

1901-7-26 Daily Mail

UNDER LONDON BY CANAL.

A Journey with Which Few Persons Are Familiar.

Nearly everybody nowadays is familiar with underground travelling by rail, but there are comparatively few people who have done a six or eight miles' journey underground by water.

Yet the facilities for such a journey—at any rate, so far as London is concerned—have been in existence very much longer than the oldest underground railway.

It may come as a surprise to thousands of persons who are thoroughly familiar with the Agricultural Hall to learn that far beneath that famous building a ceaseless stream of barges laden with valuable merchandise daily winds its way.

While idles, pleasure seekers, and busy men are passing to and fro above, these barges are slowly working their way through the dark waters of that part of the Regent's Canal, known as the Islington Tunnel.

The idea of a canal from Paddington to Limehouse originated in 1802. But the scheme lay fallow for some years, and it was not until 1811 that the secretary of the company received an intimation from George the Fourth, then Prince Regent, that he, to quote the words recorded in the company's books, "approved of the formation of the canal and graciously condescended to allow it to be called 'The Regent's Canal.' A year afterwards the first special Act of Parliament was passed, and in eight years more the long-projected venture was an accomplished fact.

The total length of the canal, including its occasional side issues, is ten miles. One end joins the Thames at Limehouse. The other runs into the Grand Junction Canal at Paddington, the two longest tunnels being at Islington and Maida Vale respectively. Well-nigh a quarter of a century ago a barge laden with gunpowder came to grief while passing that part of the canal which traverses Regent's Park. There was a terrific explosion, entailing great damage and some loss of life, and this misfortune was the cause of certain restrictions which, while modifying the chances of disaster, also curtailed the opportunities of bargees who used to do the voyage to Liverpool and back in eight days. They invariably used the type of vessel colloquially termed a 'monkey barge,' and even to this day the men who work this type of barge are called "monkey men."

Having previously arranged with the engineer who has charge of the engine used for towing the boats through the Islington Tunnel, writes a "Daily Mail" explorer, I went to the Caledonian Bridge entrance of the tunnel to wait the promised opportunity of stepping on board. On one side of the entrance is a bank of greenery, while opposite is the towing-path, with its system of signals, which block the entry of one barge until the tunnel is clear of any others. There were several barges waiting to go through, but one bargee, more impatient than the rest, resolved to "push on" rather than wait to be towed, and the engine, which had now presented itself, backed a little to give the barge room to pass it. We wondered how the bargees would get their vessel through; but they soon solved the mystery. They secured two planks to iron rings in the deck, and made them project at right angles to the barge. They then lay at full length on the boards, and, just as they began to be swallowed up in the thickness, they pushed their craft along by using their feet as propellers against the walls.

The engine which usually tows the boats looks for all the world like a railway engine mounted on a platform, and it is drawn along by means of a steel hawser, which winds itself round two huge drums placed on the engine platform at a distance of about eight feet apart. When it came to my turn to go through, I asked the engineer what would happen if the hawser broke.

"Ah, there, now you have met" he replied with a laugh. "I'm helpless if the rope breaks, and if I'm in the middle of the tunnel, why then somebody has to come and pull me out. I've been knocking about this tunnel twenty-one years, and I'm not sure that I didn't like the old engine better than this.

It worked on a chain, and if a link broke I could mend it in two or three hours. But if our cable breaks it takes two or three days to put it right, for we can't splice it. See that white mark? It marks half-way. You're just under Chapel-street now, and the Agricultural Hall is a bit further on.

Above one part of the underground canal water drips from the roof. It comes from the New River, which leaks into the canal, suggesting serious possibilities in the way of a deluge one day, though I am told there is not much danger.