

William 'Shiner' Price – a Gloucester boat builder and man of the river

Stephen Mills April 2022

For many centuries, Gloucester was an important transport hub. It was intersected by major roads and river crossings, and later, became a major inland port with the construction of the Gloucester-Sharpsness Canal and its associated docks. For a time, it also boasted an extensive network of rail links – some were vital long-distance through routes, whereas others linked with many of the city's industrial and commercial enterprises. However, for many centuries before this time, the River Severn had been used for transporting goods to Gloucester and beyond. It was the eventual arrival of the Gloucester-Sharpsness Canal that saw most cargo now moved by this route, boats finally managing to avoid the often-tricky journey up the Severn. The river, canal, and docks came to provide employment for a large number of local people, and if we dig deep enough, many of us will find a family connection to the days when commerce and industry thrived in the area.

That brings us to my personal connection – my great grandfather William 'Shiner' Price. He was a boat builder of some renown and was known universally as Shiner. To this day, no-one knows the origin of this nickname, but it stuck with him (and his sons) throughout his long and busy life. He was one of those marvellous characters that Gloucester throws up from time to time. He was a man of many parts – shipwright, hunter, fisherman, swimmer, poacher, and out-and-out rascal (but more of that later).

Shiner lived and worked on the far side of Gloucester's Westgate Bridge, living for many years in Westend Parade. Born in 1850, he remained intimately linked with the Severn, having grown up beside it at Walham, near Sandhurst. He fished and swam in it as a boy, and later made his living building and repairing river and canal boats in his yard that was located between Westgate and the (railway) Black Bridges (Figure 1). His parents were shipwright Richard, and mother Mary Ann, born in Milford in Wales.



Figure 1 – The boatyard was on the left bank, immediately below the Black Bridge. Westgate Bridge at the bottom.

During these formative years, he acquired a knowledge about the river and its ways that was second to none. He knew the currents and the shifting sandbanks, and through his skill as a swimmer, was responsible for saving a number of people who had fallen in. On one occasion, he plucked two small children from its icy grasp whose bassinette (a wicker-bodied pram) had been blown into the water.

Shiner's working life started at the age of seven, toiling in the boatyard of Charles Edwards for the sum of one shilling a week. In 1881, like his older brother Alfred, he was recorded as a sawyer, although he later rose to become yard manager, and eventually took over the yard (Figure 2). In his final years, he turned the business over to two of his sons who continued the trade.



Figure 2 Taken around 1900 at the back of the Coopers Arms in Westgate Street. He was sometimes referred to as "Tar brush", doubtless a reference to his beard!

Shiner's yard was responsible for building, repairing and maintaining various types of canal and river craft, including narrow boats, lighters and barges. He undertook work for many of the important water-based carriers of the time, including the Severn and Canal Carrying Company, G T Beard, and Mousell Chadbourne & Co. He also owned withy beds next to the yard that supplied materials for making eel traps, another of his specialities.

The working day was long. It began at 7 am and continued until the light was lost or the job in hand was finished. Shiner's abilities as a shipwright were not limited to the Gloucester area. There was a time, for example, when his skills were needed in Appledore, North Devon. The Severn and Canal Carrying Company had commissioned the building of a number of narrow boats there. Critically, these were built a few inches too wide. Apparently, if they rocked slightly when passing through narrow locks, they stuck fast! Shiner was brought in to trim 1.5 inches from the boats' overall width, which he did using a traditional adze. He also supervised the building of a number of other boats for the company.

Apart from the main 40 ft long workshop, sawpit, sheds, and a 2ft square steam box for bending wood, the main feature of the boatyard was the slipway down into the Severn. This comprised two large baulks of wood surmounted by two lengths of old iron railway track. At high water, boats were manoeuvred onto two cradles carried on a number of 6 inch diameter iron wheels that ran up the rail tracks. Using hand windlasses and chains, boats were then winched sideways onto dry land so that work could begin. However, the process was not without its risks. The ascending or descending load was controlled by jamming the wheels with blocks of oak. Should something go awry, the instruction to everyone involved was simply to run!

Much of Shiner's work was on traditional narrow boats and small barges, but it also included several metal hulled tar barges with wooden decks that operated on the Stroudwater Canal. Apart from larger companies such as the Severn and Canal Carrying Company, he also regularly worked on boats operated by smaller local carriers, such as those run by Charlie Ballinger (who had three boats) and Frank Hipwood. Wood for repairs or construction was sourced mainly from Lancasters of Newent or closer to hand from Westend Sawmills, their immediate neighbour. It was not unusual for fresh green oak to be seasoned/dried for 12-18 months before use.

Shiner continued working on boats almost until the end of his life, by which time he was nearly blind. Despite this, he was still able to carry out jobs such as caulking the bottom of boats, driving in oakum between the seams to seal them. One of the boys would lead him to the appropriate spot, hand him a five foot length of oakum, and later return to cover the seam with ("Stockholm") tar. In the meantime, Shiner would work his way along the next length. Incredibly, he remained active in the boatyard until his 89th year (Figure 4). As his son Geoff recalled: "You couldn't keep him away – he did what he could, stoking the boilers and so on".



Figure 4 Shiner still very active in his later years, was cited as a good example of how to “grow old successfully” in an article in the Daily Herald in 1936.

