

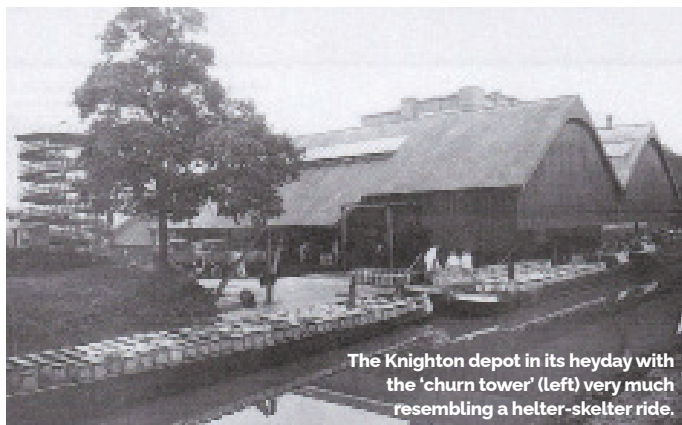
A Cadbury's Boatman

Following on from our feature on the chocolate-maker's canal connections in the last issue, **Richard Hill** tells us of his late grandfather's carrying work for the company

Anyone who's cruised the Shropshire Union between Bridge 45 and the Shebdon Embankment through Staffordshire will have come across a deserted canopy at Knighton, its castellated fringe reaching out of the trees on the north bank.

As we learned in last issue's WW that in the 1920s this was the busy processing plant of Cadbury's. Milk was collected from local farms along the Shroppie and brought to this location to produce crumb chocolate, which was then taken by boat to the Bournville factory for further refinement into the world-famous Cadbury's chocolate.

One of the boatmen working on the canal from here was my grandfather, George Wiseman. After serving in World War I, he returned to his old job of collecting milk for a cheese-processing plant in Gnosall from local farms by horse-drawn narrowboat. The wages were not good. When an opening for similar work became available at Cadbury's Knighton factory, George applied. The terms offered by the company were much better and George was taken on. He and his wife Evelyn lived in Norbury with their family, two sons Henry and Bernard, and daughters Joyce, Dorothy, Janet and Elizabeth.



The Knighton depot in its heyday with the 'churn tower' (left) very much resembling a helter-skelter ride.

The working day

A short walk across the field started George's working day at Norbury Junction where the horse was stabled and the boat, *Bournville 5*, moored. Work started at 6am. The horse was groomed, tackled and prepared to haul the boat-load of 150 empty milk churns to the start of the collection at High Onn (Bridge 25). Churns full of milk were left by the milk farmers at High Onn Wharf and various points along the canal. Gradually, as the boat made progress towards Knighton, churns, each one labelled by the farmer, were loaded onto the boat, and empty churns were deposited for the following days' collection. Once the boat arrived at the Knighton plant, the full churns were unloaded, the quantity and quality of each checked before

being emptied and processed. It was these checks that would determine the payment made to each farmer each month.

The empty churns remained inverted for cleaning before passing on to a conveyor that would carry them up to the top of a storage tower. The churns were stacked on the helical track, with gravity carrying them back down to the bottom for redistribution – a sort of giant 'helter-skelter' for empty milk churns. Once empty, the boat was reloaded with empty churns from the bottom of the tower in preparation for the following days' collection.

George, the boat and the horse then returned to Norbury Junction. The horse was stabled, the boat moored, and George finished for the day usually around 3pm or 4pm.



In 1925 George's daily routine was disrupted when his eldest daughter Joyce, aged six, contracted scarlet fever. George could not live at home for fear of carrying the contagious virus to other families. He went to stay at the Junction Inn at Norbury Junction, which was run by his father and mother, Henry and Mary Wiseman. Today this is a busy pub and restaurant but then it was a small establishment on a holding of 14 acres.

Perks of the job

One of the perks for Cadbury's employees was being able to buy cheap chocolate, particularly when it was rationed during World War II. Employees could make a monthly purchase of three or four 2lb bags of misshapen chocolate, each bar bag marked 'Not for Resale' and costing about a shilling a bag.

Another purchasable product was 'crumb' chocolate, which was made at the Knighton factory from cocoa beans, sugar and milk. George's son, the late Bernard Wiseman, recalled the crumb chocolate as an

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Boatman George Wiseman and some of his children aboard *Bournville 5* at High Onn Wharf in the 1920s.



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occasional treat, “It looked like sandstone but tasted lovely.”

Each summer Cadbury’s would host a summer fete for the children of its employees on the field high on the bank, opposite the factory. Between egg and spoon or sack races the children would look down and wave to their fathers working at the plant. The highlight of the day was a trip on the canal in one of the horse-drawn narrowboats.

End of an era

The milk-collecting routine continued daily through each season. The canal was a vital part of the dairyland community. In winter an icebreaking boat would clear the canal for the daily working traffic but in the winter of 1929 even the icebreaker was outdone by the weather and the milk had to be collected by road. Perhaps Cadbury’s recognised the opportunity as a more efficient form of transport or, perhaps for other reasons, the milk collection was slowly transferred from canal to road. Following *Bournville 5*’s

final collection, George was transferred to work at the plant itself, loading and unloading lorries with milk chocolate crumb and other imports and exports from the factory. By now George lived in Knightley, some 8 miles from the factory.

In his 30 or so years with the chocolate-maker, he was late for work just once.

On the 12th of February 1955 while motorcycling to work George collapsed and died, having suffered a heart attack. His children, now all

sadly passed themselves, remembered him as a fine man and Cadbury’s as a good employer and a manufacturer of fine chocolate. Indeed, my late mother, Dorothy, would never buy chocolate unless it was Cadbury’s.



Knighton Wharf today.