into the systems and ways of life of England. His work centers the flaws of this population around the idea of the family boat, religion/education, and the use of liquor. It has been rightfully noted that much of the data his work contains contradicts census records from the time and was likely highly exaggerated.¹¹⁶ However, Smith's work was influential and not only continued to push the social narrative that narrowboaters were deviant drunks but also shaped the ways in which official action was taken against these individuals. Thus, even his inaccuracies are highly relevant to his historic narrative.

¹¹² Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 139.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹⁴ MacLeod, "Social Policy and the 'Floating Population'". 106-107.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Our Canal Population*. 9.

¹¹⁶ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 123.

The most central focus in Smith's writing is how the family dynamic is distorted on the narrowboats specifically; the living conditions, lives of women, and treatment of children. These concerns were also expressed in *Waif and Gipsy* when Philp's writes:

A faint wheezing cry called [Nancy's] attention, and she went inside the cabin to see whence it arose. There on a bundle of rugs lay a puny baby of eighteen months, though it hardly looked as many weeks old. Tenderly, she lifted it and carried it to the light. It was no new work to her to handle sickly babies, and a pitying love sprang up in her heart as she saw the well-known pinched look so familiar in the faces of little ones whose mothers are slaves to the drink.¹¹⁷

This passage not only paints Sal as an alcoholic but also paints the population of those living and working on the canal as unfit to raise children. This idea partially came from rightful concerns about the overcrowding of narrowboats. Some families that lived on these barges had nine or so people, including children, living in spaces designed for two adults and two small kids.¹¹⁸¹¹⁹

However, many families living on narrowboats did not live in overcrowded conditions and raised children who went on to fondly tell tales of living on these vessels. These potentially exaggerated accounts of the poor conditions of the spaces these families lived in also arose from their lack of Christianity, literacy, and this aforementioned association this population had with alcoholism.

These familial concerns are present in George Smith (Of Coalville)'s work. In *Our Canal Population* to rally the support of parliament over the well-being of children on board he wrote that he often witnessed, "drunkenness, filthiness, cruelty, selfish idleness at the cost of children" and proceeds to categorize the whole adult population as, "utterly ignorant, as a very large portion of them are, of all religious knowledge, wholly without instruction, coarse and brutal in manner, and entirely given up to the vilest debauchery and the grossest passions" to question if, "the children of such parents are ever likely to grow into anything better?"¹²⁰ Victorian reformers

¹¹⁷ Philps, *Waif and Gipsy*. 58.

¹¹⁸ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*, 126.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Appendix II.

¹²⁰ Smith, *Our Canal Population*. 41.

felt as if the drunkenness and lack of religion present in the narrowboat community made them unfit to raise children. We will see how the character of Milly, the baby found by Nancy, embodies these fears as Mrs. Philps' story progresses.

There is much debate over if narrowboaters were truly more drunk and vulgar than the rest of working-class England. There is some evidence that supports a higher rate of alcoholism among bargemen than other transportation workers. Although it is not clear what the sample size of this study was, a figure from the 55th report of the Registrar General in 1897 states that among general transport workers from 1890-1892 102 transportation workers died from alcoholism while among bargemen that number rose to 131.¹²¹ A potential explanation to this discrepancy is that by 1890 most transportation workers were employed by the railways. To work on a train one has to be sober, to steer a narrowboat one does not. Additionally, improvements in sewage systems and waste disposal meant that water quality was improving in London and many adults were able to hydrate with non-alcoholic beverages. Nonetheless, narrowboaters' nomadic-ness meant that they often did not have access to a tap and therefore, clean water. Canal water was not drinkable thus, many of them still hydrated primarily with alcoholic beverages while travelling. The population of transportation workers replacing the narrowboaters was far more sober and may have made the drinking habits of the narrowboaters more apparent to reformers and residents alike.¹²²

Mrs. A.D. Philps' work leans heavily into the idea of the drunk canal worker writing of Sal that, "drink had drowned the mother's love and made her more cruel than the 'beasts that perish.' When she could not get it she was more ill-tempered and provoking than when she was intoxicated."¹²³ Mike's love, on the other hand, was not droned by this same drink. He walks

¹²¹ Ibid., 134.

¹²² Hanson, *The Canal Boatmen*. 129.

¹²³ Philps, *Waif and Gipsy*. 77.

over to Nancy with Milly in his arms and asks, “What’s matter w’ the little un, Nance?”... “She do cry. I can’t a-bear to ‘ear ‘er - give ‘er to me,”... “I do b’lieve she’s ‘ungry. Let’s give her tea and a drop o’gin; that quietens her off soonest of anything.”¹²⁴ Nancy tells him that liquor is poisonous for babies and he should be feeding her “sop” instead. This scene is a moment in which the relationship between Milly, Mike, Nancy, and Sal shifts. Mike realizes, through Nancy, that his drinking has caused him to be a poor father and that he needs to better himself for Milly.

