

1883

My name is James Silk I am 27 years old and I am a Barge man. My family have been on the canal for many years I started off learning the work with my father, he's called James as well, and so most people call me young Jim.

I live in Curzon Street in Calne, not far from the Wharf. At home is my wife Mary and my three girls<sup>1</sup>. Mary comes from South Marston, that's where I met her. When I was working with father we would often go that way carrying, timber or coal. We would try and stop for the night near the Lock Cottage at Marston . Father was friendly with Mary's father, Robert Ferris, they would meet up to do a bit of business, or have a jar or two. It was natural that me and Mary started walking out.

So when I first took my own boat on for Mr Matthews<sup>2</sup> it seemed the right thing to get married<sup>3</sup>. Mr Matthews has been good to me, but a few years ago he had a few problems. I had to leave him as he didn't have the work for me<sup>4</sup>.

I went across to the Wilts and Berks Canal Company and they gave me the boat Speculator.<sup>5</sup> Henry Wilcox from Chippenham has been my mate for the past few years. We have worked well together, he is a good man and knows the canals well, but last week we had a problem and the Speculator was lost, I really think it was Henry's fault.<sup>6</sup>

We were on our way back from Bristol heading for Chippenham. We were carrying petroleum, benzoline and matches. Petroleum is used for lanterns and benzoline for heaters and blowtorches. We all know how easily it burns, so everybody says how careful you have to be not to smoke near the load.

Well, we'd come through Bath and were heading on to Bradford when we decided to moor up for an hour, the horse needed resting and I wanted to check the load, it smelled as if there was a leak in one of the jars. I was checking the hold when I saw Henry at the back lighting his pipe.

I was about to shout a warning, when there was an explosion. My arm got burnt, I jumped into the canal. Henry was blown off the boat, but he's alright. The boat was completely alight and then it sunk. The boat is still there, they are trying lift it from the canal but it will be difficult.

As I am the master of the boat the Company will blame me for the mistake, I will lose my job. I don't know what will happen to my family.

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<sup>1</sup> 1881 Census

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Matthews General Carrier, traded from Wood Lane in Chippenham

<sup>3</sup> Married in Calne in 1875

<sup>4</sup> Matthews had suffered poor health for several years and died in 1881

<sup>5</sup> Bath inspection registers

<sup>6</sup> Total speculation Wilcox was a mate on canal boats but there is no evidence he ever worked with Silk.