

## Wood, wind, weather by Roy Webster

"Put that silly comic away and come with me. We have an important job to do," instructed the Old Man. "What? Go out in this?" questioned the Boy Roy instantly, looking up from his weekly Hotspur. "It's blowing a houlie out there". Indeed it was for inside, the sound of a blistering north easterly gale was rattling the windows. And, although the deciduous trees were bare of leaves, the branches were swaying and creaking an ominous message that the next mighty gust could bring a hefty limb of wood crashing down on an unprotected skull with serious consequences.

"I'm not going outside today in this weather. Can't it wait until tomorrow?" muttered The Boy. It was Saturday morning and they had the whole of the weekend ahead of them. "No it cannot," declared the Old Man firmly. "Old Manny Shinwell, the Government fuel Minister, reckons there's not enough coal to see us through the rest of the winter so we have to stock up with firewood. Go! Get your wellies on. It's time to saw up a tree."

Bracing themselves against the biting force eight battering, the couple headed for the garden shed where a two-man cross cut and a single hand saws were lifted off their pegs.

"Where are we going?" enquired The Boy, fearful of being crowned by flying timber.

"We're taking the row boat into The Canal and with no-one else likely to be out and about in this violent weather we'll saw up that old birch tree that came down last year to rest on the peat bog along the opposite bank," confided the Old Man, while rolling another wad of best St Julian into the blue rizla cigarette paper for his third smoke of the day.

In was early January 1947. On New Year's Day the coal industry had been Nationalised by the Labour government with the National Coal Board in sole control. Although the war was won, solid carbon fuel was still restricted to 15cwts per family per annum, and worse still, there were worrying doubts whether continuity of the allocation could be sustained if the weather turned really nasty for days on end. So, with that in mind, the Old Man nosed the family rowboat downstream to the far bank of the Fen swamp that was once a huge open Broad until Mother Nature transformed it into alder carr bog at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"Be careful where you stand, there are mud holes in there 18ft deep," He warned as The Boy disembarked leaping out of the prow onto a precariously risky waterlogged footing.

The ancient birch lay horizontal amid moist undergrowth, its stub extending tentacles of roots into the air, resembling a stranded octopus. At the opposite end of the peeling silver skin trunk, branches and twigs were in an advanced state of decay.



"Grab hold of the other end of this cross cut and we'll get started," grunted the Old Man. "Don't push, just pull on the handle and we'll get along fine."

This was arm aching work for the 14 year old Boy but he stuck it out for almost three hours until four six-foot lengths of the main tree trunk were laying end-to-end in the dank canal bank environment, now oozing obnoxious volatile marsh gas around the trampling feet. "How we gonna get 'em home?" wondered The Boy. "We're gorn ta roop 'em and float 'em," wheezed the Old Man in deep Norfolk vernacular through another acrid fog of air polluting tobacco smoke while reaching down for the wagon rope coiled neatly under the boat's front seat.

Under the influence of a rapidly-rising spring tide in the North Sea, water levels in the lowest reach of the Canal via the River Ant had been steadily lifting all morning and the trimmed buoyant timbers were now well afloat, defying gravity.

With the branches now lopped off by the small handsaw, the bare trunk sections were strung together lengthwise and the Old Man skillfully manipulated the oars in order to attach the ropes to the rear seat supports. The floating bounty was towed line astern to the family mooring, where it was winched ashore by a block and tackle set-up, awaiting there to be sawn into manageable logs and axe riven as required to keep the home fires burning and the wash house copper heated on laundry days. Thus, with the addition of a substantial horde of war time solid fuel which somehow mysteriously had become stored underground in the crumbling Anderson air raid shelter, the family would definitely remain warm until the welcome dawn of spring

Next morning, the boggy canal bank was revisited and the remnant branches of the tree were chopped into manageable lengths by father and son who gathered the mini logs and kindling wood twigs in sugar beet pulp sacks.

