

Picturing the Past

RICHARD THOMAS reveals the identity of the mystery photographer of the 1923 boatmen's strike



BRAUNSTON STRIKE & THE 'H' NUMBERS

The biggest dispute in canal history concerning only boatmen was the strike of 1923. Organised by the Transport & General Workers Union, it broke out on 13th August 1923 and lasted 14 weeks. It involved 684 men working mainly for Fellows, Morton & Clayton, but the Chester & Liverpool Lighterage Co and Midlands & Coast Canal Carrying Co also became involved. The dispute arose when FMC proposed a reduction in boatmen's rates of pay averaging 6.47%.

The resulting strike brought to a halt virtually all long-distance traffic on the canals between London, the Midlands and north-east England. Eventually, the dispute was taken to arbitration, and the Industrial Court imposed an adjusted reduction of 5% to take effect in two equal instalments on 19th November and 18th December 1923.

The union claimed this as a victory since it had succeeded in sustaining a lengthy strike involving a significant

number of men by canal boat standards, and it had won recognition, arbitration, and a revision of the employer's proposals. Nevertheless, the families involved must have seen it as rather a hollow victory.

Recording the Strike

There is a number of photographs which record the strike. The boaters had been instructed to gather at the FMC depots, and by far the largest number seems to have gone to Braunston, where most of the photographs were taken. There are just two known images of the strikers and their families – but not the boats – in Birmingham, and there may be others awaiting discovery.

The strike was organised by a union official, 42-year-old Samuel Brooks, from the TGWU's West Bromwich office. For the period of the strike, he lived in the Ship Hotel, adjacent to the wharf entrance at Braunston. Despite

ABOVE 383: Most of the larger images in this feature have not been published before, but this one is so iconic that we felt that it deserved to be seen again. It shows the boat families caught up in the strike against the backdrop of the Braunston depot. Sam Brooks is recognisable by his trilby (at the back in the centre). The circled faces are (l to r) Mary Ray, Thomas Webb, Lou Ray and William Ray.

the fact that he had little experience of the canal trade, Brooks was to make a big impression on the boatmen, not just by his physical appearance – he was a tall, well-built man – but also for the way in which he organised a wide range of social activities for the men and their families.

He appears in many of the photographs, easily identified by his trilby hat. The president of the TGWU, the Labour MP Harry Gosling, who was also secretary of the Waterways Trade Group and was later to become Minister of Transport, appears in some of the images.



ABOVE H150: The presence of John Walker's Prosperous alongside a second horse boat shows that smaller carriers were involved in the strike as well as Fellows, Morton & Clayton and Midlands & Coast. This was almost certainly because they worked as contractors for FMC. To their right is FMC's Laurel with some of Braunston's cottages in the background, the centre one with a corrugated iron roof.

RIGHT H143: Natal and Kilsby with the Stop House in the background. The boatmen have set up swings for the children in the field opposite, alongside Urmston. The boats are tied up with chains rather than ropes.

BETWEEN H160: A good turn-out for the photographer, as three boats straddle the canal with FMC's Quebec on the left. The women and children are standing in the 'brickfield' in this view from Butcher's Bridge towards the bottom lock at Braunston.

