

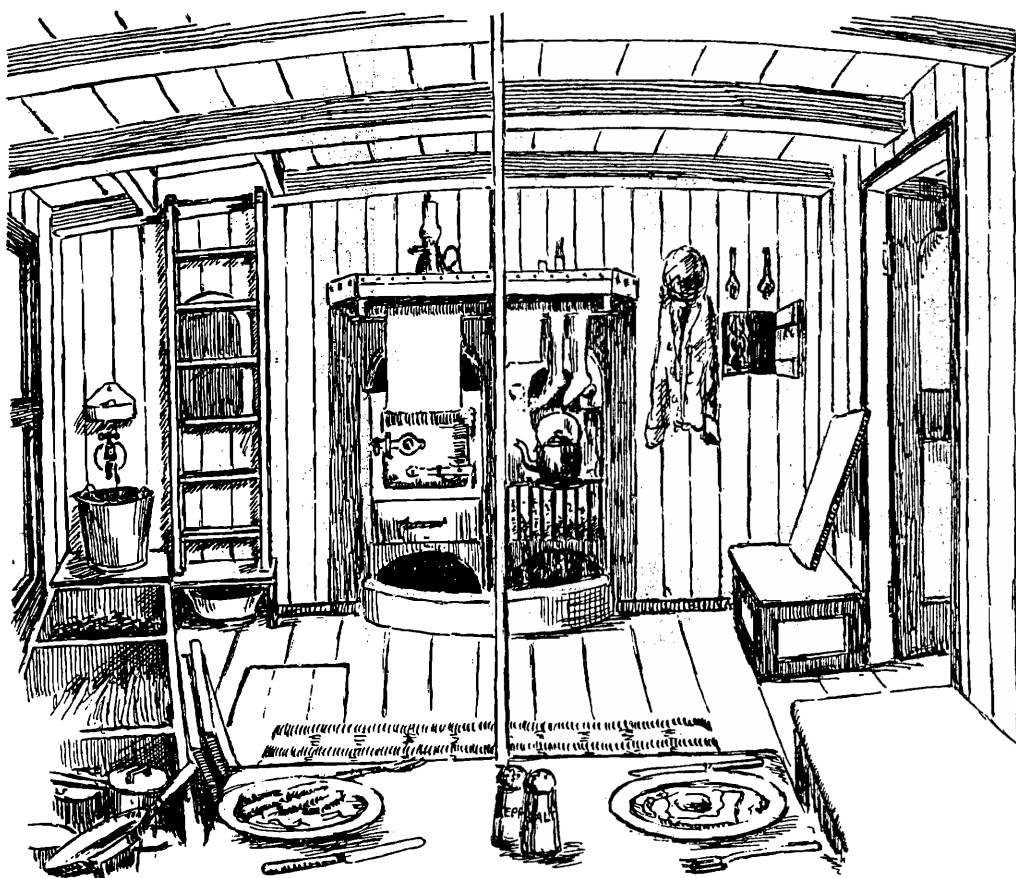
CABIN FURNISHINGS ON CANAL BARGES OF NORTH WESTERN ENGLAND

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Christopher Gilbert's *English Vernacular Furniture* (1991) was the first publication to make serious study of furniture in moveable living accommodation including gypsy caravans and canal narrow boats.¹ Both forms enjoyed colourful exuberant forms of decoration, with distinctive local variations, and both have been individually documented.² A more modest tradition of furnishing and decoration thrived on the barges plying the canals, rivers and estuaries of the north west of England from at least 1770 through until the early 1960s when the last vessels were launched.

