



## My ancestor... worked on the canals

In 1768 work began on the first major canal to run through the Falkirk area. The aim of the Forth and Clyde canal was to link the eastern and western seas, so the canal was built between the mouth of the River Carron on the Forth and Bowling on the Clyde. In 1822 the Union Canal also opened to provide a new route between Edinburgh and Falkirk. Both canals were essential for transporting goods during the Industrial Revolution and they were crucial in developing local industry in Falkirk. The building and operation of the canals also provided many local people with employment.



*Forth and Clyde Canal near Lock 16,  
circa 1907*

### Building the Canals

The process of building the canals involved various tradesmen and workers.

**Masons** built culverts, aqueducts and locks while **joiners** and **blacksmiths** were needed to make decks and gates. The bulk of the workforce, however, was made up of **navigators** or '**navvies**'. Their work was to forge out the path of the canal with picks and shovels and make it watertight. The method used by the navvies to do this was called 'puddling'. A clay 'puddle' was made by mixing loam with sand then adding water. The navvies would then trample on the mixture to create a watertight material which was spread along the sides and bottom of the canal.

In 1770 over 1000 men were working as navvies on the Forth and Clyde Canal, mostly local labourers from towns and villages along the route. When work on the Union Canal started in 1818 the navvies were mainly English and Irish workers who travelled around the country moving from job to job. Accidents among the navvies were frequent as their labour was hard and often dangerous. In 1819 and 1820, two separate deaths were recorded because of sandbanks collapsing on top of the workers.

### The canals at work

Local industries used the canal for the transport of raw materials and finished products. These goods were initially transported in horse-drawn **scows** or **lighters**, however, in 1857 steam boats were introduced to the canals and they became known as **puffers** because of the noise they made. Many companies like the Carron Company operated their own vessels to carry their goods along the canal. Some merchants also bought their own boats so they could transport coal from the mines to Edinburgh where it could be sold.

The men who worked on the canal boats were often called **lightermen** after the vessels they worked on. A canal boat crew was usually made up of a **skipper**, a **mate** and an **engineer** who all shared a small cabin on board. They worked long hours (sometimes more than 17 hours a day) in all weathers. Canal boatmen were poorly paid and had little time to spend with their families. They were also notorious for drunken behaviour, so in 1870 an institute for canal boatmen was established to care for the 'social, moral and religious welfare' of the crews.



*Horse-drawn barge on the Union Canal, 1922*

As well as the boatmen, there were **trackers**, **lock keepers**, **bridge keepers** and **banksmen** who worked on the canals. Trackers were the people who provided the towing horses for canal boats. They would usually walk alongside the horses ensuring they kept on course. Banksmen had an important role to play in maintaining the canal, they would carry out necessary repairs on the banks and they were responsible for keeping the towpaths clear. Lock keepers and bridge keepers were on call 24 hours a day to help load and unload cargo. Their main duty was to open the locks and bridges so canal boats could pass through. This operation was a two-man job and while the lock keeper opened one side, a crew member from the boat had to open the other side. For horse drawn boats the tracker usually did this, but on puffers a crew member had to swing out onto the towpath to operate the lock.



*Lock keeper, circa 1900*

### Travelling on the canals

After 1809 passenger boats also used the canals. A journey from Port Dundas in Glasgow to Lock 16 in Falkirk took five and a half hours. Meals and drinks were available and there was even an onboard library. In 1830 the Forth and Clyde Canal Company introduced a new passenger vessel called the **swift**. These boats were long and narrow and could go up to a speed of 10 miles an hour. Passenger boats had priority on the canal and the skippers of trades boats could be fined if they did not give way to them. In 1848 the Union Canal Co. withdrew their passenger service due to competition from the railways, but day trips on the canals remained popular until the 1940s.

### Sources

You can find out more about the canals and the people who worked on them through books and primary sources in the archive. Guthrie Hutton's *Scotland's Millenium Canals* is available in the search room as well as *From Sea to Sea* by Len Paterson and *The Canals of Scotland* by Jean Lindsay. You can also look through the finding aids to locate a number of relevant primary sources in the archive collection.