

## **Rare canal sign collection to go under the hammer**

By Geoff Courtney

A selection of original and historical canal company signs collected over 50 years by a Sheffield couple will be going under the hammer on June 19 in a prestigious auction at the country estate of Sir William McAlpine.

The cast iron and enamel signs, some of which are estimated to sell for up to £400 due to their rarity, are part of a collection being sold by Kath Furniss following the death of her husband Stuart, a former schoolteacher who passed away last year at the age of 89.

Stuart and Kath were well-known within railwayana circles, and over the course of half a century they amassed a vast array of railway company cast iron and enamel signs, but such was the couple's passion in this particular sphere of the hobby that they also collected a wide variety of canal company signs.

The entire collection will be sold at Sir William's estate at Fawley Hill near Henley-on-Thames in an auction organised jointly by Kath, Great Central Railwayana, Great Northern Railwayana and Ian Wright, a close friend of the couple for many years.

There is expected to be considerable interest within the waterways fraternity in the 25-plus canal signs, as such a large and historical selection rarely comes onto the market at a single sale.

A majority are cast iron, of which about half are boundary posts and weight restriction signs. There are also mileposts, and signs concerning cycling on the towpath, trespassing and the throwing of rubbish, bathing and fishing, and caution to boatmen. The canal company names are carried either in full or identified by initials.

The most highly valued pair, at up to £400 apiece, are an LNER Witham Navigation sign about trespassing and depositing rubbish on the banks or in the drain, which the catalogue describes as "very rare," and a Midland Railway sign re 'bathing or fishing in this canal.'

Close behind at up to £250-£300 valuations are two Shropshire Union Railways and Canal Co signs concerning cycling on the towing path dated 1901 and a bridge weight restriction, a Grand Union Canal Co warning that the towing path is private property, and a Sharpness New Docks & Gloucester & Birmingham Navigation Co cast-iron notice advising that a bridge was insufficient to carry weights “beyond the ordinary traffic of the district.”

Further signs with up to £200 estimates are a third from the Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Co, in this instance carrying a caution to boatmen about unloading stone on the wharf, a boundary post bearing the initials S&SY NVGn (Sheffield & South Yorkshire Navigation) on one side and MS&L Ry (Manchester Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway) on the reverse, and a Warwick & Napton Canal Navigation bridge weight sign.

Other fully-titled signs are examples from the Sheffield & South Yorkshire Navigation Co, the Leeds & Liverpool Canal Co, the Forth & Clyde Canal, and North Walsham Canal Co, with estimates up to £150. Initialled companies include Grand Junction, Monmouthshire Canal, Birmingham Canal Navigations, Shropshire Union Canal, and Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

Another set of initials on a cast-iron boundary post (GN&GE. FN) abbreviates the longest title within the selection – Great Northern & Great Eastern Joint Railway Fosse Navigation Canal.

A milepost bearing the initials and number ‘GNR, WN ¾’ from the Great Northern Railway-owned Witham Canal will also be going under the hammer, as will four Thames Conservancy private pleasure vessel enamel plates dating from 1936 to 1948.

Great Central Railwayana director Dave Jones said: “The canal signs in the sale comprise a particularly fine collection which will surely appeal to the canal fraternity, including historians.”

The 550-lot auction is being held at Sir William’s Fawley Hill estate near Henley-on-Thames, starting at 11am, with viewing the previous day, June 18, from noon-5pm, and on the morning of the sale.

Sir William is a renowned railway enthusiast who readily agreed to open up his estate for the auction. He told *Towpath Talk*: “It will be quite something. It was a lifetime’s collection by

Stuart and Kath, and should attract very considerable interest among the canal and railwayana collecting community.”

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Caption to canal sign pic 1

A North Walsham Canal Co weight limit cast iron sign that will be going under the hammer at a specialist auction on June 19. PHOTO: GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAYANA

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Caption to canal sign pic 2

This cast iron Sharpness New Docks & Gloucester & Birmingham Navigation Co bridge weight sign which will be auctioned on June 19 carries a top estimate of £250. PHOTO: GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAYANA

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