CANAL BANK ‘COMMUNITY’?
LOUGHBOROUGH’S BOAT FAMILIES

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The ebbing and flowing of ‘community studies’ has recently bequeathed some discussion about the relative importance of practice or action, or social relations, as against symbolism, sentiment or ethos. Which is prior? Can one exist without the influence of the other? Over 30 years ago, Mary Prior examined these issues (if not in current terminology) in her deep study of Fisher Row in Oxford, a canal-side ‘community’. Superficially, Fisher Row seems paradigmatic of these urban edge ‘communities’. Here, as part of a longer-time project on the development of Loughborough, an analysis is made of a seemingly corresponding canal-side neighbourhood of boatmen inhabiting the streets around Regent Wharf in that town, located precisely in the context of recent discussion about the character of ‘community’.

Canal building and improvements in river navigation have attracted multi-faceted research, but often not inter-related to present a coherent, overall image. So complex are the issues. The technological feats perhaps received the earliest and probably most continuous interest, initiated by the enthusiasm of L. T. C. Rolt, and David and Charles Hadfield. As a consequence, biographies of particular navigations have constantly appeared, not least, in this current context, The Leicester Line, by Phil Stephens.¹ Rolt was, however, also engaged by the people of the waterways, and his and his wife’s enchantment has been represented on television and the wider media.² That aspect is addressed here, as will be elucidated further below. In the economic sphere, the financial investment and speculation which supported the construction of the waterways has been expertly addressed by Ward, so that the popular imagination of the ‘canal mania’ has been eruditely situated in the contemporary political economy.³

Although Rolt and his acolytes were concerned to illuminate the life of the boat families, their concentration relied almost exclusively on oral accounts and visual illustration, thus refracted through later and declining livelihood, life-course and lived environment. It was not until the exploration of Fisher Row in Oxford by Mary Prior that a more holistic representation of a ‘boat community’ became available. To a large extent, this present analysis of the boat families of the lower Soar Navigation has been stimulated by, complements and contrasts with Prior’s prior considerations. It also arises, however, from a longer-term project on Loughborough. The canal-side neighbourhood of Loughborough cannot be considered in isolation from the other boat families in villages between Belgrave and the debouching of the river

navigation into the Trent, nor without comparison with the boat ‘community’, its attributes and facets, in Fisher Row.

What follows is therefore a longish introduction into the characteristics of the boat ‘community’ in Fisher Row, and a more contemporary dissection of the notion(s) of ‘community’ by contrast with neighbourhood. In the case of ‘community’ in Fisher Row, there is a coalescence of the C-word as occupational integrity (and exclusiveness) and place as ‘community’. Reference to those idea(l)s is reconsidered later.

Fisher Row is situated in what was the western extremity of Oxford, in the parish of St Thomas. The neighbourhood consisted almost entirely of fisher families and canal boatmen, the former the genealogically core kinship groups. There was an occupational homogeneity or integrity, which tended to exclusiveness. Located on the periphery of the urban entity, Fisher Row thus existed as an ‘isolate’ community, especially because of its social, occupational and geographical endogamy: intermarriage within the local families of the canal-side ‘community’, with reduced contact with the rest of the population of Oxford.

Yet in what does ‘community’ inhere and how did Fisher Row conform to that category? Community studies have waxed and waned over the last 60-odd years. Approaches have variously emphasised the symbolic construction of community, the imagined community and (very recently) the realist, action-based community. The discussion has particularly cohered around the issue of boundaries. Although many of the earliest of the ‘community studies’ gravitated to rural settings, revisited in the 1990s, one of the most formative considered the working-class terraced housing in the east end of London, and another, attempting to redress the rural emphasis, explored the market town of Banbury. First, we can partly discount the ‘imagined community’ of the late Benedict Anderson, for it was concerned with the formation of national sentiment (‘national consciousness’) facilitated by ‘print capitalism.’ The earliest sociological examination of ‘community’ concentrated on rural localities.

