

back in 1998 I was running South Midland Water Transport Ltd and the fleet then contained three vintage butty boats, all ex-Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd. (FMC). Their dates of construction ranged from 1897 to 1921 and they were all in good structural condition, having been rescued from virtual dereliction by the Company Chairman, Malcolm Burge. Two boats, *Australia* and *Fazeley*, were in regular work and the third, *Sunny Valley*, was kept in reserve. *Fazeley* worked from Stoke Bruerne in the fuel retail business during winter and in general cargo carrying during the summer months, paired with motor boat *Clover*, while *Australia* was on loan to Alan and Trish Akhurst, paired with their own motor boat *Archimedes*, also in the fuel retail trade.

Victorian canal boats

I had just returned from a lengthy trip to the Kennet & Avon Canal with *Clover & Fazeley* in the Spring of 1998 when, through the agency of Tim Coghlan, I received a telephone call from a television film company enquiring whether I could find any boats suitable for representing mid-Victorian canal boats, since they were about to start filming an episode in the Inspector Morse series based on Colin Dexter's novel *The Wench is Dead*. As it happened, I had read this particular book and knew that Dexter had based the plot on an actual murder that took place at Rugeley on the Trent & Mersey Canal in 1839. He had transferred the action to the Oxford Canal and had moved the date forward as well, but the plot was still quite recognisable to anyone who knew the original story.

What was wanted were a number of boats of Victorian aspect, and here I felt we were onto a winner. There were, and still are, a number of ex-Grand Union boats available, but their shape is all wrong for anything pre-1930s if one is to be a purist; however our ex-FMC boats were shapely things and the hulls really looked the business. But there was a snag. Although there are no photographs of narrow boats earlier than c1870,



On the drip: Morse is taken to hospital following his collapse during a lecture by the American criminologist Dr Millicent Van Buren – seen left (Lisa Eichhorn) - on *Criminal Detection in the Victorian Period*. He disagrees with her conclusions on the famous murder by the boatmen of Joanna Franks on the Oxford Canal and begins to investigate from his sickbed. (ITV/Rex Features)



One day on the K&A: Inspector Morse (John Thaw) and his new sidekick DC Kershaw (Matthew Finney) only filmed on the canal for one day, as all the other canal scenes were set in Victorian times. Morse said, 'It always pays to revisit the crime scene, Kershaw', to which Kershaw replied, 'Never one to like canals. Always seem made for bodies.' (ITV/Rex Features)

we knew from artists' impressions that the working gear was rigged very differently from later on in the century, and also the livery colours were probably very different from those of late Victorian times, of which photographs are much more common. I suggested that the television company consult the well known canal artist Tony Lewery with a view to getting the livery details right and they replied that he was in fact already on his way!

Preparing the boats

Alan Akhurst of *Archimedes* was enthusiastic about being involved and his expertise as a carpenter and general handyman came in most useful. My diary records that Tony arrived with his travelling workshop-cum-studio aboard *Alcor* on 9th May and, having agreed terms with the film company, we set about a three week intensive programme of preparation before the first week of June. I had had experience of television film making previously so was able to persuade the film company that canal boats can be moved from location to location but not necessarily overnight. There were four main areas of location shots, The Black Country Living Museum,

Bringing the dead wench to life Part III

David Blagrove recalls his role in the filming of the Victorian canal scenes in June 1998, converting three old working butties into four even older ones, and moving them to far-flung locations, for the *Inspector Morse* episode *The Wench is Dead*.

Braunston, Bruce Tunnel near Savernake and Honeystreet, both the latter on the Kennet & Avon Canal.

Persuading the director that one could not physically move boats from Braunston to Savernake overnight was difficult. But eventually we received a timetable for shooting which looked possible from the boating point of view, although there would have to be some long days boating put in. Still, it was at least in June and at a reasonably quiet time on the cut, before the main holidays and vacations start. In fact it became necessary to finish *Australia* and *Sunny Valley* in time for them to go to the Braunston Boat Show on 22nd May, while *Fazeley* was put on hold pending the completion of a carrying job, due to end on 27th.