It is then revealed that the real reason she is crying is that she has an open and infected burn wound on her foot from when “in her drunken stupidity” Sal had burnt the baby on her coal stove and never tended to the wound.¹²⁵ Nancy tells Mike that the wound is infected and the baby is very sick. The only thing they can do is clean the wound, wrap it up and pray. The two pray together and Mike tells Nancy that, “If I knew how to pray I’d ask God to let me keep her.”¹²⁶ This scene paints Sal as the villain, a drunken mother who has hurt her baby and will not pray for her well being. Mike on the other hand, is given a redemption arc.

The vilification of Sal and the redemption of Mike relates back to another concern the Victorian reformers had with those who lived on the narrowboats; the presence of women working on the canals. Smith’s original allegations against the narrowboat way of life states that, “sixty per cent. are unmarried, but living as husbands and wives.”¹²⁷ He also records that he had witnessed, “boat-women strip and fight like men.”¹²⁸ The women of the narrowboats were seen as drastically different than the average Victorian woman. They are recorded as alcoholics, overly-aggressive, and generally unlady-like. The combination of work and home life aboard the narrowboats and the general presence of women in this very masculine and physical work force

¹²⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Smith, *Our Canal Population*. 95.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

disrupted the ideal family dynamic, thus making the “boat-women” even more of a social pariah than the rest of the narrowboat family. In *Waif and Gipsy*, Both Mike and Sal are alcoholics who neglect their child but Mike is able to be saved by Christianity and Sal is not because Mrs. A.D. Philps has decided that she is more at fault for this horrific home and the state of their child.

The Canal Boat Acts

Despite Nancy and Mike’s prayers, Milly dies.¹²⁹ This death is Mrs. A.D. Philp’s warning of what happens if the lives of narrowboaters are not regulated by either religious organizations or the government. Floating Chapels were places where narrowboaters could engage in Christianity if they wished to do so. However, A.D. Philps’ is conveying a point of view shared by George Smith (of Coalville) and other Victorian reformers. These people could not be trusted to choose to engage in religious practices and were instead in need of a forced intervention. In *Our Canal Population*, George Smith (of Coalville) demanded that parliament must take legislative action to “remedy” their “sad” condition.

Smith’s petition to Parliament was successful; just two years after his source was published, the First Canal Act was passed in August 1877. This act targeted the conditions aboard narrowboats and focused on the health and wellbeing of children by requiring all boats to be registered with and supervised by “registration authorities.”¹³⁰ These authorities were responsible for recording the amount of people on board and the age/sex of said individuals to ensure that boats were neither overcrowded nor unclean. Narrowboats were also now subject to frequent and random inspections from local sanitation authorities. Additionally, School

¹²⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹³⁰ The Act itself does not specify who or what these authorities were. I believe it was intentionally written as a somewhat vague position to allow the registration of narrowboaters associated with specific companies (ex. Pickfords) to be the responsibility of said companies.

Attendance Committees in the area boats were registered to were tasked with ensuring that every child of school-age on the barge was attending classes.¹³¹

The passing of The Canal Acts symbolized a massive expansion in the power the government could exercise over working-class and poor families. As discussed earlier, most Victorian reforms directed at this demographic were tied to the physical and public locations of factories and workhouses. These laws however, permitted government programs to physically enter the homes of a working-class population to control their family dynamic and way of life. A narrowboater's home could be visited by an inspector at any time without warning. During these checks, they could be forced to alter their home environment, risk losing their house as a whole, or have one of their own children taken away. The Canal Act of 1877 was the first time the British government exercised legislative control and reform over the family unit in the homes of the narrowboaters.

Public opinion on this first act was negative on both sides. *The Times* recorded that this act was far too invasive, writing that:

The floating home of the "bargee" is to be invaded. Its privacy is attacked. Its liberty appears doomed to pass away with a display of inquisitorial power such as was never before dreamt of by any man conducting his boat through the canals and canalised rivers of England.¹³²

Others felt as if women and children were not protected enough by this act. Most narrowboats were now registered and there were some standards that were supposed to be upheld.

Nonetheless, depending on the person inspecting the boat, material conditions did not change on board many of the barges. Some inspectors forced narrowboaters to follow these new standards and others did not. According to Hanson, one inspector by the Thames had recorded approving the conditions of hundreds of narrowboats despite never actually entering one of these vessels.¹³³

¹³¹ MacLeod, "Social Policy and the 'Floating Population'" 111.

¹³² "On the Second Reading in Commons," *The Times*, June 4, 1877.