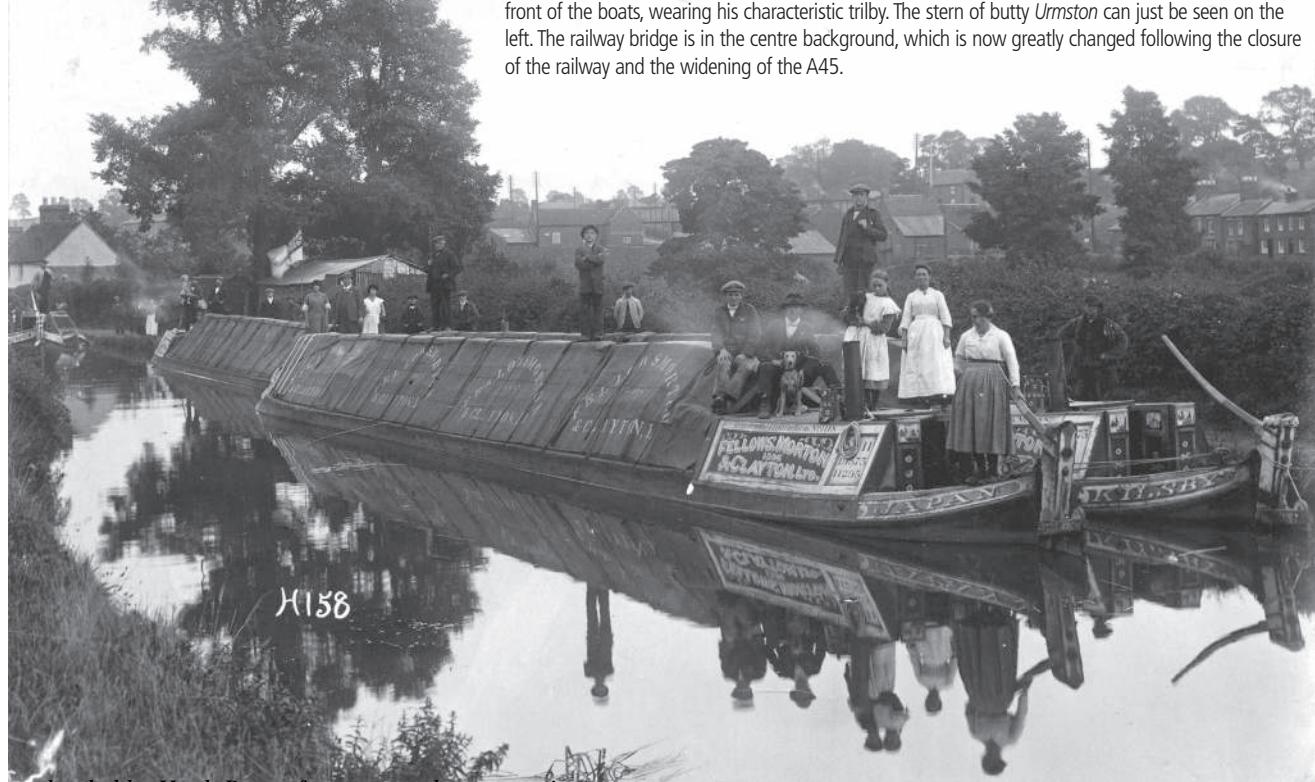


Picturing the Past

BELOW H155: FMC's *Australia* lies on her own opposite a raft of boats, including *Denmark* (with forecabin), and *Aire* behind her. The gate of the narrow stop lock, removed during the widening that took place ten years later, is in the foreground. This view is almost identical to that in **H159** (inset), which has been published before. One report claimed that *Australia* was the only boat at Braunston loaded with coal when the strike began, but the fact that she was so well loaded yet so high in the water suggests that her cargo was coke rather than coal. Coke was used as fuel for the steamers and was usually brought from Leamington Spa or Rugby gas works.



BELOW H158: A fine reflection is cast by the crew of *Japan* and *Kilsby*. Mr Brooks is on board at the front of the boats, wearing his characteristic trilby. The stern of butty *Urmston* can just be seen on the left. The railway bridge is in the centre background, which is now greatly changed following the closure of the railway and the widening of the A45.





ABOVE: In this unnumbered card, Midland & Coast's Mars, Jupiter, Cassandra and Scholar make an impressive sight as they block the entrance arm at Braunston. The latter two have their names carved into their top planks, reflecting their Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Co origins. In contrast, the former two came from Noah Hingley, but show very different lettering styles on the cabin sides and top bends. The lack of numbering for this card is curious: was it perhaps taken by a photographer other than Victor Long?

BELOW H157: Probably the same four Midland & Coast boats as in the photograph above, this time seen from the towpath bridge across the entrance to the arm. However, the boat on the left, with Mr Brooks on the cabin roof and a large cable drum amongst the barrels in the hold, is elsewhere identified as Orion, in which case some boat movement had taken place between the two photographs. It is known that Cassandra was involved in a dispute about bringing the FMC steamer Speedwell, laden with 17 tons of sugar (classed as a perishable cargo), into the wharf to unload. Motor boat Lion can be seen unladen in the background.