Such idyllic and (then seemingly immutable) organisms are inappropriate to the

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5 Prior, *Fisher Row*, p. 34.
9 *Imagined Communities*.
10 All recapitulated in Crow and Allan, *Community Life*. 
urban context. The working-class terraced district of London, examined by Young and Willmott, contains some of the characteristics, but elides the issues of competition for resources, internal hierarchy and exclusion, identified in Winston Parva (South Wigston) by Elias and Scotson.11 Discounting the latter’s criticisms, Crow and Allan rehabilitated the notion of ‘community’, which inherently involved issues of resources, hierarchy, and exclusion, without detracting from the ideal. Crow and Allan resurrected ‘community’ in both place and occupational schema. Reference has been made above to both ‘imagined community’ and ‘isolate’ community. Here we encounter Cohen’s ‘symbolic construction of community’, in which ‘community’ involves sentiment for locality, but Cohen’s ‘community’ is ‘isolate’ in the sense of remote, contained and strictly bounded. Fisher Row might be conceived to be physically constrained and bounded by natural and artificial restrictions, but it was hardly isolate in the same way as Cohen’s Whalsay in the Shetland Islands. In fact, the notion of ‘social imagination’ as ‘community’ has once again been critiqued as an a priori category. How do we construct that ‘social imagination’ without social action? One emphasis then is to reinsert the ‘social’ and to understand how interactions produce that ‘imaginary’.12 Specifically in the urban context, it should not be assumed that locality (place) is more than neighbourhood as contrasted with ‘community’. In neighbourhoods, interactions (networks) are often selective; proximity does not produce ‘community’.13 (This bibliographical byway is intended to delineate the main lines of analysis of the concept of ‘community’, excluding work which has been more focused on policy and prescription.)

Those sociological and ethnographic investigations of twentieth-century local society informed historical research into places as communities in the past. One especial strand proposed that specialised occupational groupings which formed, because of the nature of their work, on the edges of places, developed into ‘isolate’ communities. Examples would thus comprise: the fishing families of, for example, Robin Hoods Bay in North Yorkshire in the nineteenth century; the textile hamlets, first in the rural countryside and then on the edges of existing urban places in Lancashire in the nineteenth century; and very pertinently for exploration here, the fisher and boat families of Fisher Row on the western extremity of Oxford.14 Industrial edge ‘communities’ on the periphery of urban places inherently have many characteristics in common. In the case of Loughborough canal-side development, however, occupational homogeneity was not one of the features.

Many differences are immediately obvious between Fisher Row and the Loughborough canal-side populations, simply by reference to the census returns. Fisher Row boatmen were absent on the census date in 1841; not so in Loughborough and, indeed, the boat families of the lower Soar (with occasional exceptions).15 Concomitantly in Fisher Row, with ‘the man on the move’, women
provided ‘community stability’; in Loughborough and the lower Soar in general, women furnished the networks with other occupational groupings locally, particularly textiles, hosiery and lace. Whilst Fisher Row women’s networks were inward, women in the lower Soar valley fostered the external networks, which subverts the usual comprehension of male and female networks: work-related and domestic-related. The only immediately obvious correlation between Oxford and Loughborough (and the lower Soar valley) is the apogee of the occupation in 1851 and its rapid decline thereafter, which was, however, consistent in all boat enterprises.

Fisher Row has become paradigmatic of ‘isolate’ communities established through the locational factor of specialised occupations, and has, in particular, defined boat families. The separation of canal and navigation kinship networks away from the centre of existing parishes, often in new hamlets, has become an anticipated pattern. The new wharfs constructed were at some distance from the established village, as at Kilby Wharf on the Grand Union, Woolsthorpe Wharf on the Grantham Canal, or the boatmen’s hamlet at Braunston in Northamptonshire. In Oxford, both wharves, on the Thames at Folly Bridge and on the canal at Fisher Row, were remote, almost exclusive ‘communities’ of barge and boat families. In Leicester, the northern wharf was situated at a distance from the urban centre, connected by the long trek along Wharf Street. The expansion of and investment in the canal system in the late eighteenth century promoted the development of these remote hamlets and wharves.

To the north of Leicester, along the Leicester Navigation (later part of the Grand Union), Loughborough developed as a waterway transit and distribution point. Between 1780 and the end of the eighteenth century, the town was connected northwards towards Nottingham by a new cut and eastwards to the Leicester Navigation, slightly in advance of the arrival of the Oxford Canal at Fisher Row in Oxford in 1790. The latter route circulated the north and east of the town constructing a new boundary. The least salubrious sector of the town was selected for the new wharf (Regent Wharf), logically for the first connection northwards towards Nottingham, but reasonably so because the area had a traditional inhospitable association. The Rushes, as the designation implies, constituted a low-lying, watery environment. It was dissected by Wood Brook, which fed into the new cuts. Wood Brook formed another internal boundary obstructing urban expansion along the northern and western perimeter of the town, for it was lined for much of its way, along Wards End and Devonshire Square, by dyeworks and other industrial premises which discharged into the stream. The initial developments in the Rushes thus consisted of the new wharf, the gas works, a brewery, several lodging houses and further along Derby Road, after 1834 the new union workhouse. A location thus