Disguises

The livery problem was solved by the construction of false panels that fitted closely over the cabin sides, while the cabin roofs were covered with vinyl, fitted professionally by a carpet



David Blagrove at Stoke Breurne during the boat conversions - on *Clover*, with *Fazeley* yet to 'go into make-up' breasted-up and stern just visible beyond. (Tim Coghlan)



'Tony arrived with his traveling workshop-cum-studio aboard *Alcor*': Canal artist Tony Lewry seen on the case at Stoke Breurne. He is supervising his assistant with the painting of the false panels to convert the former FMC butty *Australia* into the Shroppie Fly *Barbara Bray*. (Tim Coghlan)

fitter and painted as required. The main difficulty was fixing the false sides to *Australia*, for she had been rebuilt with a steel rather than a wooden cabin. After a brief but disastrous experiment with glue, Alan managed to pop rivet them and afterwards the holes in the steelwork were plugged. Names of course had to be changed for the filming, and *Australia* was renamed *Barbara Bray* and her owners' name altered to Pickfords, who were also canal carriers in those days.

After many hours toil, often interrupted by rain, the boats were ready by Thursday 21st, when the *Barbara Bray* left for Braunston behind *Archimedes*. We left Stoke Breurne the next morning with *Fazeley*, now loaded with recyclables for Shanks & McEwan Ltd behind *Clover*, and *Sunny Valley* behind *Greyhound*. Almost immediately a drama occurred as we entered Blisworth Tunnel. A red lamp was being waved and by it I caught a glimpse of white paintwork. My immediate reaction was that *Sunny Valley* had slipped her cross straps, but no, it was merely Ken Price's mini working boat *Chipp* that had suffered a minor malfunction and was being shafted out stern-first. At Blisworth we came up with *Archimedes* & *Australia* just untying, so what with our three pairs and the rear being brought up by working boats *Lupin* and *Alcor*, there was an impressive collection of boats heading for Braunston.



Two boats for the price of one: *Fazeley* was given different names and owners on either side, with aliases *Prince Regent* and *Hannah*. 'It was to cause considerable puzzlement to certain Thames lockkeepers.' (David Blagrove)



The Morse team at the 1998 Braunston Boat Show where the *Barbara Bray* was required to open the show. L/R Canal artist Tony Lewry, Simon Ainley (BW Braunston Canal Manager) author Colin Dexter, David Blagrove, and Tim Coghlan of Braunston Marina, with the *Barbara Bray* beneath Butchers Bridge. (Derek Pratt)

Star of the Show

The next day the *Barbara Bray* was required to open the Boat Show, towed into the marina by *Archimedes* with Morse author Colin Dexter aboard, and much posing took place. Then it was a matter of throwing the passengers off and Alan departing immediately after the morning parade of historic narrow boats. The *Barbara Bray* had to be at the Black Country Living Museum for Tuesday morning, so "no hanging about" was the order of the day. In fact he rang me on Monday afternoon to say that the boats were in position and I breathed a sigh of relief. First objective achieved!

While at Braunston Tony Lewery painted new names on *Fazeley*, ready for her film debut later in the programme. It was decided to give her different names and owners on either side. This meant that the film company had two boats for the price of one by the simple expedient of winding the boat! It was also to cause considerable puzzlement to certain Thames lockkeepers, who were used to seeing *Fazeley*, but had no record of her aliases *Prince Regent* and *Hannah*, but I digress.

On Monday I handed the pair over to Malcolm Burge for delivery of the recyclables while I returned home to sort out paperwork and draw money for the crews' subsistence before leaving for the filming at the Black Country Living Museum. The Museum was standing in for Banbury Wharf and made a most convincing background, with plenty of smoke effects, beloved of television film producers. Filming began at lunchtime and we were kept busy with loading property sandbags into *Barbara Bray* in order to simulate a load. Actors

had to be instructed in such matters as which way to shove the tiller and how to handle lines convincingly, and the boats were constantly on the move within the basin as different camera angles were tried, and numerous takes put in the can. The weather meanwhile deteriorated and became steadily more miserable until a wrap was declared at 7.00 pm.

It was then that I discovered that Alan's crew had unwittingly caused a problem in one of the nearby pubs. One of his mates, who had a small-holding, had produced some herbal tobacco and, this being long before the smoking ban, had lit up in the bar the night before, causing the management to eject the entire crew on suspicion of smoking "suspicious substances"! Because of this we were obliged to go further in search of refreshment; eventually we found a welcome at *The Fountain*.