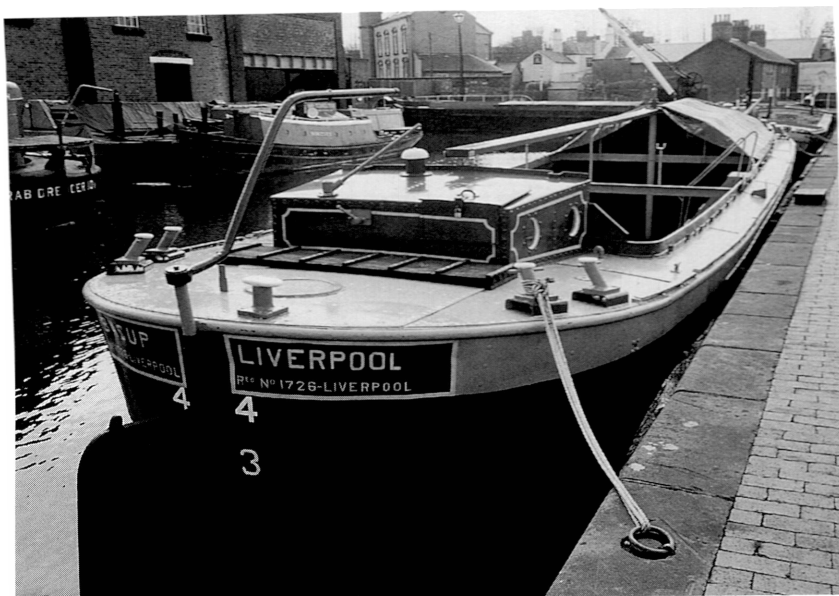
Water transport either by river or later by artificial waterway was a vital ingredient in the expansion of the British economy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Bulk raw materials and energy supplies (especially coal) could be moved more easily and cheaply by water than by road. As many of the cargo trips lasted more than a day, cabin accommodation was needed for the crew. They might have been only the skipper and a mate or, alternatively, a family with the skipper's wife acting as mate. There was a distinctive north western type of wooden barge known as a 'flat' or 'wide boat'. Unlike the better known narrow canal boats they were built to a width of about fourteen feet, with an overall length of up to seventy feet (but with sixty three feet as standard for some waterways because of the length of the locks) and a depth that varied according to the routes they plied. Estuary and coastal barges drew an average seven or eight feet while a Leeds and Liverpool boat, for example, would draw about four. They had a characteristic shape and certain specific structural features that were designed to provide strength and maximum cargo capacity within restricted dimensions. Their layout was simple with about seventy five per cent of the hull devoted to the cargo. At the bow and the stern the remaining space was partitioned off to provide storage and living accommodation. They could be propelled by towing with horses or teams of men or by a single mast and two sails. Steam power was introduced on the River Weaver navigation in 1863. This altered the accommodation which had to be moved into the bows as the stern was filled by the boiler and engine. The bow section had hitherto been used for storage or as a berth for a 'third hand'.³

The flats probably developed from local coastal and lighterage barges between 1730–40. The industrial economy of the North-West was starting to grow rapidly in the early eighteenth century. Lancashire textiles, coal and Cheshire salt found ready markets both home and abroad, and the growing port of Liverpool became a major importer of New World produce, especially rum, tobacco and timber. This called for new port facilities and better internal distribution. Improvements started with the opening of an enclosed (non-tidal) dock at Liverpool in 1715 and followed with opening up navigation to Manchester, the Cheshire salt towns and the Wigan coalfields between 1732 and 1742. In 1757 the Sankey Canal to St Helens started the building of artificial