17 Prior, Fisher Row, p. 240.
18 Prior, Fisher Row, pp. 12 (‘an occupational enclave ... almost an extreme case’), 13 (‘occupational community’), 34 (older, continuous families), 206 (‘community ... isolation’).
19 Prior, Fisher Row, p. 201 (Braunston).
20 Prior, Fisher Row, p. 265.
originally insalubrious by nature became polluted for urban housing development by the early nineteenth century.  

The locality had the potential for the formation of a remote, isolate boat ‘community’. It was indeed here that the preponderance of the boat families congregated, along Canal Bank and Bridge Street. Several issues are addressed here about this agglomeration of families, in the light of previous ‘community studies’, and especially by comparison and in contrast to Fisher Row, the nearest analogous settlement already examined. The progressive clustering was voluntary to the extent that Loughborough had an optimal size: distance to work was minimal from any part of the built-up area to another.

First, the size of the boat population must be established. As Prior indicated for Fisher Row, the census enumerators’ returns might be defective. In Oxford, boat people were busily engaged on Sundays in the work of loading and unloading, so a census conducted on that day was probably defective. She compensated by demographic reconstruction from the parish registers of St Thomas, Oxford. In Loughborough, the census does not appear to have suffered to the same extent from this deficiency, so it seems a sufficient point of departure. The following data exclude crew on boats on the canal which were visiting and consisted of foreign members. The information comprises households – that is, where the head of the household was a designated boatman – and singletons – usually a son in a household whose head was not a boatman. For clarification, these boat families and individuals inhabited houses

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in the town, mostly concentrated near Regent Wharf, but some dispersed through
the town. Most of Loughborough’s boat people lived in houses, not on boats.23

Fisher Row contained a marginally smaller complement of boatmen: 32 and 34 in
1841 and 1851, declining precipitately to 13 in 1861 and ten in 1871.24 The eclipse
of boat families in both Oxford and Loughborough was associated, in a complex
way, with the arrival of the railway in Oxford in 1844 and in Loughborough in
1848.25

It is evident, nonetheless, that the boat families were predominantly geographically
endogenous. Most heads of boat households in the nineteenth century had been
born in Loughborough. For 1841, of course, the information is not available. In the
1851 census, 16 of the heads of 25 boat households had their origins in the town; in
1861, 21 out of 25; in 1871, 18 of 22; in 1881, 17 of 20; and in 1891, nine of 11.
The recruitment of singletons exhibited the same characteristic: six of seven in 1851
born in the town; three of six in 1881; and five of eight in 1891. (The other census
years are complicated by visiting boats in the wharf.)

A high degree of geographical marital endogamy also obtained. Between 50 and
64 per cent of the wives in the enumerators’ returns between 1851 and 1891 had
been born in the town. Other female partners derived from the parishes in the Soar
valley towards Leicester, especially those which had boat families, at Barrow and
Mountsorrel. The geographical, topographical, occupational and economic unity
or homogeneity of the upper Soar valley, between the town and Leicester, made
such networks inevitable. Some form of textile industry – stockings and socks in
particular – pervaded Rothley, Barrow, Quorn, Sileby, Thurston, Birstall and
Belgrave.26

Despite the visits of boats from considerable distances, marriage formation with
boat families from afar did not arise. In 1861, boats in Regent Wharf probably
originated from Leicester (Shakespear), Oxford (William) and London (Providence
Protect and Charlotte). A decade later, boats there had arrived from Stoke Bruerne
(Prince of Wales and Daniel ORourks) and Kings Sutton (Sarah and Fanny), and

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23 Compare Prior, Fisher Row, p. 222.
24 Prior, Fisher Row, p. 233. Table 1 is based on The National Archives (TNA), HO107/595/6, fo.
3-/595/12, fo. 6; HO107/2083, fos 7–363; RG9/2273, fo. 3-/2275, fo. 57; RG10/3254, fo. 6-/3257, fo.
24; RG11/3144, fo. 6-/3146, fo. 86; RG12/2514, fo. 7-/2516, fo. 95.
26 E.g. TNA, RG9/2282, fos 102–31 (stockings and sock weavers in Thurmaston), RG9/2279, fos 87–
123 (Sileby framework knitters and sock knitters).
perhaps elsewhere. Networks were not established with longer-distance boat families. The land-based boat families of Loughborough did not engage closely with the long-distance water-based families (although some unusually canal-based families were listed in 1861 and 1871 on the Fulham and the Providence).