Picturing the Past

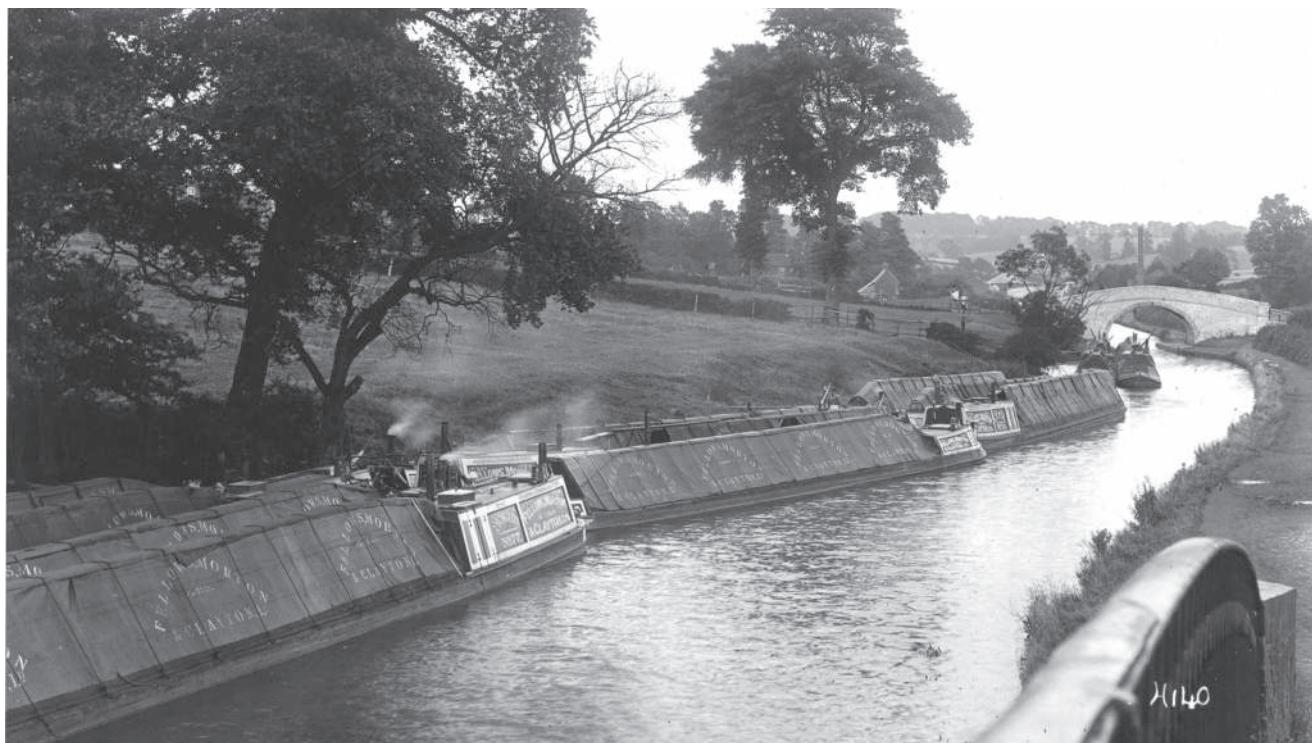


ABOVE H139: A variety of mainly horse boats and butties lying against the brickfield. The two nearest with bows towards the camera appear to be the left-hand pair of boats in card H157 (page 13) before they were moved in to block the arm.



LEFT: An unnumbered card showing Thomas Green's Rose Agnes back out on the main canal after having been unloaded, along with the steamer Speedwell, of her 'perishable' cargo of sugar and/or tea. It would appear therefore that she was contracted to FMC at the time. She is seen, also unloaded, in the arm in card H141 on page 17.

BELLOW H140: Motor boats and butties lie on the offside near Butcher's Bridge. On the left is *Penguin*, with, possibly, the cabin of ex steamer *Baron* visible behind, and motor boat *Lynx* in the mid distance.