1. River Weaver steam packet. View inside cabin looking aft
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port

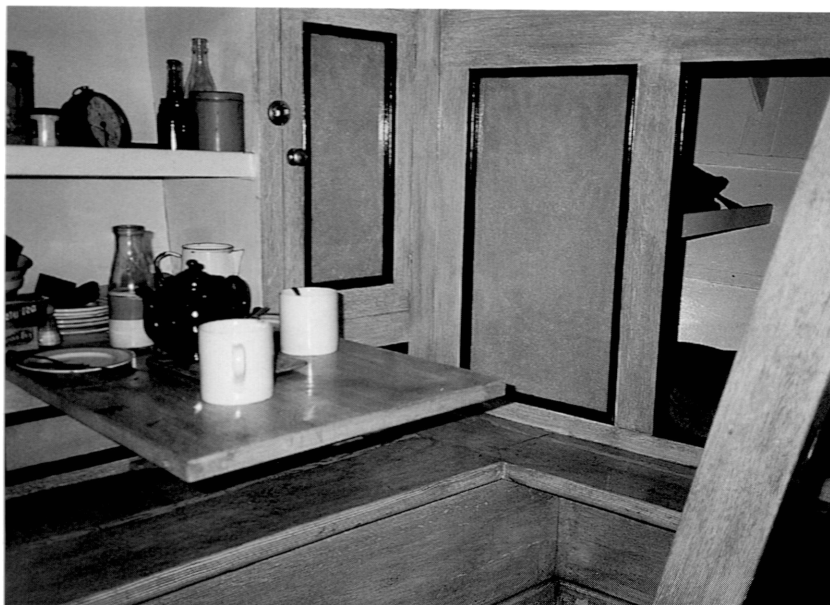
wide canals which linked Liverpool to most of Lancashire and Yorkshire by 1820. The traffic generated was immense and in spite of the competition from railways. For example, one and a half million tons of coal and 700,000 tons of salt were carried to Liverpool in 1852.⁴ This, in turn, needed a large number of barges, perhaps as many as a thousand. The size, layout and decorative scheme of these barge cabins has been documented from surveys of surviving craft and wrecks, a fine mid-nineteenth century model; interviews with retired flatmen and precise dimensions given in Canal Boat Registers after 1877. All indicate that there was an almost standard layout which goes back at least to 1772 — the date of the building of the *Daresbury*. This remarkable survivor was afloat until 1957 when she was measured and photographed before being sunk.⁵ Her cabin was almost identical to that of the *Oakdale*, the penultimate flat, launched in 1950. Cabins measured between nine and six feet long, and went across the full width of the boat, curving inwards to fit the shape of the stern. Height varied from six feet in a sailing flat to less than five in a Leeds and Liverpool canal boat. Access was



2. M. B. 'Bacup'. Stern view
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



3. M. B. 'Bacup'. Fore cabin, looking forward to folding table and panelled lockers
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



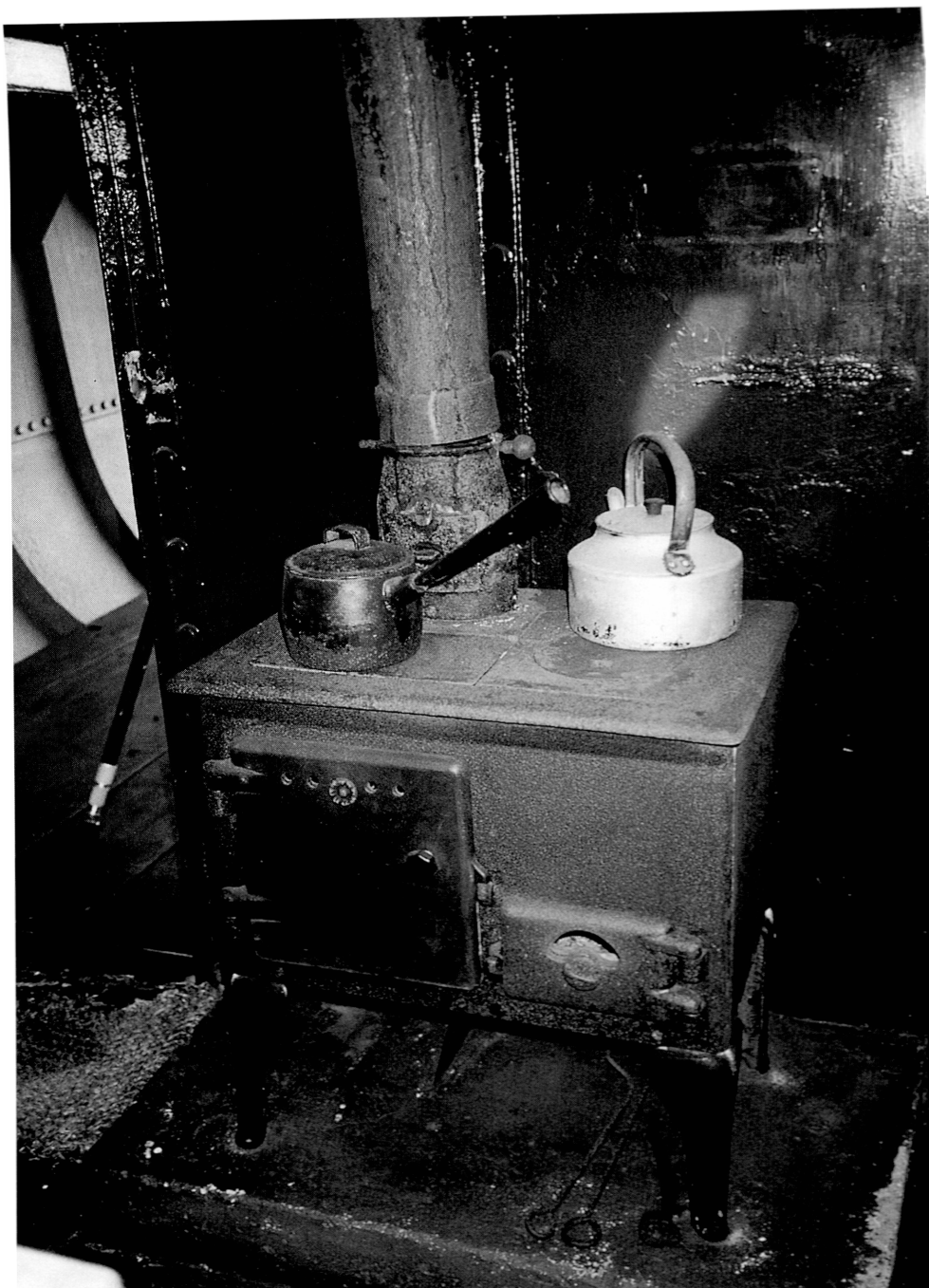
4. M. B. 'Bacup'. Fore cabin, looking forward to folding table and panelled lockers

Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



5. M. B. 'Bacup'. Fore cabin, side view of recessed bed space

Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



6. M. B. 'Bacup'. Fore cabin aft bulkhead with cast iron range and access to hold
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



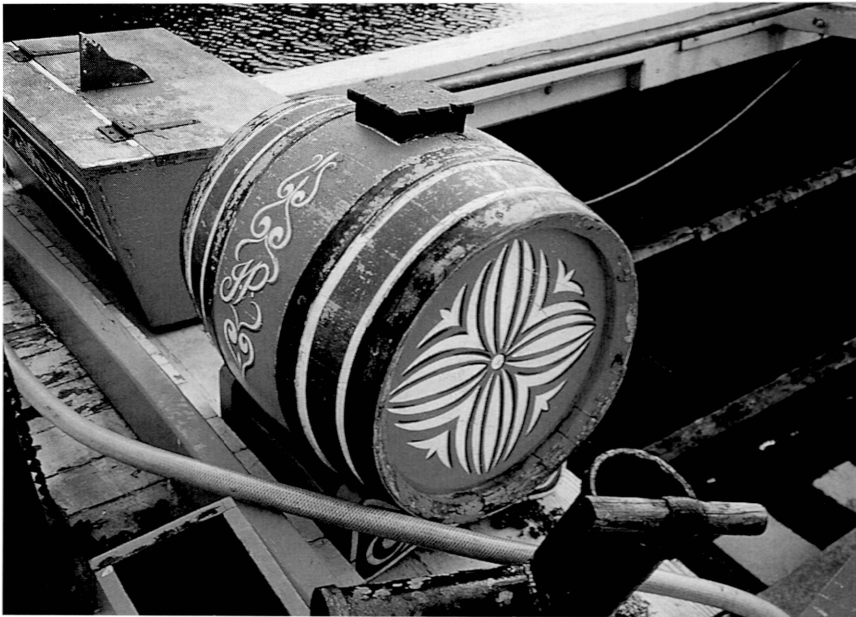
7. Leeds and Liverpool short boat *George*. Aft view
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