My overnight abode being under *Archimedes* cloths on a camp bed, I was disturbed once by the bed collapsing beneath me, but otherwise spent a peaceful night. One advantage of film making is that the catering is usually excellent, and the site canteen was able to produce a superb breakfast. Filming took place all that morning, after which we had to prepare the *Barbara Bray* for the next set up, back at Braunston. The cloths



'We had a bunch of actors who couldn't steer a boat': said Director Robert Knights, seen here briefing the team at the Black Country museum. (ITV/Rex Features)

had to be removed, a ton of sandbags loaded along with seven large poly tanks, each capable holding about one tonne of water, then the cloths were replaced and tying down, always a longish business. The lift bridge across the Museum Arm had to be laboriously cranked up and at last, at 4.10 pm we were able to get away. We tied by the concert hall near Old Turn in Birmingham that night and all went for a well-deserved meal.

For the time being my boating was over; I had to return home and finish getting *Fazeley* ready, now that she had returned from her recycling trip. On arriving home later next morning I found that my wife had succumbed to a viral infection and was in bed, so I had to become a nurse as well as other duties. Fortunately, although uncomfortable, the attack was not too serious and she was up and about after a couple of days.

Resetting the boats

As with the other boats the deckboard, crutches and top cloths all had to come off and a nineteenth-century-style set of running gear installed. The top planks curved downwards from the mast forward to a small stand at the fore end of the



Standing in for Banbury Wharf: 'The Black Country Living Museum made a most convincing background, with plenty of smoke effects, beloved of television producers.' (ITV/Rex Features)

hold, and a similar curved plank inserted at the cabin end. This was particularly difficult, since the existing cabin had been lengthened somewhat and for the film it had to be faked so as to appear that the cabin was its original length. Consequently there was nothing with which to secure the sternmost end of the top planks. The problem was solved by using the existing fitting at the end of the real cabin, securing the foremost part of the stern plank by lashing it down hard,



Death Boat: Joanna Franks (Juliet Cowan) is helped into the forward cabin on the *Barbara Bray* – a voyage that for her or someone else would be their last. Her carpet bag, seen here, was never found, which aroused Morse's suspicions. (ITV/Rex Features)



'The Barge Inn' at Honeystreet in Morse's time: The inspector can be seen sitting outside drinking with DC Kershaw, with his famous red Jaguar beyond. It was to this pub that the body of Joanna Franks was brought, and 'enormous efforts were made to present its environs as a Victorian scene'. (ITV/Rex Features)

inserting an intermediate prop and then pulling the planks down in a sexy curve until its stern end touched a cabin block. All this sounds simple, but the natural springiness of the wood meant that, although we soaked the plank well before pulling it down, there was always the possibility of a breaking rope causing the plank to become a sort of Roman Ballista and go twanging upwards, taking any body or thing standing on it and projecting him or it skywards. Fortunately this never happened. This brought us to 1st June, by which time filming was due to begin at Braunston.

Back to Braunston

This time the scene was supposed to be Iffley Lock, below Oxford, at which the accused boatmen were arrested for murder. It was in fact at Bridge 3, just below the second lock. More trimming of the *Barbara Bray* was required, for she proved to be unstable when the poly tanks were filled with water. Eventually more sandbags stabilised her. I forget how many rehearsals were required and then takes before the Director decreed a wrap, but they proved exhausting as time and again the loaded boat had to be pulled this way and that,



The Bruce Tunnel on the K&A from the western end: The eastern end of this short tunnel was where the body of Joanna Franks was found. The approach cuttings were in much demand during the filming. (Tim Coghlan)



Drunk in charge: At Banbury, Joanna Franks had alighted from the *Barbara Bray* to complain at the canal office of the boatmen's drunken behaviour, but she then went back to join them – despite offers of using the coach – and to participate in the drinking. This scene was filmed in the approaches to the Bruce Tunnel. (ITV/Rex Features)

as suitably attired Victorian policemen poured down the side of Bridge 2 onto the towpath to arrest the miscreants. My diary records that we did not finish until 7.30 pm.

Alan and Trish and crew now had to take their boats to the far end of the tunnel for a shoot in the small hours the following night. They then had to go to Norton Junction to wind and set off southwards down the Oxford Canal and the Thames for the next locations on the Kennet & Avon Canal. I made my farewells, saying that I would meet them above Blakes Lock, Reading the following Sunday, the 7th June.