ABOVE: It is not clear whether these two photographs of a large number of people on FMC's *Briton* (ex steamer *Baroness*) and an unidentified butty at Braunston were taken during the strike or not. The photographer certainly posed the people and the boats (which are not moving despite being in the middle of the canal) and took the two photographs only seconds apart. Neither card bears any number.



The 'H' Numbers

It has long been a puzzle why some of the photographs bear a serial number starting with the letter 'H' and others, taken of the same event, do not.

Perhaps the most obvious conclusion is that the former carry the initial of the photographer.

Charles Hadlow was an employee of the Grand Junction Canal at the time of the strike. He would have had access to the canal and, perhaps more importantly, been known to the boatmen and their families. It is possible that, being of 'the management', he would have been unsympathetic to their cause, but he may have been appointed to record the event. A number of the strike photographs is preserved in Charles Hadlow's album in the British Waterways Archive.

His superior, the assistant engineer Thomas Millner, was himself a keen photographer who often took official images for the Grand Junction Canal Co. At the time of the strike, however, he would have been 64 and perhaps unwilling to carry a heavy plate camera along the towpaths when he had an assistant to undertake these duties!

However, first conclusions are not necessarily correct. Whilst collector



Dennis Ashby was searching through old postcards at a fair he found a card bearing the reference H144 showing a group of boat people in a field behind a narrowboat. In the plastic pocket which contained the card was a scrap of paper with the pencilled words "Victor W. Long of Rugby, Photographer. Works outing of canal boat employees."

Whilst smothering a wry grin at the thought that a group of boat people would go for a works outing on a canal boat, closer examination of the scene revealed a meadow beside a canal which was identified as being the field opposite the towpath bridge at Braunston. In those days, the arm led to the FMC yard and the original line of the Oxford Canal; today it is the home of Braunston Marina. The card had not been posted, but was clearly of the right 1923 vintage.

The 'Victorian Photographers' website provided the information that 'Long, Victor W' had premises at 'Braunston, Northamptonshire, England' between 1923 and 1928. So he was in the right place at the right time. However, no further information about him could be found, other than that he lived in Sydney Road, Rugby, and later had his studio there.

The search for other 'strike' cards, in books, publications and archive collections, revealed that there were eight known to carry an 'H' number and a further five, of which four bore just the figures 381, 382, 383, 386. These four portrayed groups of striking boatmen and their families. One other (393) showed Mr Brooks and Mr Gosling. Further forays by Dennis Ashby to postcard fairs located another seven cards, three with 'H' numbers.

Picturing the Past

Then in October 2010, he received an email from the USA via the Canal Card Collectors Circle which said: "I am trying to identify what was happening in these scenes. They are photographic postcards by the Rugby photographer Victor Long, and were taken, I believe, on the Grand Union Canal." Attached were copies of several known 'H' cards – and one previously not seen. An immediate reply to the sender, Richard Roberts in San Francisco, produced a response which included the information that he had six original 'H' cards (five of which were new, previously unknown, images) for sale. These are now in Dennis Ashby's collection.

He also provided evidence that confirmed Victor W. Long as the photographer of the 'H' cards. There was even a postcard which included the shadow of a tall man with a plate camera on a tripod. The fact that this card was published perhaps indicates that Victor Long was comfortable with his professional reputation and had a sense of humour. It is rare to find a postcard illustrating such a basic photographer's error.