8. Leeds and Liverpool short boat *George*. Deck skylight
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



9. Leeds and Liverpool short boat *George*. Dog kennel
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port

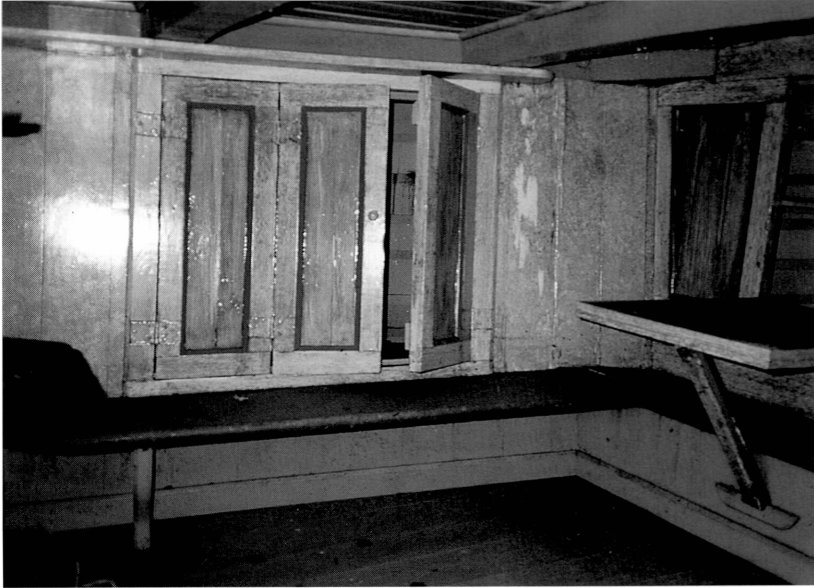


10. Leeds and Liverpool short boat *George*. Water barrel
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



11. Leeds and Liverpool long boat *Scorpio*. Bow view
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port

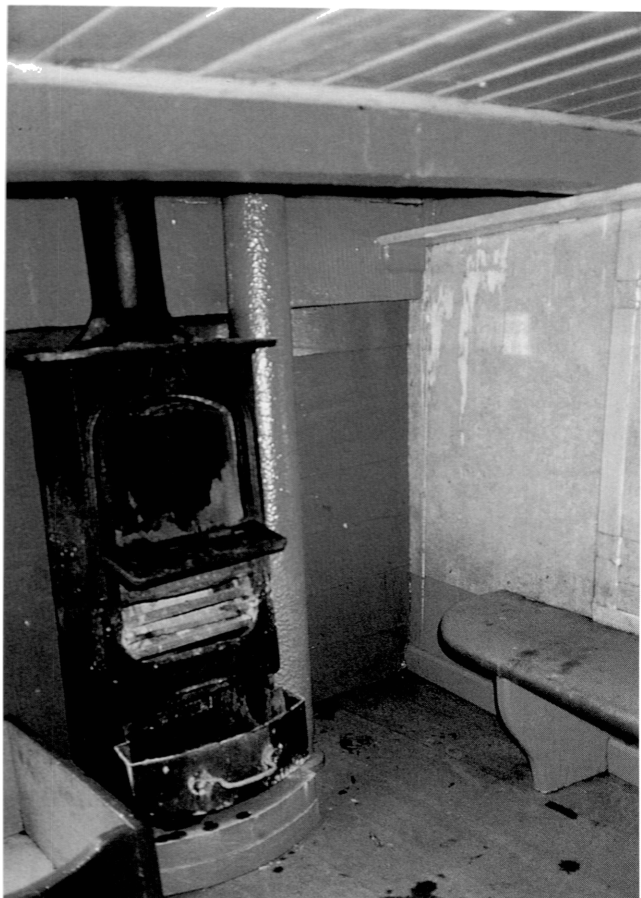
through a square hatch always on the port (left) side down a vertical ladder, fixed to the bulkhead (partition) dividing the cabin from the hold. In the centre of the partition there was a cast iron stove or range. The former had a 'tidy betty', a rack for heating a kettle or a frying pan. There was often a brass-edged mantel-shelf to hold an oil lamp if this was not suspended in gimbals from one of the deck beams. The ashpan was also hedged in by a brass fender which protected the scrubbed or painted floor. In Leeds and Liverpool canal boats the floor had a one and a half-inch border painted in red lead. This was an extension of the red lead painting of the surrounding lockers or benches. As with all cramped living accommodation the cabin furnishings were fixed and dual purpose where possible. The two sides of the cabin had fixed benches. Some had hinged seats and boxed-in sides to enable use as storage lockers. For example, the one nearest the store would be used as a coal bunker. There were enclosed bed spaces on each side above the benches. In Weaver flats they had sliding doors, while Leeds and Liverpool canal boats had hinged ones — usually in three panels, forking one to one side and two to the other side. The later steel Leeds and Liverpool boats such as the *Bacup* preserved at the Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port, did not have doors but either curtains or nothing at all. Within the bed space there was usually a shelf for personal belongings — often a suitcase to hold going ashore clothes. On wooden boats the bed space interior was



