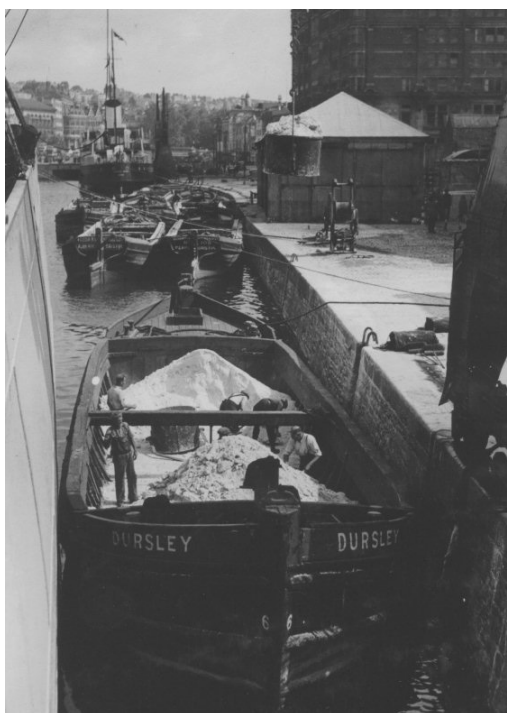


A Boat named *Dursley*

Andrew Barton

Many local people may not realise that the town of Dursley once had a working barge named after it. *Dursley*, along with her sisters, *Uley*, *Cam*, *Nibley* and *Berkeley* amongst others, was one of a fleet which spent most of its active life plying back and forth between Bristol, Avonmouth and Gloucester via the Severn and the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal.

Dursley was built in 1926 at Monks Meadow, Gloucester at the works of Joseph Barnard¹. She was of wooden construction, had a registered tonnage of 39 tons and carried the official number 145630. From new, she joined the fleet of G.T. Beard Ltd whose founder, George Thomas Beard, was an official stevedore in Gloucester but unfortunately died in 1927, not long after *Dursley* was built, after falling at his home. After his death the company continued to be run by his two sons who employed John Cooke as barge master and the company was reformed as G.T. Beard (1929) Ltd. John Cooke eventually bought the business in 1947 and passed it to his brother, Benjamin, who later became Lord Mayor of Gloucester. Benjamin Cooke retained the G.T. Beard company name and continued to run it until it went into liquidation in 1955.



Dursley at work in Bristol Docks
Bristol Port Authority, c1957

During her early years, some of the loads carried by *Dursley* included timber to Price-Walker and Moreland's match factory in Gloucester². During all this time she was typically towed by the tugs of the Severn & Canal Carrying Company Ltd which had been formed back in 1874. *Stanegarth*, *Primrose* and *Addie* were some of the regular tugs in use and the journey was essentially a one-way trip with the barges going back empty³. This last fact perhaps contributed in no insignificant way to the downfall in the industry. Following the collapse of G.T. Beard (1929) Ltd, *Dursley* continued in the employ of Fred Ashmead & Son Ltd until she reached the end of her working life in 1959.

After the end of an active life, perhaps the best fate a boat could typically expect would be a rapid trip to the breakers and for her raw materials to be reused. No such fate awaited the *Dursley* though. Around 1963, *Dursley*, now essentially a hulk, was towed up the Severn and ran aground on the bank at Purton, near Sharpness. Many locals will have seen some of the boats on the foreshore at this stretch of the river and perhaps wondered as to their story. The tale of the *Dursley* makes up just one small part of the history of this intriguing location.

That this part of the story can be told at all is in no small part due to the ongoing research of an avid local enthusiast, Paul Barnett, who has taken on the mammoth task of discovering the origins of all the boats that still linger on the riverbank before their time eventually runs out. Paul certainly has the qualifications to do the research. He originally trained as a Hydrographic Surveyor and engaged in a number of international bathymetric surveys, including a sub-bottom profile of the wreck site of the German pocket battleship *Bismarck*.

Upon returning to Gloucestershire, Paul turned his attention closer to home and embarked on an in-depth investigation of the remains of 81 vessels which lie forlorn on this windswept shore of the Severn, there surrendering their remaining strength to protect the region and to aid deposition.

Taking up the tale of the *Dursley* again, it was beached at Purton through the efforts of her temporary skipper, Eric Aldridge, crewman Doug Munday and bank crewman Dick Woodward together with the tug *Resolute*, her skipper Oliver Powell and crewman Charles Langford. The technique was simple - at high tide, the barge was towed at full speed towards the shore and before it was too late the tug veered out of the way letting the barge drive itself up on to the bank. A rope from the barge was then looped around a fixture onshore and passed back to the on-board winch whereupon it would pull itself further aground to its final resting place⁴.



The *Dursley* not long after beaching at Purton.
Immediately behind her is the *Edith*
The David Wheeler Collection, 1965



Little now remains of the *Dursley* 40 years on
Andrew Barton, 25th June 2006

The story doesn't end there though. As more boats got cast aside on the bank at Purton and the years advanced, so recollections dimmed and receded into distant memory. After all this time, just how is it possible to discover the story behind each one? Paul was helped significantly in this area by work done in the early days and during the intervening years. In the case of the *Dursley*, a visit by maritime historian and author, David MacGregor, to the site soon after her beaching enabled the official number, 145630, to be taken off the main beam⁵. No name was visible so the number provided the crucial link. The house colours of Fred Ashmead & Son, a black band on a grey background, could also be seen on the rudder post and they are still just visible today. Plotting the locations of the boats in this way, when much more was intact and visible, proved to be very important. For the *Dursley* it was just in time as much evidence was later to disappear when the main beam was salvaged and built into the chimney breast of a house in Gloucestershire.

Now in 2006, the *Dursley* still survives, just, although very little remains. Paul's task continues, at the time of writing, only 4 out of the 81 known to be on the bank have still to reveal their secrets.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the help and information provided by Paul Barnett in writing this short article. His extensive knowledge of the history of the Purton boat graveyard and his evident enthusiasm for the subject serves to keep the memories of this slowly disappearing feature alive. Paul continues to research the area, often conducting guided tours of the site. He is always keen to discover more and if anyone has further information he can be contacted by telephone on 07833 143231 or by email on barnadillo@aol.com.

References and Notes

1. Mercantile Navy List 1930.
2. Port of Gloucester Arrivals & Departures Records 1937-1948 - Gloucestershire Archives D2460/4/5/1-4.
3. Conway-Jones, Hugh (compiler), *Working Life on Severn & Canal*, Alan Sutton, 1990.
4. Taped interview with Eric Aldridge by Paul Barnett in 2002.
5. Taped interview with David MacGregor by Paul Barnett in 2002.