¹³³ Hanson. *The Canal Boatmen*. 140.

George Smith (of Coalville) and those who supported the continued reform of this population were back in the House of Commons arguing for further legislation in 1880. They were successful and in 1884 the Second Canal Act was passed. This Act required narrowboaters to frequently re register their boats while also completely banning the presence of young girls over thirteen onboard and requiring non-married men and women to have separate sleeping quarters. The way in which the acts were carried out however, did not change. Thus, the degree to which these new laws were actually enforced was in the hands of the individual inspectors.¹³⁴

Between 1890 and 1913, official reports state that out of all the narrowboats inspected, less than 10% were found in violation of cleanliness, registration, and social standards each year.¹³⁵ Generally, once these physical standards were set, the narrowboaters had no problem adapting to them. Thus, the Canal Acts were successful in the general improvement of the physical conditions onboard the narrowboats. The forced registration of vessels and the inspection of crafts vastly improved health and cleanliness onboard barges that were subject to actual inspections. William Bagnall, a man who grew up on the canals in the late 19th century told Hanson that after the acts canal life had, “improved in everything to what it was when I was a boy... [the boats] more clean and decent.”¹³⁶

George Smith (of Coalville) and other Victorian reformers were shocked by the narrowboaters’ willingness to accept the standards of the 1877 and 1884 Acts. In 1885 an annual report stated that, “although the class have a reputation for bad language and rough manners, scarcely a single instance has been reported in which an inspector’s interference has been resented.”¹³⁷ The poor and cramped living conditions which many narrowboaters experienced were seen as both vital to and representative of the divergent culture of the narrowboaters as it

¹³⁴ Ibid., 131.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 140.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 142.

embodied their poor reputation as filthy and amoral drunks. There seemed to be an expectation that this population would fight for and cling to its own filth. George Smith (of Coalville) and the Victorian reformers believed that if they were able to physically control the spaces where narrowboaters lived and worked, as they did to other working-class individuals through workhouses and factory regulation, they would be able to alter their cultural practices and values. They failed to see that the narrowboaters' cultural and communal practices were rooted in far more than just the cramped physical space of their barges. Their subculture was tied to the greater community of narrowboaters and the banks of the canals themselves.

Although the narrowboaters did not resist the imposition of new standards of cleanliness in their homes, they did resist the forced education of their children. Literacy rates did improve after the Acts were passed, however there was a notably high absence rate among registered narrowboat children as they were often away from their school district. When they did attend school their learning was inhibited by the poor treatment they faced on school grounds. Hanson records that they were “reluctant to attend school, for ‘they say they would not like to be laughed at in consequence of being very backward in their learning.’”¹³⁸ The negative stereotypes of “water-gypsies” that were learned in educational settings, as shown by *Waif and Gipsy*, made school grounds a hostile environment for these children. The children of the narrowboaters were not able to be educated into dominant cultural practices as they were not welcome in the very institutions that were responsible for their cultural assimilation.

The cultural practices of the narrowboaters would remain relatively unchanged up until the canals were used for wartime production during WWI. Through the Canal Acts George Smith (of Coalville), Parliament, and Victorian reformers attempted to accelerate the natural transition that was happening on the banks of the canals as the standards of the transportation industry

¹³⁸ Ibid., 174.

changed. They only succeeded in improving the physical cleanliness of these spaces because they failed to see that the cultural practices of this community were tied to far more than solely their reputation of filth and amorality. The transition away from these waterways and towards railways made this fascinating way of life begin to become obsolete. Instead of allowing the culture of these canal workers to fade out slowly, Smith and other Victorian reformers passed acts and spread propaganda that made these individuals outsiders or, “water-gypsies” that needed to be “remedied” while ultimately failing to alter their semi-nomadic way of life.

The Canal Acts and George Smith (of Coalville)’s efforts were likely not about ensuring the happiness and well-being of those who lived and worked on the canals. Instead, they were an attempt to amend an outdated form of transportation and the nomadic way of life it required which went against the image of Victorian England. This image began in and was centered around London. This is why the legacy of the Regent’s Canal is so important to the industrial history of England: not primarily for its economic contributions but for social, political, and cultural reasons. Although the waterways of the Regent’s did not carry the most coal, it did carry the most social weight and was where, through the administration of The Canal Acts, Victorian Reformers and Parliament attempted to intentionally transition away from this form of industrial life.