12. Leeds and Liverpool long boat *Scorpio*, starboard side. Bed space and drop-down table aft
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



13. Leeds and Liverpool long boat *Scorpio*, aft. Table, locker and reversed clinker lining
Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port



14. Leeds and Liverpool long boat *Scorpio*, forward bulkhead with cast iron stove

Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port

lined with boards with their upper edges overlapped. These were grained, or painted in cream or green. At the stern there were normally three panelled cupboards. The door of the centre one was hinged at the bottom and when its brass catch at the top was released it could be dropped to make a table. This was supported either by a single leg on to the floor, a diagonal prop on to a ledge half-way up the bench, or by a brass rod and hook in the deck beam above it. In some Leeds and Liverpool canal boats such as the *Scorpio* preserved at the Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port, there was one large cupboard with four panels, one of which was the folding table. Weaver steam barges where the cabin was in the bow had a variation with two side cupboards at forty five degrees to the central cupboard, with a drawer below each one. The central cupboard had a drawer above (for breakables such as lamp glasses) and the top of the opening itself had a decorative ogee shape. The side cupboard panels, the bed space sliding panels and the two doors leading to the skipper's separate cabin were round-headed. Cabin panelling was usually grained. Sometimes there were two shades — one for the wood surrounding panel and one for the panel itself, with the panel moulding picked

out in a different colour, often blue. Benches could be grained as well, as in the case of the *Scorpio*. The seat was in a dark green with a crimson red side and a darker red for the floor. These were by no means all the variations on the basic layout of fixed cabin furnishings. On deck, there was a five gallon water barrel often brightly painted and some coal boats on the Leeds and Liverpool canal carried a dog kennel and a 'proven tub' — a wooden box for the horse's feed — on deck. All three items were brightly painted with the metal bands of the barrel picked out in a different colour from its staves, with a painted design on the bands. The latter might be flowers, as in the photograph, or a single bold symbol such as the 'club' from playing cards or a feathery scrollwork decoration which was often featured on the sterns of Leeds and Liverpool canal boats.⁶

Within living memory cabins were invariably kept scrupulously clean and scrubbed out once a week. As Tom Lightfoot, a Weaver waterman pointed out, 'So the simple idea was, if the crew kept the boat clean then they kept themselves clean.' He also said, 'there was not a lot of room but they used to manage very well.'⁷ Whether Tom and the other hard-working bargemen would recognise Herman Melville's eulogy on a particular sailing flat's cabin is doubtful:

These craft have each a little cabin, the prettiest, charmingest, most delightful little dog-hole in the world; not much bigger than an alcove for a bed. It is lighted by little round glasses placed in the deck; so that to the insider, the ceiling is like a small firmament twinkling with astral radiations.⁸

REFERENCES

1. Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture 1750-1900*, New Haven and London, 1991, pp. 241-43.
2. For example, C. H. Ward-Jackson and D. E. Harvey, *The English Gypsy Caravan*, Newton Abbot, 1972 and A. J. Lewery, *Narrow Boat Painting*, Newton Abbot, 1974.
3. For a detailed account of construction, propulsion etc. of these barges see M. K. Stammers' *Mersey Flats and Flatmen*, Lavenham, 1993.
4. B. Poole, *The Commerce of Liverpool*, Liverpool, 1854, pp. 26, 34.
5. E. W. Paget-Tomlinson, 'The Daresbury', forthcoming in *Waterways Journal*, 3.
6. Hull decoration is outside the scope of this article, but is covered in M. K. Stammers op. cit., pp. 37-38, and M. Clarke, *The Leeds and Liverpool Canal*, Preston, 1990, pp. 17-21.
7. T. Lightfoot, *The Weaver Watermen*, Northwich, no date, p. 15.
8. H. Melville, *Redburn His First Voyage Being the Sailor-Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman in the Merchant Service*, originally published in London, 1849; Penguin edition, London, 1976, p. 236.