As the area around the wharf developed, so the boatmen began to congregate in the adjacent streets, on Canal Bank and Bridge Street. Their clustering here was a natural propensity, of course. On the other hand, they did not comprise a distinct ‘community’ in terms of place; nor did they exhibit absolute residential propinquity. If, for example, households are analysed on Canal Bank in 1861, the occupational diversity is considerable: interspersed with the eight households headed by boatmen were four agricultural labourers, an agricultural machine maker, farmers of 30 and 80 acres, and an occasional gardener; retailers encompassing a grocer, a blacksmith/victualler, licensed victuallers (Albion Inn and Boat Inn) and a coal merchant; small producers or trades comprehending a cordwainer, a bricklayer, a bootmaker, a journeyman shoemaker and a wagoner; four widows and a widower; textile workers including three worsted framework knitters, a cotton warp-loom weaver, two cotton hose seamers and an Angola factory hand; industrial workers such as the railway platerlayer, the engine worker at a dye works and the stoker at the nearby gasworks; a clerk and a letter carrier; and the premises of the iron foundry and steam flour mill. None of the boatmen were immediate neighbours, although eight inhabited households at one remove (‘next door but one’). Their nearest households included the grocer, framework knitters and hose seamers, a cordwainer, the blacksmith/victualler, the bricklayer, a widow, an agricultural labourer, the engine worker, a farmer, a loom weaver, the stoker, and two widows. The composition of Bridge Street was consistent.

The movement to the locality around the wharf is reflected in the census returns in 1841 and 1851. In 1841 the boatmen’s habitations were more dispersed through the town. Although there was a concentration near the wharf, a number of boat families existed at some remove from the rest. Bridge Street was inhabited by 11 boat families, Canal Bank by six, The Rushes by four. Three boat families had accommodation on Derby Road, and across that thoroughfare, two in the recently constructed Regent Street. To the north of the basin, six boat families were located in Meadow Lane and three in John Street. Some families, however, had at least temporarily rented housing towards the centre of the town, in Ashby Square, Sparrow Hill and Baxtergate, and others distributed in Rectory Place, Mill Lane, North Street, Spring Gardens, Moira Street and Railway Terrace. Some 35 boat households thus had accommodation in the immediate vicinity of the wharf, but a number preferred to settle for other areas of the town.

With the decline in numbers of boat families after 1851 was associated a further concentration near the wharf; 19 families now congregated in Canal Bank, Bridge Street, Dead Lane and The Rushes, predominantly the first two roads. Other

27 TNA, RG9/2274, fo. 88; RG10/3256, fo. 34.
28 TNA, RG9/2274, fos 68–82.
households were now only situated in Nottingham Road, Rectory Place, Railway Terrace and John Street. This more circumscribed pattern persisted to the end of the century, with a few exceptional instances of families located in Greenclose Lane (not far from the basin), Meadow Lane, Court A in High Street, Conery Passage, Factory Street, Sparrow Hill, Duke Street, Pinfold Street and Mill Lane, but these latter families inhabited these outlying locations only briefly.

The boat families remained urban tenants, not proprietors. In 1848 the property in Bridge Street, for example, was owned by some 30 landlords, none of whom can be identified as boat households.30

The industrial development of the town provided alternative employment to the canal. In 1861, although seven wives were defined as ‘boatman’s wife’, the vast number of wives in boat households were engaged in the textile industry – at least 18 – comprising cotton hosiery factory hands, seamers, spinners and stitchers, Angola and Merino factory workers, and lace runners. Accordingly, daughters also gravitated to these occupations in the expanding textile factories and warehouses. Whilst the eldest son often followed in the father’s occupation on the canal, other male siblings also found employment in the textile industry.

