

Oxfordshire

HALERS AND HORSES: WORKING WESTERN BARGES



Figure A A detail from Jan Siberechts' painting 'Henley from the Wargrave Road' (1698), by courtesy of the River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames. The barge shown passing through Marsh Lock is a typical Western barge, laden with logs and sacks of (probably) malt. Its descent is being assisted by a cable attached to a capstan on the western bank.

From the 17th century to the early 20th the typical vessel on the middle and upper Thames was the 'Western barge', so called because they operated inland west of London Bridge. Like the barges shown in paintings of the 1690s (Figure A), those of the 18th and early 19th century were wide and flat-bottomed, but substantially bigger. By the 1760s some measured nearly 130 feet long by 18½ feet wide, and could carry 180 tons or more. From 1751 they were required to have their tonnage and place of origin painted on the side, and to have a draught (their depth below the water) of no more than 4 feet, though both regulations were regularly flaunted by bargemasters keen to cram the largest possible cargo into their vessels. Such massive sizes declined slightly by the early 19th century, partly because new poundlocks and canals could not accommodate them. The largest barges required a crew of 6 men and a boy, the steersman 'assisted by bargemen who, with large ashen poles from 14 feet to 19 feet in length, with incredible dexterity, keep the barge in the proper navigation channel' (Figure B).

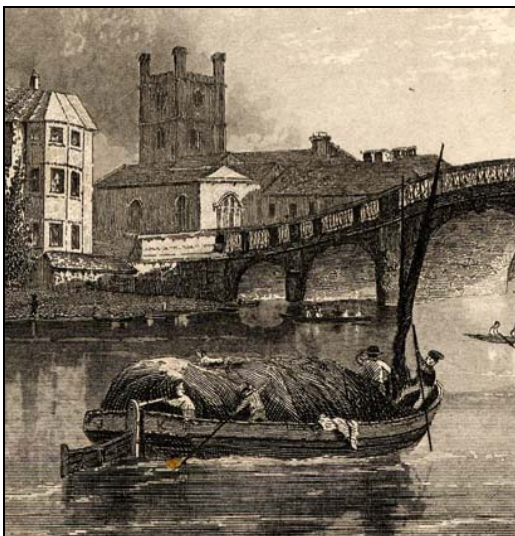


Figure B Despite its similarity to the traditional Western barge, the vessel shown approaching Henley bridge in this drawing of 1834 is an 'improved' Kennet or Thames-and-Severn canal-type barge, with rounded prow and a spritsail mounted towards the front. The bargemen are using long ashen poles to help keep it off the shallows.

Until the late 19th century most barges had a sail to help the downriver journey, with masts which could be lowered to fit under bridges. Most were square-rigged like those in Siberechts's paintings, though from the 1790s smaller triangular sprit sails (which were less efficient but easier to handle) gradually replaced them. Barges travelling upstream or over particularly difficult stretches had to be hauled manually, which in the 18th century was still sometimes done by teams of men known as haulers or 'halers'. An eye-witness account described their back-breaking work:

Coming upstream the barge was towed by 5 or 6 men; each had a leather breast-strap with a small harness rope which he could attach to the tow-rope. Hauling a loaded barge upstream was no light task and, at a rapid, it was desperate work, the advance being only foot by foot. The men bent forward and sometimes, if the barge happened to give a shear in a stream, they almost lay on the ground, and waited till she could recover herself.

By the 1730s towing with horses was becoming more common, though the number needed on different stretches varied considerably. In 1809 the agriculturalist William Mavor reported that a 128-ton barge needed just one horse for the downward journey, but between 8 and 14 upstream. Like halers, horses seem to have been available for hire en route, though bargemasters presumably made advance arrangements for regular journeys. Improving the quality of towpaths formed an important part of the Thames Commissioners' work, and was mentioned in government legislation as early as 1730. An Act of 1771 provided that halers put out of work through use of horses or by injury and old age could apply for relief to the Thames Commissioners, who might authorize payment of up to 4s. a week.

Mr. WILLIAM LANGLEY, of Great Marlow, Bargemaster, being examined, said, that he navigates the River from Henley to London a Barge of One hundred and Forty-six Tons, a small One of Seventy-seven, and another of Sixty-six; that it generally takes Two Horses to draw the One of 146 Tons from Putney to Richmond, with the small Barge in Tow Three Horses; from Richmond to Hampton Court mostly Ten Horses with the single Boats, Twelve with the small One in Tow; from Hampton Court to Weybridge Twelve, and Fourteen with the small One in Tow; from Weybridge to Windsor Fourteen, and Seventeen with the small Barge in Tow in the Winter Streams; from Windsor to Hambleton Bank Ten Horses, with the large One Twelve; from thence to Boulter's Lock Twelve Horses, either single or double; from Boulter's Lock to Headfor Twelve; from Headfor to Cookham, Ten Horses; from Cookham to Spade Oak, Four Horses, being a very easy Strain; from Spade Oak to Marlow Ten Horses; and from Marlow to Henley Eight: that the worst Passage is Tangier Flat, a Quarter of a Mile below Windsor, a very dangerous Place, and at Sunbury Flat Accidents

Figure C. Part of the statement made to a parliamentary enquiry in 1793 by William Langley, a Marlow bargemaster who operated between Henley and London. Langley reported that 'it generally takes two horses to draw the [barge] of 146 tons from Putney to Richmond'; Weybridge to Windsor required 17 horses in winter 'with the small barge in tow', and Marlow to Henley required 8.

Journey times in the 1790s remained conditional on weather and water levels, though Mavor claimed that floods hindered Thames navigation for no more than 20 days a year on average, and that the river was less prone to freezing than a stagnant canal. Upstream journeys from London to Marlow or Henley generally took around 3–4 days, not all that different from in the 15th century; the 9 days taken to Oxford (or 8 days downstream from Lechlade) was, however, a huge improvement on earlier. Nonetheless, in exceptionally bad conditions the journey from London to Oxford could still take 8 weeks.

Sources: Wilson, DG, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), 35–54; Mavor, W, *General View of the Agriculture of Berks* (1813), 432; Burton, J, *Present State of Navigation on the Thames Considered* (1767); Vanderstegen, W, *The Present*

State of the Thames Considered (1794); *Report from Committee ... into Improvement of the Thames* (Parl. Paper 1793, xiv); Acts 3 George II, c.11; 24 George II, c.8; 11 George III, c.45.

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