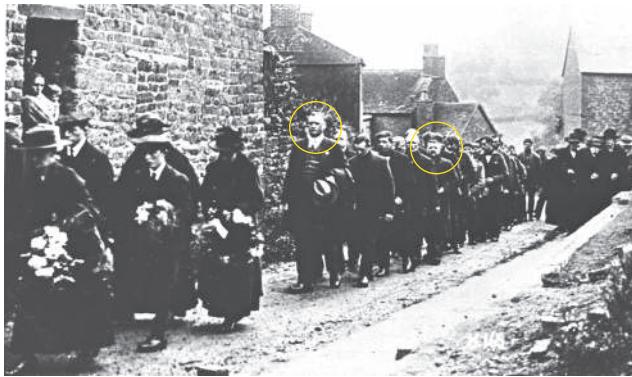
TOP RIGHT H142: The photographer Victor Long allowed his shadow to appear in this image taken looking towards the bridge that has now been replaced by the modern A45 road bridge. The boats with cabins visible are John Walker's butty *Princess Mary* with motor *Christine*. John Walker had bought the butty from a Deanshanger-based coal merchant and registered it in March 1923. However, the motor was owned by Birmingham paper makers, Smith, Stone & Knight Ltd, whose livery can just be made out on the original card. She was eventually bought by John Walker and registered by him in May 1925, but clearly he was using the craft prior to that, most likely on hire from that firm. At this time John Walker was rapidly building up his fleet which is evident on *Princess Mary* as she carries his fleet number 6 on her cabin side.

MIDDLE RIGHT 381: Women and children involved in the strike pose against the abutment to the railway bridge. Frank Ray, who supplied several of these images, has identified (circled) Hannah Webb (in front of telegraph pole; wife of President's Skipper Thomas), Lou Ray standing on her left with little Frank Ray in front of her. The two children on her left are Alfred and Rose Ray, with mother Mary Ray behind. The girl towards the middle is Lou's best friend Mary Webb (daughter of Hannah & Sam). Just 12 years later Lou Ray was married to Arthur Owen and working on Sabey's boats in London (Autumn 2011 NB). The card numbered 382 is almost identical.

BOTTOM RIGHT 386: A large group of mainly children caught up by the strike pose in the field opposite the wharf at Braunston. The gentleman is Sam Brooks.

Downloaded by Hugh Potter from narrowboatmagazine.com





ABOVE H165: The procession in Cross Lane for one of three funerals that took place during the strike, that of 62-year-old Joseph Green of the boat *Flint*, on 27th September 1923. The two circled faces are those of Mr Brooks and William Ray.

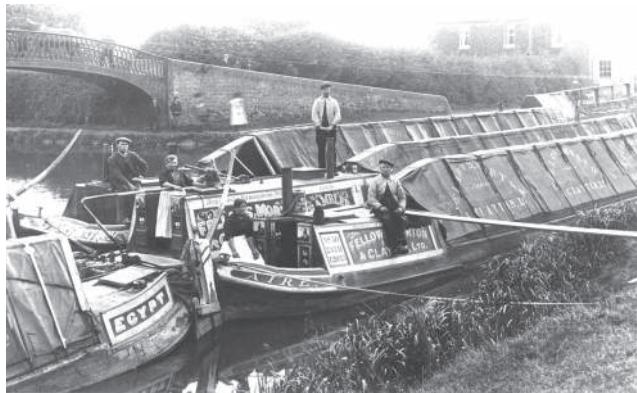


ABOVE: Labelled with the photographer's initials, and produced for the *Rugby Advertiser*, this depicts the funeral of 12-year-old Edward Walker, who fell from his father's butty during the strike and drowned. The funeral was described thus: "An extremely impressive sight was presented as the cortege, numbering probably 100, proceeded from the Castle Inn, where the body had been resting, to the church . . . Many of the followers carried touching bouquets of wild flowers to place on the coffin."



ABOVE H151: Steamer *Speedwell* lies opposite the arm entrance. She was loaded with 17 tons of sugar, a perishable cargo which, according to FMC's management, it was entitled to unload. When this was attempted, the entrance arm was blocked to prevent, or at least delay, the cargo's transfer to road vehicles.

RIGHT H144: It is surprising that Victor Long published a postcard of this image taken looking across from the Stop House, as it suffers from camera shake. However, it is fortunate that he did for it was with this card that Dennis Ashby found a slip of paper with "Victor W. Long of Rugby, Photographer. Works outing of canal boat employees" written on it. Presumably this note was not by the photographer who would have known full-well that it was taken during the strike. Note the water barrel on *Urmston's* roof in place of the more usual can.