These arrangements can be illustrated by some particular families. Charles Jardine’s two eldest sons joined him as boatmen, but the two daughters became lace runners.31 Whilst the daughter of George Matlock entered a worsted factory, the son, younger than the daughter, was engaged by his father as a boat boy and then boatman.32 The same situation obtained in the household of Samuel Simmonds, whose eldest son became a boatman, but of the two younger male twins, one joined his father and elder brother, and the other was engaged as a framework knitter. His daughter also entered the textile trade as a hosiery seamer.33 Finally, Caleb Simmons had two daughters and two sons. Both daughters were employed as hosiery factory hands. The eldest son was employed by Caleb as a boatman, but the younger son (by three years) was engaged in a dyeworks.34

The life-course of boat people has been explained, but is perhaps worth recapitulation here. Boat boys were recruited from the age of ten on the Loughborough boats, a status which they retained until the transitional age of 15.35 At 15, they qualified as ‘boatmen’.36 The intervention of the various canal acts in the 1880s might have resulted in some change in designation, for a male of 12 was defined as a ‘boatman’s assistant’ in 1891.37 From then to the end of life, the boatman worked on the navigation relentlessly. None of the boatmen in the census for Loughborough was described as ‘retired boatman’, which obtained with some

30 Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR), DE1834/125 (rate book, December 1848).
31 TNA, HO107/595/6, fo. 18; RG9/2274, fo. 68.
32 TNA, RG11/3145.
33 TNA, RG10/3256, fo. 25.
34 TNA, RG10/3256, fo. 24.
35 TNA, RG9/2274, fo. 88 (ten years of age).
36 TNA, HO107/595/6, fos 5, 34, 41; HO107/595/8, fo. 25; RG11/3144, fo. 104.
37 TNA, RG12/2154, fo. 50.
other occupations. Half a dozen boatmen enumerated in the census returns had attained the age of at least 70; the eldest, 76, still active in the role.\textsuperscript{38}

Between 1851 and 1891, the average age of the married boatmen seemed to rise, as indicated in Table 2.

The inclusion of a 75-year-old widower boatman (Thomas Attenboro) in 1891 would slightly increase the average age.\textsuperscript{39} Seven of the 11 married boatmen in 1891 had attained the age of 40 or older. Although there were some new recruits, their number was limited as commerce declined on the navigation.

The various listings present some ambiguities, nonetheless, resulting from combined occupations. In particular, the census returns included as boatmen those who were engaged as independent coal merchants and traders. Whilst the elder Caleb Simmons was designated a ‘boatman’ in the census, aged 70 and still working, the directories included him amongst the coal merchants, in both 1828 and 1846.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, John Jennings and William Gee were described as ‘boatman’ in the census, but as coal merchant in the same directories.\textsuperscript{41} This status differentiated them from the other ‘boatmen’, for they were engaged as independent traders in a staple commodity. Before the advent of the railway, the transhipment and transit of coal depended on the earliest boatmen like Simmons, Jennings and Gee, an arrangement which evaporated after mid-century.

The subsequent generations of boatmen probably consisted of employed workers on fly boats, making frequent, short trips between Loughborough, and Nottingham and Leicester. The character of that activity permitted their permanent domicile on land, in the houses constructed by the wharves. The fly boats had already become established, of course, at an earlier time. Pickford & Co.’s and Elia Coleman & Co’s fly boats were operating through Loughborough in 1828, daily to Nottingham.\textsuperscript{42} In 1855, fly boats to Leicester, Derby, Burton and Nottingham were managed by the Grand Junction Canal Company.\textsuperscript{43} Towards the end of the century, even though the canal trade was declining, Fellows, Morton & Co. had taken control of the fly boats, from its establishment at 59 Nottingham Road.\textsuperscript{44}

<table>
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<th>Median</th>
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<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>16.05162</td>
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Table 2. Average age of boatmen in the census returns, 1851–91.

