

## Tales from the Riverbank

### Docker/Stevedore – 1930's - Object (Piece of coal)

*(Docker turns round)*

**Docker:** (Shouts) Haven't you boys finished yet. Come on. She's got to set sail soon. Need it unloaded as soon as is possible.

Honestly you can't get good workers these days. We had some timber to be unloaded last week. Now that is a fairly simple job to unload but if you are not experienced like this load its like watching the Keystone Cops. See the timber comes in lengths of 14 to 15 foot, 2 inch. What you have to do is to lay it on your shoulder and take it to the piles, the trestles. Some of these who we've had down here aren't use to it though. I mean you'll have somewhere more than 40 odd lengths to carry off. And you see them struggling with it. They can't cope and their shoulders get sore and then they start to bleed. I feel sorry for them but they have to learn how and get used to it all.

I did. See that's the way I started out. As a docker. It was all casual labour and classed as "fast as can". There was no official rate of pay for it. Just work as fast as you can and get paid for your speed. If you could load two lighters then you were entitled to go home. See they had to pay an extra half a day if they wanted us to spend the rest of it working. Speed very important.

You have to load them right, mind. Otherwise it won't go under the bridges on the way up to Birmingham. I started work down here when I was 15 but weren't recognised as a docker until I was 18 and didn't become a man until I was 21. Well, you're not are you and you don't get married until you are at least in your twenties.

I lived here at Sharpness all my life, with my grandmother. She owns the newsagents shop. You know the one out of an old railway carriage. My first job was working for her. Going round delivering the papers. The Gazette, Herald, News, Sketch. And standing there outside her shop, I watched the ships coming in and out and thought – that'll be my job soon.

The sailing ships would come in with big tug boats and be steered into the dock. Biggest one ever was this 5,000 tonner all the way from America she'd come. Some of them come from further. One come all the way from Australia. I said the chief mate "Steerman, how many days?" It was his 100th day coming from Australia. Was carrying this cargo of wheat an had been going for so long some of it had started to sprout. With the grain then we have this suction pipe to suck out the grain then two men stand by bagging up and getting them sacks out of the way. Six men would be down in the hold of the ship. Have to be careful mind, coz you imagine standing on a mountain of grain. Its like standing on shifting sands and if it all moves wrong you can end up getting buried. Some men ties cloths round the end of their boots to give them more grip. Toe rags they call them. 100

days on board a ship full of grain, sailing all the way round from Australia. Imagine that. All you see is that ship. Be worse than being in prison I reckon.

All kinds of cargoes through here. One common route is for ships to take salt out and bring grain back. Coal from Lydney goes up river and it might take three tides to get a coal trow up.

Some of the men have fallen off the ships and into the dock. They ain't been hurt, apart from their pride because they get known as the Mayor of the dock. Until the next bloke falls in and then he gets the title.

When you've been on the dock for a while then you can move up, work up to being a stevedore. Don't ask me why sir coz I don't know. I mean why is anything called anything eh? Big difference is that I can drive the winch and rig the gear and have to tell others how to do it. I can make a sling in the hold of a ship. Taught myself all this so that I could work my way up and be in charge. I become a ships stevedore when the old gentleman who had been on it before became poorly. I took the job on.

Here on the docks though we have had labour come up from Avonmouth. They were no good. Didn't know how to load timber. They would just pile it up on the canalside. We got loads of complaints about them. My assistant, lad, Ken came to me and said "They aren't working!" Aren't working. I goes out there and they are all sitting around on the slings eating ice cream. I aks you, ice creams. "I want that out now." You should've seen them all. They threatened me with a soaking first and then they got the National Dock Labour Official in. I gave him a piece of my mind and no mistaking, coz if there is one thing I will not stand its idleness. I have never been idle in all my days and don't see why anyone else should be.

Mind, 1926, the General Strike, I was not going to be working that day. The dock was barricaded from the outside. You would have been a blackleg if you'd worked that day. Men were barred if they worked on the General Strike. We had this ship, the Laurel Scotland filled with cotton seed, had to sit there lying idle whilst that strike was on, but there was no way I would be a blackleg. There were fights in the pubs and some people round here who broke that strike well we still don't talk to them 10 year on.

Some of the ships that come in fly the yellow flag. You know what that means. Sickness on board. We won't go near them until the doctor has been on board and inspected. He comes down from Berkeley special. Well, you don't know what infections or illnesses they might have on board. I mean, might be the smallpox, the tuberculosis, the measles, who knows? No don't go near them and wait.

We've seen them all through here mind, schooners, steamboats, barges, trows. I learnt to scull a boat at the age of 8 years old. I'm alright on the water see. Though don't ever want to sail as far as Australia or the like.

Best get on. I mean look at this lot. That ship ain't going to unload itself.