Home life

Shiner’s domestic life was as colourful as his working life, and he was well known for his pranks. Perhaps the best-remembered one was a succession of apparent suicides, where he leapt from Westgate Bridge into the Severn. As the hue and cry was raised, he would swim under the water back to the boatyard, change his clothes, then join the authorities dragging the river for the body! On other occasions, when returning from pleasure trips upstream on the Windsor or Berkeley Castle steam cruisers, he would dive over the side as it passed his boatyard, preferring the short swim to the walk home from the Quay (Figure 3).

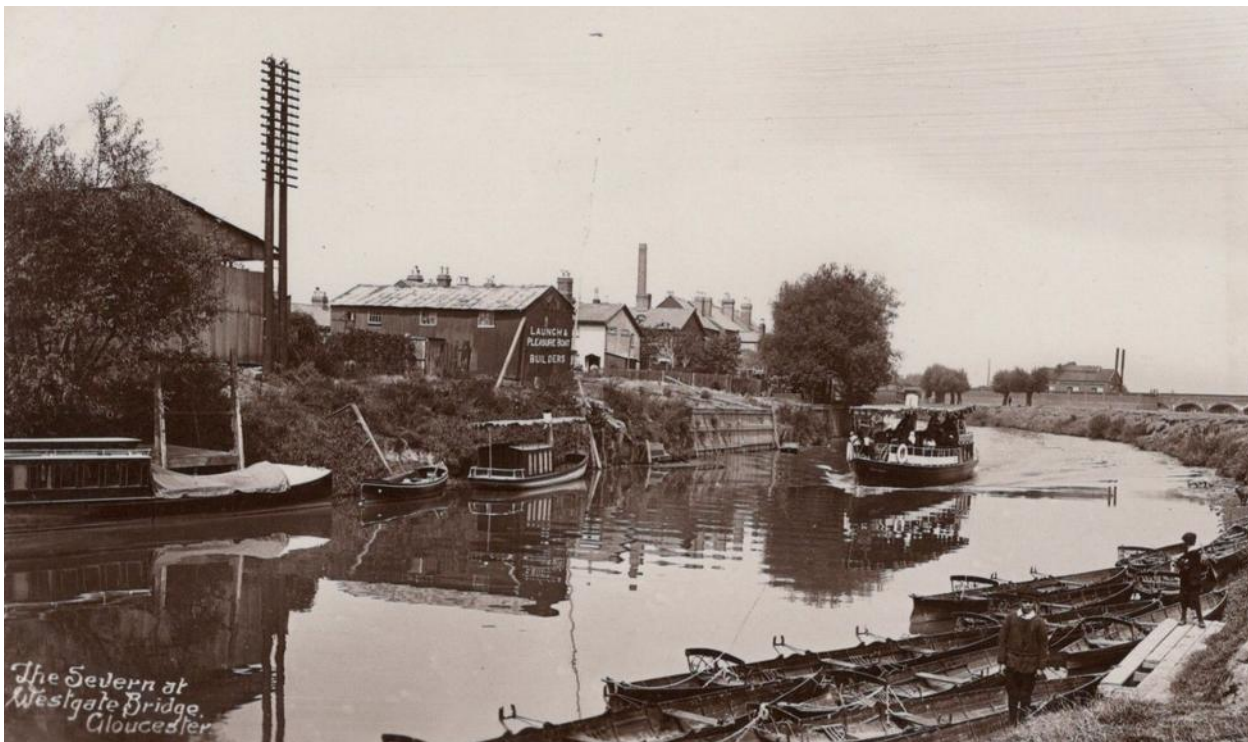


Figure 3 Looking upstream from Westgate Bridge. The boatyard was just beyond the bend on the left bank. The building in the distant right hand side was the water pumping station adjacent to the Brunel-designed Black Bridge.

Shiner married three times and outlived all of his wives. The last one disapproved of his liking for a drink, so on his return home after visiting various pubs in Westgate Street, he would follow a set routine. To test the water, he would throw his hat through the door. If it came back, accompanied by a sharp cry of "William!" he invariably retreated to the boathouse for the night.

Shiner worked and played hard and when I began this journey in the 1980s, was still remembered with affection, both as a colourful character and a kind man. Like some far-travelled sea captain, he would sit and repair his elver nets accompanied by some of his beloved grandchildren (who included my late mother) and regale them with stories of the Severn. Invariably, close at hand would be a jar of cider and bag of humbugs for the children.

When Shiner eventually died in February 1941 at the age of 91, his sons and grandchildren headed a huge throng who attended the funeral service at St Nicholas Church in lower Westgate Street, the same place where had been baptised in October 1854. His passing effectively marked the end of an era - gradually, the river and canal had been losing its dominance, as the roads and railways continued to erode their traditional cargoes. In the cold of a bleak wartime February, Gloucester laid to rest one of its most colourful sons, one who is still remembered in some places with a wry smile.

Postscript

During the 1980s, I started gathering information and stories from relatives, former neighbours, and yard workers, all sadly no longer with us. I also made an appeal via the Gloucester *Citizen* that rekindled the memories of a number of older residents who had known him. Ironically, one of the first GSIA lectures I attended was given in the room above Stroud Museum by the late Fred Rowbotham, retired District Engineer for the Lower Severn District of the Severn River Authority.

Fred was an acknowledged expert on many aspects of the Severn (see <https://coaley.net/fwr-intro/> for information on his background and extensive slide collection, digitised by Ray Wilson). A chat with him afterwards revealed that he remembered Shiner well, and that he had carried out various boat repairs and other jobs for him, mostly during the 1930s up to the start of the Second World War.