Down the Thames

Going south with *Clover & Fazeley* from Stoke Bruerne I had a variety of crews as far as Brentford, after which my wife Jean, now fully recovered, and Peter and Carol Trinder arrived. The weather continued to be indifferent, but traffic on the Thames was light. Eventually, just before 7.00 pm on Sunday 7th we came sweeping up the Dreadnought Reach towards Kennet Mouth. We were within a hundred yards of the entrance to the K&A, when a pair of working narrow boats appeared heading downstream and swung across our fore ends into the Kennet. It was *Archimedes* & the *Barbara Bray*. If we had tried we couldn't have arranged it neater. Amazingly enough, Alan and all his crew were so enthralled by the entrance to the Kennet that nobody glanced in our direction and we rapidly closed up behind them as they went under the first railway bridge. Under the arch I loosed off a lengthy blast on the horn and was aware of a concerted jump from our colleagues ahead. The look on their faces as they gazed astern was indeed comical.

Up the Kennet

Our journey up river was reasonably uneventful, although *Archimedes's* steerer was taken by surprise by the sharp bends above Burghfield. Above Newbury my pair experienced a momentary wedging in Guyers lock, but the other pair managed to pull us out and the next attempt was successful. We were indeed making excellent time until we arrived at Dun Mill lock just below Hungerford. Here we suffered another minor catastrophe when a mate of mine who had joined us for the day managed to lift a top gate out as the boats rose in the

lock. Fortunately *Archimedes* had recently been rebottomed in steel and the old wooden kelson had been sawn into blocks and used as ballast. We soon commandeered some of these and with a handy wedge were able use an edgewise top plank as a lever, pulling the gate back with a block and tackle and holding it firm as we did so. Two people gently raised the gate with the plank and it slid back into place with no trouble at all. We were on our way again within the hour, but it cost my mate a serious round of drinks shortly after in the John of Gaunt. Meanwhile somebody had reported the gate to BW, who were exceedingly puzzled on their arrival to find everything as normal. The foreman, with uncanny instinct, traced us to the pub and peace was eventually made.

Location at Bruce Tunnel

The following morning saw us at the east end of Bruce Tunnel ready for more location work. This was where the murdered girl's body is found in the canal and *Fazeley* can be seen as the boat in the background. One might think this was a simple job, but Oh no! What with dreadful weather and extra takes we were busy here for two days, but managed to get away on the Thursday evening and got down Wootton Rivers locks



These shoes just don't fit: Morse revisits evidence used in the Victorian trial with the acerbic pathologist Dr Laura Hobson (Clare Holman) The shoes were the wrong size for the body that was found in the canal and showed no evidence of wear from canal boating. (ITV/Rex Features)



The case within a case: Morse, assisted by his friend Adele Cecil (Judy Loe), discovers a false bottom to the case left on the boat, containing fly leaves for a music hall performance by *The Great Donovan, Emperor of All Illusionists and his lovely assistant Joanna*. It provided the vital clue for establishing who the real murderers were. (ITV/Rex Features)

that evening. The boats were filthy after two days work in wet and muddy conditions and on the way round to Honeystreet next morning a great deal of mopping-off and polishing had to be done. It was here that we saw John Thaw for the one and only time, for of course the story is set at two different times: one in the nineteenth century and the other at the present, when Morse manages to solve the mystery of whodunnit? Honeystreet appears in both eras, and *Archimedes* had her own brief moment of glory when Morse walked past on the towpath as Trish Akhurst stood in the doorholes.

Enormous efforts were made to present the environs of *The Barge Inn* as a Victorian scene. Outbuildings were thatched, windows replaced, signwriting done; when the film was finally shown the sequence lasted about five seconds! By Sunday 14th filming had at last finished and the great clear-up began. Sandbags had to be unloaded from both *Fazeley* and the *Barbara Bray*, and the water ballast emptied into the bilges before lifting out the poly tanks, after which the bilges had to be pumped out. The Victorian running gear and cloths came down, to be replaced by a more convenient modern set of planks. All was finally complete by evening and we all celebrated the end of a tiring but worthwhile contract in *The Barge Inn*.

Journey home

The journey home was reasonably free from trauma, but one small incident is worth recording. When passing through Henley on the way upstream we noticed that piles were being driven in mid-river ready for the Regatta Season. On the way back heats were being rowed for the ladies events and I noted that boats were asked to go through the course outside the piles. We duly did this, but Alan, following some while later only saw the notice at the last moment. There are several escape channels through the booms, but before he reached the first one he was accosted by an irate gent in a fast motor launch and white-topped cap who sternly ordered him to desist and to turn round. Alan did not see the point of this, since the escape channel was not far off, and continued on his way. Whereupon the irate gent boomed that he, Alan, would be reported to his owners and solemnly took down the details of Pickfords painted on the cabin of the supposed *Barbara Bray*. History does not relate what the modern Pickfords firm made of this complaint. 