\textsuperscript{38} E.g. TNA, HO107/595/8, fo. 18; RG10/3254, fo. 99; RG11/3145, fo. 10.
\textsuperscript{39} TNA, RG11/3145, fo. 70.
\textsuperscript{40} TNA, RG9/2275, fo. 41; Pigot & Co’s National Commercial Directory for 1828–9, p. 495; White’s Directory 1846, p. 286.
\textsuperscript{41} TNA, HO107/2085.
\textsuperscript{42} Pigot 1828, p. 497.
\textsuperscript{44} Wright’s Directory of Leicestershire 1887–8 (Sheffield, 1888), p. 481.
The fortunes of George Wood are synonymous with the decline of the waterborne trade through Loughborough. Wood was an immigrant to Loughborough, a native of Armitage in Staffordshire, on the Trent navigation. In the 1841 census, he was assumed to be a coal merchant, but in 1861 was described as a wharfinger, the two occupations not exclusive. By 1851 he was aged 62.\(^{45}\) Wood & Shaw had embarked upon a partnership as coal merchants from the Duke of York’s Wharf on Nottingham Road.\(^{46}\) When the partnership was dissolved, Wood continued as sole proprietor.\(^{47}\) To supplement his income, Wood acted in various other capacities. He provided the agency for the fly boats of both the Grand Junction Canal Company and J. & W. Soresby.\(^{48}\) By 1836, however, he, as surviving partner of Wood & Shaw, wharfingers and coal merchants, had already become bankrupt, a situation which persisted intermittently for at least the next 20 years.\(^{49}\)

Any assessment of the existence or otherwise of a boat ‘community’ requires investigation of the social activity which was necessary for the inculcation of a ‘community ethic’. The principal indicator comprises marriage formation, to what extent boat people concluded marriages within their own occupation or through neighbourhood ties with other occupational groups. There are, of course, constraints on the numbers of potential occupationally endogamous marriages. The exchange of partners was limited by the smallness of the number of boat families and their declining cohort. It seems evident that boat activity was a predominantly male occupation, for wives and daughters were engaged in textile trades, at home and in factories. The number of eligible male boatmen thus restricted the inter-marriage of boat families. Equally, however, the involvement of the women of boat families in textiles provided opportunities for networks outside the boat families. The heterogeneous occupations in the canal-side neighbourhood also opened and increased those opportunities for external networks. There are, therefore, some ambiguities which cannot be fully quantified or assessed.

Considering first marriages of grooms who were boatmen, between 1838 and 1875, 15 boatmen married daughters of boatmen, but 65 married daughters from other occupational groupings.\(^{50}\) The concentration of these boat family inter-marriages occurred, however, before 1852—that is, at the apogee of the boat economy; 11 of the 15 were arranged in 1838 to 1851 inclusive. Obviously, the opportunities for such ‘alliances’ declined after 1851 as the number of boat families diminished. Reflecting merely on the instrumental aspects, inter-marriage not only represented networks and contacts, but also meant that both parties understood the rigour of the experience of boat life, even though the family was domiciled on land on and around Canal Bank. On the other hand, precisely because the family was land-based presented advantages for wives to originate in non-boat families to pursue work to supplement the household income. Numerous brides thus derived from framework

\(^{45}\) TNA, HO107/2085, fo. 37; HO107/595/8, fo. 45.  
\(^{46}\) Pigot 1828, p. 495.  
\(^{47}\) White 1846, p. 286.  
\(^{48}\) Post Office Directory 1855, p. 274.  
\(^{49}\) The London Gazette, Issue 19351, p. 183; Issue 19955, p. 505; Issue 22014, p. 2183.  
\(^{50}\) ROLLR, DE667/17–20.
knitting families. Deep contacts between some traditional boat families inevitably resulted in inter-marriage. As an example, Francis Kilbourn, boatman, of Bridge Street – son of John, boatman – took as his spouse Charlotte Matlock – daughter of Thomas, a boatman of Regent Street. Thomas Gee, boatman – son of the boatman William – contracted marriage with Mary – daughter of the boatman John Shephard – of Canal Bank. Both formal liaisons occurred in 1843, when opportunities for inter-marriage were highest.\textsuperscript{51} Despite these strong attachments, the vast majority of boatmen, even before 1851, elicited spouses from other occupational groupings. Neighbourhood was as important for contacts as occupation.

As might be expected, daughters of boatmen predominantly also married outside the boat families – 46 espoused partners, who did not descend from boat families, derived from more than 20 different occupations, but, with the increasing importance of textile production in the town, 17 framework knitters. Labourers comprised nine other grooms, consistent with the occupational structure of the location around the canal basin. A very few liaisons reflected both longstanding connections and transformation in the position of boat families. In 1865, Joshua Simmons, a widower and labourer – son of John the boatman – married Charlotte Kilburn, widow – daughter of the boatman Thomas Matlock.\textsuperscript{52} Female offspring tended, however, not only to be engaged in other occupations, but also to make their contacts outside the boat families.

