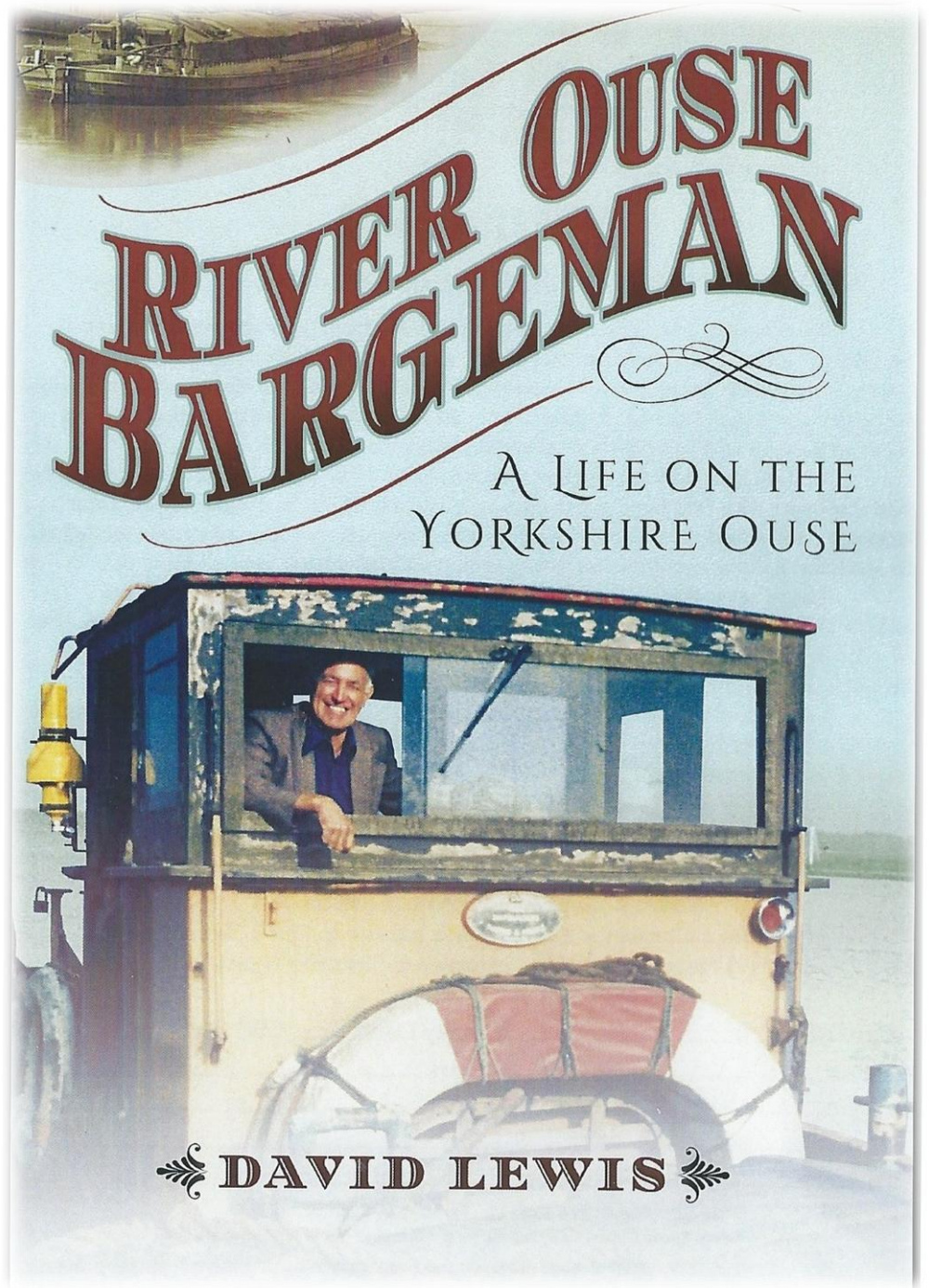
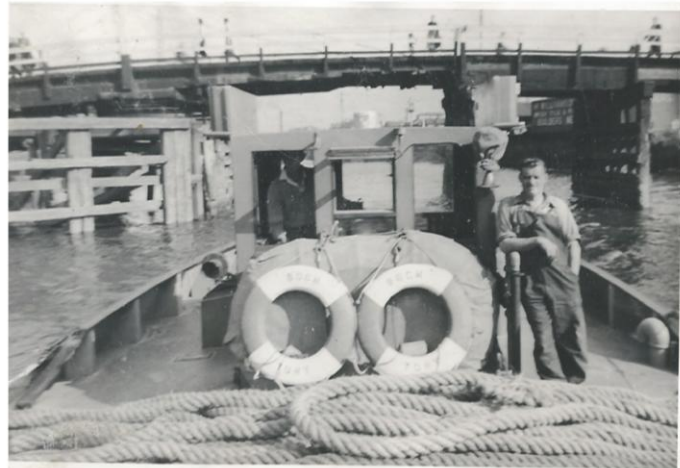




