

## Float No. 15 and 16 - Royal Canal - late 1800s (remains)

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### Royal Canal Float No. 15 and 16

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Two canal boats lie at Darcy's Bridge on the Royal Canal. They look old and damaged, and more than likely incite many a comment from canal walkers not native to the area, or from other visitors who may not know the history of trading boats on that element of the inland waterways system. For those that do, there are many fascinating stories, linked to other tales and families both in and from the surrounding area. One of these who can chronicle the story of these two craft quite well is Mr. Willie Leech. Willie's dad James was the last trader on the Royal Canal. These two boats are the last remnants of what was once a thriving business. The vessels are known as No. 15 and No. 16. Like the other elements of the inland waterways system, boats on the Royal were numbered. These were horse drawn boats so never had the M (Motor) suffix like those of the Grand Canal and River Barrow navigations. Both were private boats, No. 15 having been handed down to James Leech from his own father, and James then purchased No. 16 during the war from the Kelly's of Kilcock, another trading family on the Royal Canal.

James Leech was from the Summerhill area of central Dublin, just beside Ballybough Bridge, about a mile from Spencer Dock which is the link of the the Royal Canal to the River Liffey. James built up a substantial fuel business buying coal directly from the coal ships moored just outside Spencer Dock and hauling it back to the midlands. Some of his larger customers included Maynooth College, Shaws and St. Lomans Hospital in Mullingar. Bagged concrete to Longford and Mullingar along with flour and sugar and of course Guinness were also regular consignments from the city. Cargos into Dublin included turf which was sold by the bag straight from the boat at Ballybough and North Strand area of the city. An unusual cargo was 'mather' a mud similar to what is know as 'puddle' used by the Gas Company in Dublin, to line the lamps and gas grids of the street lighting system. The burnt slag from the mather was recycled, being returned to the midland farmers to use as a kind of fertilizer.

A trip to the city (known as a '3 day trick') needed regular stops to rest the horses, usually two of them for a 50 ton load. The crew would usually comprise 3 men, one at the bow (or at regular intervals down below cooking meals), one on the rudder and a third on the bank with the horse(s). Many of the animals used to pull boats had a previous life pulling either trams or dairy carts in Dublin. They were treated well when working on the boats, with special collars more heavily padded with straw. Fresh grass and the best possible oats from full nosebags at every meal break and of course plenty of fresh water were also the norm. A regular arrangement to rent private stables for them each overnight stop was in place, while the men slept in tight quarters on the craft. When the time came for the horses to retire from the canal, they were usually sold on to local farmers.

As the canal fell into more and more disrepair, the boats needed more regular visits to the dry docks, in both Spencer Dock and Mullingar, to keep them afloat. In the end they were tied up at Darcy's Bridge with the closure of the canal and act as a vivid reminder of the Royals commercial past.

Read the recollections of Willie Leech in an interview in 2001 with Brian Goggin in "The Last of the Horse Drawn Boats".