The Boy heaved a sigh of relief. The worst of the work was done and he was ready on the oars wanting to row home. But he had to wait for the Old Man was not on board but bent over, smearing oozing black mud over the fresh cut stump and decorating it with sphagnum marsh moss.

The visible sawdust was being scuffed into the soggy terrain and footprints camouflaged by transplanted rushes and reeds.

"No-one coming this way will ever know we have helped ourselves to some of their firewood," smirked the Old Man, who had succeeded in obliterating what might have been spotted and possibly described as a minor crime scene.

His cap was set at a jaunty, triumphant angle. He knew it was a job well done and that assessment required no further testimony. For on January 29, the nation was gripped by a winter of repeated snowstorms with temperatures plunging to minus 16F.

Road and rail travel was blocked by impenetrable snow drifts up to twenty foot high, fifteen towns and countless villages were cut off, power supplies failed and some trapped Norfolk villagers were airlifted food parcels distributed by parachutes of the Royal Air Force.

At the family home, no coal was delivered for weeks and the only route to the village shops or a local dairy farm was a hike across fields or along the frozen Dilham Canal or Taylors Cut, while snow bound garden root vegetables had to be persuaded with the aid of an iron crow bar to be released from frozen rock hard soil. Compared with much of the country, those problems were slight. Thanks to the fire wood from old birch tree and a mound of suspect war time black market coke the Boy Roy and his parents remained warm and healthy until the welcome arrival of the great end of winter thaw.

This resulted in the worst Norfolk floods since 1912. And swollen by a dangerous inland surge of abnormally high sea tides, water levels in the Taylors Cut and the Dilham stretch of the NWD Canal as far as Honing Lock, rose by more than three feet, flooding the alder carrs and the cattle grazing marshes. Fortunately, the family cottage home was some four feet above normal water levels and safe; as was the ancient row boat, now moored alongside the remnants of the seasonal winter cabbage crop and drowned carrots and turnips.

And for The Boy the added new year holiday bonus was his six mile cycle ride to the North Walsham Paston school being repeatedly blocked by drifting snow blizzards prompting his form master Mr. Grantham-Hill to bleakly note on a dismal end of term report: "This boy needs to work harder to make up for absence!"

However, he was not the only absentee. School trains and buses also failed to beat that fierce seasonal weather resulting in many an empty desk in Classics Three during that winter term.

On the plus side the killer myxomatosis disease had not yet infected the local wild rabbit population and The Boy Roy and his pet albino white ferret Jack seized the opportunity to supplement the family meat ration during those dull days of relentless arctic conditions.

The big thaw arrived too late to resume fishing the NWD Canal that season but the following June 16<sup>th</sup> was worth waiting for. It heralded one of the warmer summers on record producing stunning catches of most coarse fish species at all points from Ebridge to the Wayford River Ant confluence, most notably from those areas of water deepened by the army dredgers during the early summer of 1940.

That scheme was intended to hamper the threat of invasion by enemy tank forces during the early days of world war two. Instead the military accidentally created a superb post war canal, environment both for the aquatic piscatorial residents and their happier hunters recovering from the mental and physical stresses of a relentless six year war.

And unlike huge numbers of coarse fish that perished in the frozen oxygen starved still water lakes and ponds that winter, the vital aeration of the NWD canal via water vole burrows, hollow marginal reed mace, deep land drainage and steady flows proved the vital aquatic life savior during those turbulent weeks of fierce Arctic conditions.

It was those weather hardy resilient fish stocks that not only succeeded in surviving the 1947 winter battering and again during the wandering into the UK of the Eastern Russian deep freeze of 1963, that were the source of the amazing lasting vitality of all the prominent freshwater species currently thriving and delighting keen anglers on the restored and revived NWD canal.

All users of this free facility should display the utmost respect for Mother Nature's quite remarkable recovery. Not forgetting the unstinting efforts of the human volunteers whose devotion to this worthy cause remains as strong now as it was in the beginning and continue to make it happen.