Laurie Dews on right, family and mates, at Hull Docks, 1976.

Laurie himself at Naburn Lock, 2015

Working a barge through Selby Bridge, 1950s



It's dark.

There's a westerly blowing a blizzard into your face as you peer ahead.

Your barge is carrying 200 tons of linseed, with the deck only a few inches above the murky and turbulent waters of the Humber. To get your cargo safely to dock and your pay in your hand, you depend on a tug, busy belching foul-smelling smoke, using a hundred-foot long, ten-inch diameter tow rope to drag a convoy of four barges upstream

And, of course, a lifetime of experience and trust in your fellow men.

Those were the typical working conditions of Laurie Dewes, the "Last of the River Bargemen". Laurie worked for the BOCM mills in Selby, carrying seed which was to be crushed into valuable oils, up the rivers Ouse and Humber from the port of Hull. One of 40 or so men in the trade, he worked for 50 years from 1937, following a family tradition stretching back to the 1860s. Now aged 94, Laurie is the last survivor of that generation of working men, and his tale is that of a lost craft, as the commercial barge traffic ceased in the early 1990s.

The new Pen & Sword book, "River Ouse Bargeman", covers almost 200 pages with Laurie's family tales, the tricks of the barge trade and anecdotes describing the hard-working and humorous aspects of a working life lived in the open air.

These anecdotes are expanded upon by noted Selby historian David Lewis, who has added factual background to Laurie's words, along with charts and original documents to accompany many of Laurie's original photographs, information about the Selby fleet and the story of how 'Soapy Joe' Watson, brought the BOCM mills to Selby.

Here's Laurie describing how to save some time on the journey. *"We'd push a 10-foot rod over the bow. If we couldn't feel anything, we'd shout 'Deep' to the skipper. If we felt the river bed, we'd shout '8 foot', and if we could see more of the rod we'd shout '7 foot and shordnin' '. We'd have to go careful like over the shallows til the rod started to submerge - then we'd shout '8 foot and deepnin' '. Then we knew we'd got over the worst and could plough ahead. That saved 45 minutes - but if we'd got stuck, we'd have been there for 12 hours til the next tide'.*

If the water level fell too far, the bargemen tied up to a jetty. Laurie says: *"Where there's a jetty, there's a pub! We had many a happy hour at the Hope and Anchor at Blacktoft. The foghorn on the jetty was so loud everyone called it the 'Blacktoft Bull'"*

Back in the day too, the lads would make a brew and sing songs to pass the time. The book includes five of Laurie's songs, including 'Dujardin's Navy' a wry song to the tune of 'John Brown's Body' about the perils of the barge trade for Selby Warehousing and Transport (SW&T) and its boss of the day, Mr. Dujardin.

"We are the jolly lighter lads, the lighter lads are we

We do not sail the ocean and we don't go down to sea

We are the jolly lighter lads of SW and T

In Dujardin's Navy"

Book details

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