What was significant for both male and female members of boat families was locality, fundamentally because of the social composition of the area around the canal basin. Marriages were endogamous by social status and location. In 63 marriages, the partners dwelt at the time of the ceremony in the same street, particularly North Street (16 matches), Canal Bank (12 marriages) and Bridge Street (11 unions). Another 27 ceremonies were conducted for marriage partners who inhabited the locality around the canal basin at a remove of one street from each other.

Although Loughborough had several wharves and, in particular, Regent Wharf, it did not constitute the only settlement with boat families between Leicester and the town. Above has been noted the origins of some wives of Loughborough boatmen in, for example, Mountsorrel. The significance of Mountsorrel is reflected in the migration of the youngest Caleb Simmons from Loughborough to Mountsorrel. Three Caleb Simmons were returned as boatmen in Loughborough in the early nineteenth century. The youngest was reported as aged 27, married to Mary, and inhabiting Bridge Street in Loughborough in 1851. Both he and his spouse had been born in the town. No further reference is made to this family in the subsequent census returns for the town. In 1861, Caleb, aged 37, reappeared in the census for Mountsorrel, married to Mary Jane, both born in Loughborough. Their first, third and fourth children were born in Mountsorrel and the second in Loughborough. It appears that this boatman had removed from Bridge Street in Loughborough to Neat’s Yard in Mountsorrel North.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} ROLLR, DE667/17, pp. 165, 176.
\textsuperscript{52} ROLLR, DE667/19, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{53} TNA, HO107/2085; RG9/2280, fo. 31.
This pattern was followed by George Street(s), who inhabited North Street in Loughborough in 1841. By 1851, he had relocated to Mountsorrel North with his wife, Maria (originally from Narborough). This transition occurred early in their family formation, for in 1841 George’s age was rounded up to 30 and Maria’s down to 20. Their actual ages in 1851 were respectively 36 and 32. Two of their children had been born in Loughborough, George’s home town, and one in Mountsorrel.54

Figure 2 represents the other vills above Leicester which contained settled boat families and, in some cases, visiting boats on the navigation: Birstall; Thurcaston; Mountsorrel; Barrow upon Soar, Quorndon; Loughborough; Kegworth; and Hemington. Boat families congregated in Mountsorrel North, although one such household was situated in South. In 1861, perhaps the apogee since fewer boat families appeared in the 1841 and 1851 census returns, ten boat households were enumerated in the township and a singleton boatman. All were domiciled in houses, on land, not water, several in Pleasant Row. Although in close proximity, they were not adjacent or immediate neighbours.55 Seven of the 20 partners (1861) had their origins in the township; three derived from Loughborough; and five from proximate villages along the navigation. Opportunities existed in the township for non-boat employment. The five children of James Woodhouse, inhabiting Briggs Yard, were engaged as quarry men (two), a stocking seamer (daughter) and brickyard boys (two).56

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54 TNA, HO107/595/6, fo. 41; HO107/2087, fo. 185.
55 TNA, HO107/594/7, fos 7–8, 10, 17, 19; HO107/595/18, fo. 6; HO107/2087, fos 185, 187, 199, 325, 329; RG9/2280, fos 4, 29–31, 38–9.
56 TNA, HO107/2087, fo. 329.
Barrow did not apparently attain the same population of boat families. In 1841 three boat households existed in Bridge Street, but only one and two singletons in 1851. What seems to have distinguished Barrow was its mooring facilities. In the latter census, three boats were moored, one of which seems to have been a local enterprise, but the other two (a boat and butty) were occupied in longer-distance trade. In 1861 a similar return was compiled, but with three longer-distance boats moored up.

Towards Leicester, Birstall and Thurmaston had a few boat households; Birstall probably at its zenith in 1841 when three such families were registered. Kegworth, at the north end of the county, was in 1861 the domicile of three boat families. None of the partners had been born in the parish, but all, apart from William Bramley from Leicester and Benjamin David from Coleorton, had been born in the vicinity along the navigation, in Sutton Bonington and Ratcliffe on Soar. All the wives, in 1851 and 1861, had found employment as laceworkers, a speciality of Kegworth.

These numbers of families place into context the boat population concentrated around the wharves in Loughborough, which far exceeded, as might be expected, the navigation vills on the lower and upper reaches of the navigation between Leicester and the northern boundary of the county. The importance of the wharves at Loughborough derived not only from the provisioning of an expanding population, but as a transit point for coal and grain.

