

Early 1881

James Silk, aged 58. Born Calne, lives near the Wharf in Calne.

I am the steerer<sup>1</sup> of a boat called Express, register number 697. The boat is owned by Mr Joseph Matthews of Wood Lane in Chippenham, he has a coal yard next to the tunnel<sup>2</sup>. I have worked for Mr Matthews and his father before him for more years than I care to remember. Most of my family are bargemen. My son Robert is my boat boy. My father was a bargeman all his life. Then there's my brother Jacob, he died a few years back but in his prime his was one of the smartest boats on the canal, it was called Mary. That was his wife's name too. He got his leg crushed taking a boat through the locks at Pewsham which meant he couldn't work the boats any longer. They got him a job helping out at the wharf at Calne, but he was never the same again. Losing his boat was what killed him.

I got my oldest boy, James, in with Mr Matthews and he became a good steerer. Last year he went across to the Wilts and Berks Canal Company though. He left Mr Matthews employ because there just isn't enough work.

Mr Matthews used to have six boats, but now it's down to two, me and William Sheppard.

Mr Matthews is what's known as a general carrier. Coal, timber, stone, bricks, grain, flour you name it we carried it. I didn't enjoy carrying manure on my boat though, I didn't mind the smell but then I had to clean the hold out.

Mr Matthews and his father before him ran a good business, but over the last few years things have become harder, the canal company aren't keeping the canal up. It is silted up and locks get broken. People are turning to the railways because they say it is more reliable.

Mr Matthews has been ill for a few years now and there is nobody to run the business properly, he is now nearly blind I fear that I won't have work next year<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Canal Company uses the term "steerer" to identify the master of a canal boat.

<sup>2</sup> Although Brinkworth owned the coal merchants at the wharf in Chippenham there were other coal merchants with access to the canal.

<sup>3</sup> The 1881 Census noted that 48 year old Joseph Matthews was deaf and blind due to illness. A progressive illness which resulted in his death. The Canal Company ledgers record his death on 22 December 1881. His wife Charlotte and Daughter Annie moved away to start a new life in Gloucestershire.