

New boats could be built on the bank. They were slid into the water on completion broadside on. This was done between the dock and the Factory Street bridge. For repairs, boats floated into the dock. After stop planks had been inserted behind them to cut them off from the canal, the dock was emptied by opening a sluice gate in the bottom. A brick culvert carried the water under the bed of the canal and out into the River Cherwell. The dock goes on working in that way today.

When Herbert Tooley died in 1987, he had been the boatbuilder in Banbury for virtually his whole life of 73 years and his father before him. He was a craftsman of the old school, who could and did turn his hand to anything. Although brought up with wooden boats and the skills of woodworking, he was quite content to straighten out a steel propeller shaft, decoke an engine or replace a stripped screw thread. But it was mainly with wood that he excelled. And with his death one of the last links with the heyday of canal working boats was broken.

Our boat Clara, so renamed by us because that was the name of her luckless predecessor, was built in 1906. She was a 70-foot Shropshire Union coal boat, originally horse-drawn, and was converted in the early 1950s by Malcolm Braine at Brownhills. We came to be Herbert Tooley's longest-term customer and therefore friend, as he looked after Clara for 30 years.

She had become like the well-kept penknife – two new handles and four new blades but still the same old knife. In a succession of refits, her elm bottom planks and oak side planks had all been replaced, and two new cabins had been added as the weather took its toll of the old. After each docking the seams in the hull had to be repacked with oakum (shreds of old rope) to keep the water out; this was rammed home with a long-headed caulking hammer and a broad-nosed chisel.

Because the bottom boards shrank when out of the canal for any length of time, it was essential to find the cracks and fill them; otherwise the water would have come flooding in. To find leaks, Herbert Tooley used the simple but effective technique of filling the empty boat with water and watching where the water came out!

He also knew how vital it was to have cross-beams on the floor of the empty dock for the boat to rest on. Otherwise all his good work might have gone to waste when the dock was refilled with water: the flat bottom of the boat on a muddy floor could create a bond too strong for the rising water to break, and the boat would be left stuck to the bottom underwater.