

# The Barge Sabrina Story

## Sabrina Barges

Six un-powered barges named Sabrina 1 to 6 were built by Charles Hill & Sons at Bristol in 1944, and No 5 is now the largest exhibit at the National Waterways Museum. Towed everywhere by tugs, they were mainly used for carrying 130 to 150 tons of imports from Avonmouth to Worcester or Stourport via the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal and the River Severn.



## The Barge Fleet

The 90ft long Sabrina barges were ordered by the Ministry of War Transport and initially joined the existing barge fleet of the Severn Carrying Company. This fleet was later taken over by what became British Waterways who by 1960 had 6 motor and about 20 dumb barges. Each barge was crewed by two men, who shared a cabin in the stern under the wheelhouse.

## Role of the Barges

The main role of the barges was to pick up imports from ships at Avonmouth and to carry them inland - mainly to Diglis Wharf at Worcester or Nelson's Wharf near Stourport. The principal cargoes were metals such as copper, zinc, steel and aluminium, and foodstuffs such as wheat, cheese, cocoa beans and tinned tomatoes.



## Avonmouth

At Avonmouth, a barge went alongside a ship, and the cargo was loaded by registered dockers. Then the crew replaced the hatch boards and sheets over the hold. If the cargo was particularly valuable, a wire was stretched back and forth across the top and a lead seal was attached.

*Black & white photographs courtesy of The Port of Bristol Authority*

*Colour photographs by Hugh Conway-Jones*

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## Sharpness

Approaching Sharpness, the tug and barges had to swing round to head into the last of the flood tide, and then at high water, they turned into the entrance. During these manoeuvres, each helmsman had to be careful to steer to keep the tow ropes taut, for if a rope went slack and then suddenly tightened, it was liable to break. Each helmsman kept an eye on the barge behind, and if that rope started to drop, he turned his wheel slightly to bring it taut again.



## Worcester and Stourport

At their destination, the crew could earn extra money helping to discharge the cargo. If the cargo was something desirable like tinned tomatoes, the crane driver was encouraged to drop a box, and then the crew had several enjoyable meals over the next few days!

## Decline

For many years, the barge fleet was very busy and operated profitably, but its function of moving imports to the Midlands was eroded during the 1960s by the growing use of containers and lorries. After struggling for a few years, the fleet was formally disbanded in 1969, although some barge movements continued into the early 1970s.

## Barges Remembered

Although the commercial use of barges had long ended, the importance of their former role was remembered when preparations were being made to establish the National Waterways Museum at Gloucester. Sabrina 5 was restored at R W Davis & Son's - Ship & Boat Builders yard at Saul. In 1988 she became an exhibit at the Museum. She has now been given a new role.



Access ways have been installed allowing her hold to be used as a performance venue for audiences of up to 90 people, first used at the Saul Canal Festival in July 2004.

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