ABOVE: An unnumbered card depicting FMC's *Egypt*, *Aire*, *Rambler* and *Oldbury* tied opposite the entrance to the arm, presumably during the strike. A horse crossing the bridge reminds us that not all carriers were affected by the union's action.



ABOVE: An unnumbered card showing steamer *Hecla* out on the main canal, presumably during the strike. In H141 (below) she is seen in the arm.

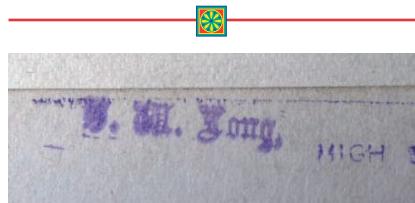
BELLOW H141: Steamer *Hecla* lies alongside the butty *Rose Agnes*, belonging to Thomas Henry Green, also seen in the unnumbered postcard on page 14. *Rose Agnes* appears to have been unloaded by this time, as does the unidentified butty beyond *Hecla*. The fore-cabin butty *Lemon* lies on the diagonal whilst steamer *Speedwell* is in the background, still to be unloaded.



Picturing the Past

Regular exchanges of information across the Atlantic culminated in Richard Roberts locating four more images, two of which were new 'H' numbers. One of these (H150) pictured John Walker's *Prosperous* tied up among the FMC craft. Another card, but without a reference, is a full length image of *Rose Agnes*, belonging to John Henry Green.

Whilst it was recorded that Midlands & Coast was officially involved in the strike, the presence of *Prosperous* and *Rose Agnes* might indicate that other smaller concerns supported the action. However, a report that *Speedwell* and *Rose Agnes* were two of the boats controversially unloaded of their cargo of sugar and/or tea suggests that *Rose Agnes* was contracted to FMC at the time. Chris M. Jones confirms that both Green and Walker regularly worked as contractors for FMC.



ABOVE: Victor W. Long's stamp as it appears on the back of some cards.

BELOW 393: Messrs Gosling and Brooks at Braunston. This is one of five known cards numbered between 381 and 393. Were they taken, like the 'H' series, by Victor Long, or were they by a Grand Junction Canal Co photographer?



393
MR. GOSLING M.P. AND MR. S. BROOKS AT BRAUNSTON

Downloaded by Hugh Potter from narrowboatmagazine.com



ABOVE H161: One of three similar photographs showing boat families crowding round whilst the steamer *Speedwell* is brought into the arm to unload its cargo of sugar. The name on the butty to the left of *Speedwell* looks like that of the former SURCC *Sardinia*. The image has been reproduced several times before, but we have tried to focus in on the action. Presumably this is around the time that FMC's Mr Harris was allegedly thrown into the canal by the captain of *Cassandra*, Joseph Roberts. The police are watching intently and the boaters have broken up into several 'discussion groups'.

RIGHT H162: In this scene just four policemen can be seen looking on.

BELOW H163: Police reinforcements were brought in after the Braunston foreman Mr Harris was thrown in the canal. They are standing in a line to keep the boating families from accessing the wharf prior to the unloading of *Speedwell*. In the foreground are Mr Brooks (in trilby), possibly Mr Harris lying on the ground, and FMC's Mac Anderson.



The presence of Midlands & Coast boats was already known from the published card H157 showing the fore-ends of four of its boats. A second, unnumbered, card appears to show their sterns and identifies Midlands & Coast's *Mars*, *Jupiter*, *Cassandra* and *Scholar*.

A Mystery Remains

It is almost certain that the 'H' cards were photographed by Victor Long, along with some bearing his initials, but what about the others? Did he simply not number some and give others a number with no 'H' prefix? Or was Charles Hadlow deputed to record the strike by his boss, or did Thomas Millner do the job himself?

As can be seen from the table, there are 18 cards now known with 'H' number references, and 13 cards either with other identifications or no inscription. These are all of the Braunston area and they date from the correct time. It would be interesting to find out if copies of the missing 'H' numbers (145–149, 152–154, 156 and 164) are perhaps languishing in someone's attic and, if so, to confirm that they portray the 1923 Braunston strike.