Conclusion

Last summer was the two hundredth anniversary of that sunny afternoon in August of 1820 when the coin this study began with was distributed to commemorate the opening of the Regent’s Canal. This less than ten mile long stretch of water radically changed in these two centuries. Named to reflect the nobleness of the Prince Regent himself, John Nash designed the Regent’s Canal as part of his greater plan to redevelop northern London. The Regent’s Canal

Company created a structure that was supposed to bring London further into the industrial transition while simultaneously reflecting the pre-existing cultural value and significance of green spaces in London. A vital piece of the planned separation of these spaces rested on the control of bodies, specifically those of the lower class. Working-class individuals were only supposed to frequent spaces of industry while areas like Regent's Park were planned as non-industrial spaces of high class living and leisure. Nash and the company overlooked the fact that this waterway would promote movement. Thus, these planned lines of separation were quickly blurred by both the bodies of those who utilized the canal and the waters of the structure itself. This blurring created conflict that only intensified as railway competition grew after the 1840s and changed the standard to which transportation workers were held to. The Regent's Canal transformed into a battleground for cultural reform and social control as the industrial transition progressed forward in the city of London.

This battle for control had social and physical effects. Before the 1840s, the failed separation of leisure and industry brought pollution and previously separate populations closer together than ever before. Thus, we see the early presence of floating chapels which sought to Christianize and civilize those who lived and worked on the canals. Socially, as the 19th century progressed, the urge to "civilize" this population spread to the rest of the country with the rise of the railway industry. During these decades, the unfixed and unique lifestyle of the narrowboaters nationally cast these individuals as social pariahs in need of direct intervention which the likes of George Smith (of Coalville) tried and failed to do.

Economically, canals were less prominent after the 1840s. Nonetheless, culturally, canals were just as much, if not more relevant during the later half of the 19th century. The Regent's Canal, and the greater network as a whole, became a place of scandal and filth. When the golden

age of canals ended, Londoners had to reckon with the stretch of water that is the Regent's Canal and decide what the new social function of this structure would be. Victorian Reformers and Parliament chose to attempt to eradicate the narrowboaters through the 1877 and 1884 Canal Acts as their way of life no longer had a place in the future of this transition.

This historic legacy illuminates the conflicts and clashes that take place as individuals act as agents of change during times of transition. Nonetheless, those in power were not the only ones who acted as agents of said change. Narrowboaters continued to bathe, laugh, and engage in their communal practices in spaces where they were unwanted by those who had property along the canal. These floating families did not stop frequenting the backyards and green spaces of London even after individuals like Paterfamilias complained.

The 19th-century working class is often discussed as a relatively powerless group of individuals whose lives were dictated by those above them; however, this study complicates these preconceived notions by demonstrating the agency narrowboaters had in resisting spatial separation and forced assimilation during these decades of transition. Their unfixed nature allowed them to evade many of the structures that sought to change their nature while also providing a community in which narrowboaters could preserve and practice their distinct way of life. They displayed agency and kept their culture intact up through the mid 20th-century. The narrowboaters were not changed by any reformer or act. It was instead the repeated nationalization of the canals during WWI and WWII that would alter the way narrowboaters live and work.

E.P. Thompson stated that the Industrial Revolution should be viewed as a, "transition between two ways of life."¹³⁹ The Regent's Canal was an active economic and cultural asset to the city of London during this industrial transition. The Regent's was both natural and unnatural,

¹³⁹ Thompson, "*The Making of the English Working Class*," 418.

it promoted the industrial while also offering remedies to the negative qualities of industrialization through its green spaces, and it was both a place for the working class to use and an area of high-class living. By embodying this transition, the historic legacy of the Regent's Canal illuminates that fact that the working class of London, specifically the narrowboaters, were not simply subject to this transition but, instead actively participated in shaping how their familial structures and culture would fare as industrial development and the social reform threatened their way of life.

Today, the Regent's Canal is a real estate asset, a bike path, and a green space. After years of disuse, its waters have been cleaned and it is now a sight of public screenings and evening strolls. City Road Basin is no longer lined with sky-high piles of timber; it is a park with a playground. The boats moored in the basin are no longer the homes of dirty outcasts but are now occupied by young, hip professionals seeking an "alternative" way of life. There is no decision to be made between or separation of the industrial and green spaces. These bike paths and parks promote economic growth and urban well-being simultaneously, something John Nash likely would not have appreciated. Very few physical spaces commemorate the Regent's legacy of community, connection, and conflict. When walking the towpaths, the history this study has explored can be glimpsed in the colorful motifs decorating both modern and historic narrowboats that are now regularly sold for nearly £100,000 or, in the halls of the London Canal Museum where old canal enthusiasts share stories of their families' history on this waterway. Their stories and this greater legacy is so much more than that of an industry lost to the development of technology. It showcases the conflicts and messiness of the industrial process and how it was met by the resiliency and agency of a community of working-class outcasts who refused to be forgotten in the industrial history of London.

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I affirm that I have adhered to the honor code on this assignment.