Comparison here with Hemington is apposite. This village provided a small inland transit near the confluence of the Soar navigation and the Trent. The number of boatmen actually increased there between 1841 and 1851, the latter year being the apogee of the boat families. About a dozen households were engaged in boat activity in 1851, but 23 men in all, including six lying on boats in Hemington Cut. Only five boatmen heads of household were absent on the day of the census. Two here were dependent on external support, both because of age: Hannah Dakin, aged 77, ‘Parish relief Poor Boatsmans Wife’; and John Drakefield, aged 80, ‘Paris [sic] relief Penurious’ boatman. Despite the profusion of boat families, the predicament of these two might have been illustrative of slender resources. Both belonged to the continuous boat families. As in Loughborough, wives and daughters engaged in the textile industry, here as lace runners and embroiderers. Abruptly, by 1861, only four heads of households were described as boatmen, but three others, belonging to the traditional boat families, had become ‘watermen’. A decade later, only two heads of household remained in the occupation with one son from a longstanding boat family. In 1881 and 1891 the boat occupation had disappeared. Instead, new

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57 TNA, HO107/592/8, fos 27–30; HO107/2087, fos 157–9, 170, 175 (the text is, however, in poor condition).
58 TNA, RG9/2279, fo. 34.
59 TNA, HO107/594/12, fos 6, 12; HO107/592, fos 7, 16; HO107/2087, fos 513, 516, 654.
60 TNA, RG9/2488, fos 24, 30, 44–5, 49.
61 TNA, HO107/2140, fos 22, 44, 71.
63 TNA, HO107/2140, fo. 94.
64 TNA, RG9/2488, fos 97–105.
65 TNA, RG10/3531, fos 91–8.
households of railway labourers and platelayers had indicatively infiltrated into the village. The traditional boat families – Twells, White, Millitt, Dakin and Drakefield – were now reduced to general labourers or farm labourers. 66

Unfortunately, very few boatmen’s estate was valued for probate (Table 3) (valuations before April 1881 were expressed as under a certain amount, but ‘real’ valuations were assessed thereafter). 67 A decline in their fortunes seems apparent. 68 The considerable estate of William Waterhouse is consistent with his brother’s trade in coal in Hemington, to whom William’s estate was entrusted at probate, as executor. By 1896 the boat builders had also experienced a collapse, as illustrated by the valuation of £382 15s 8d of the estate of Joseph Rudkin, barge (more correctly, narrow boat) builder, at 50 Westbourne Street, Leicester. 69

‘Community’ remains an elusive concept. It may be appropriate to accept a plain-language interpretation, like analytical philosophers deciding on the singular intention of a word. Therein, however, lies a slipperiness which elides the issues of social action and dissonance. The concept becomes dry and eviscerated. There is no necessity to restore to the notion the ‘warm-glow’ of the street of terraced houses – purportedly. On the other hand, the term deserves a more penetrating analysis than the attribution of ethos or sentiment. Fisher Row is an example of how ‘isolation’ produces that sort of social action which reinforces, perhaps, solidarity, by occupation and in place. The canal-bank society of Loughborough is a counter example of how neither place nor occupation ineluctably led to ‘community’. Nor is it certain that neighbourhood social networks, which certainly existed, fostered ‘community’ more than selective interactions of particular families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Hemington</td>
<td>John CLIFF</td>
<td>&lt;600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>Castle Donington (formerly Hemington)</td>
<td>William WATERHOUSE</td>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Hemington</td>
<td>William DRAKEFIELD</td>
<td>&lt;200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>Loughborough</td>
<td>Caleb SIMMONS</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Mountsorrel</td>
<td>Joseph PILGRIM</td>
<td>£62 19s 4d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Probate valuations of boatmen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not for the first time (or the last, probably), I would like to record my indebtedness to the kindness and consideration of the staff of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.

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66 TNA, RG11/3385, fos 89–100; RG12/2719, fos 159–67.
68 Table 3 Source: National Probate Register (NPR): 1858 Cabieces-Cornes, p. 144; 1863 Udell-Wyvill, p. 136; 1870 Dabbys-Dyson, p. 197; 1874 Raban-Slynn, p. 437; 1895 Naden-Rynd, p. 162.
69 NPR, 1896 Nadauld-Rynne, p. 320.