There are known to be two photographs taken in Birmingham during the strike, but in the Midlands boats also gathered at Wolverhampton, Nottingham, Coventry, Leicester and Market Drayton. Surely there must have been photographs taken of boatmen and boats at other locations during the 1923 strike.

The Story of the Strike

The full story of the 1923 strike has been told in far greater detail than space here allows.

Extensive original research was undertaken by Ken Sherwood and published in *Journal of Transport History*, September 1986.

He also wrote about it in *Waterways World* March 1990 and in (the original) *Narrow Boat* magazine for March 1985 as a follow-up to an article by Teresa Fuller in the January 1985 issue.

A complete list of strikes that involved boatmen on the inland waterways was itemised by Wendy Freer in her thesis *Canal Boat People, 1840–1970*, which is downloadable online via <http://etheses.nottingham.ac.uk>.

Acknowledgments

As there are several copies of many of the cards, these have not been individually credited, but thanks are due to the following for either supplying scans of the cards or information about them – or both: Dennis Ashby, David Blagrove, Tim Coghlan, Alan Faulkner, Lily Flowers, Chris M. Jones, Frank Ray, Richard Roberts.



ABOVE: An unnumbered card with a group of men and boys photographed by the railway bridge. Mr Brooks, centre with waistcoat, can as usual be recognised by his trilby, whilst almost everyone else is wearing a flat cap. The three circled faces are (l to r) Thomas Webb (skipper of *President*), William Ray and his son Jack.



ABOVE H166: Some of the boating families assembled beneath the railway viaduct outside the former Ship Inn, where Mr Brooks lodged for the duration of the strike. The three circled faces are those of William Ray, Sam Brooks (unusually hatless) and Harry Gosling MP.

H Numbers and other photographs

| | |
|--------|---|
| H139 | Line of boats by the brickfield |
| H140 | <i>Penguin</i> and <i>Lynx</i> , Butcher's Bridge |
| H141 | <i>Hecla</i> , <i>Rose Agnes</i> , <i>Lemon</i> , <i>Speedwell</i> in the arm looking from bridge |
| H142 | Vertical with photographer's shadow, old A45 bridge |
| H143 | <i>Natal</i> and <i>Kilsby</i> , Stop House |
| H144 | <i>Urmston</i> , children playing opposite Stop House |
| H145–9 | Not known |
| H150 | John Walker's <i>Prosperous</i> by brickfield |
| H151 | <i>Speedwell</i> from bridge over arm |
| H152–4 | Not known |
| H155 | <i>Australia</i> , <i>Denmark</i> , Aire from stop lock |
| H156 | Not known |
| H157 | <i>Jupiter</i> , <i>Mars</i> + two other boats from bridge over arm; <i>Lion</i> at rear |
| H158 | <i>Japan</i> and <i>Kilsby</i> |
| H159 | <i>Australia</i> , <i>Denmark</i> , Aire from stop lock, with crowd |
| H160 | <i>Quebec</i> and other boats by brickfield |
| H161 | <i>Speedwell</i> and strikers |
| H162 | <i>Speedwell</i> and strikers, police |
| H163 | <i>Speedwell</i> and strikers, three men |
| H164 | Not known |
| H165 | Funeral procession |
| H166 | Group under railway bridge |

Numbered Cards

| | |
|--------|-------------------------------|
| 381 | Group of women and children |
| 382 | Group of women and children |
| 383 | Strikers' group outside wharf |
| 384–5 | Not known |
| 386 | Group of children |
| 387–92 | Not known |
| 393 | Gosling and Brooks |

Unnumbered Cards

| |
|---|
| Briton with <i>Dee</i> from bridge |
| Briton, closer up, from bridge |
| <i>Hecla</i> by brickfield |
| Thomas Green's <i>Rose Agnes</i> , opposite arm |
| <i>Mars</i> , <i>Jupiter</i> , <i>Cassandra</i> , <i>Scholar</i> in arm |
| <i>Oldbury</i> , <i>Aire</i> , <i>Rambler</i> , <i>Egypt</i> opposite arm |
| Strikers with Mr Brooks centre |
| Funeral of Edward Walker |