



Fred Rowbotham in his younger days at work on the Severn.

Left Fred Rowbotham today. He is seen against the chute he had built in 1964 on the river at Minsterworth for the loading of stone on to barges for repair work to the banks.

MAN OF THE SEVERN

Fred Rowbotham, District Engineer to the Severn River Authority (now the Severn-Trent Water Resources Authority) for more than forty years, retired last month. No one has a more profound knowledge of Britain's greatest river, as WILFRED HARPER discovered.

One of Fred Rowbotham's first experiences of the river must have been as a baby when his father pushed him in his pram through the floods of December 1910, to the consternation of the neighbours. An exceptional tide and a heavy rainfall had combined to cause wide floods across the Severn plain, as happened on his sixty-fifth birthday in February this year.

Young Rowbotham grew up around the Severn, the Frome and the Stroudwater and Berkeley canals, and their waters and banks were his playground. He was often aboard the lovely old sailing trows which traded on these waterways.

After a professional training which had nothing to do with river engineering, he became, at the age of 22, the Assistant Land Drainage Officer for Gloucestershire County Council. The 1930 Land Drainage Act eventually brought into being forty-seven catchment boards, and Fred Rowbotham was transferred to the Severn Catchment Board at Worcester where his office was an old gate-keeper's cottage. Told to equip it, he ordered furniture, maps, surveying gear and a cabin cruiser; and he measured the floors for linoleum.

Soon, however, he found himself, much to his delight, back in Gloucestershire with the job of establishing the Lower Severn District. His next few years held all that a young man could wish for, and his work laid the foundations for his later mature knowledge. He made an up-to-date survey and a tidal study, put in hand the repair of seventy miles of neglected sea walls and embankments, cleared the principal tributaries and cared in all sorts of ways for the river and its dependants.

To get about this large working parish he flew a little aircraft of the Cotswold Aero Club, hopping from side to side of the estuary with his equipment stowed aboard.

Specific projects during these pre-war years included the widening of six miles of river below Gloucester, the building of the automatic radial sluice gate at the Abbey Mill at Tewkesbury, and studies connected with the 1933 Severn barrage proposals.

During the war he was second-in-command of the River Home Guard who, among other duties, tracked floating mines in the estuary. One mine was discovered dried out at the foot of the sea wall above the Severn Tunnel. At low tide it exploded, but the crater was plugged before the flood tide covered it. The plugging was done by a Catchment Board gang which had been organised by Fred Rowbotham for rapid repairs to bomb-damaged sea walls. It was often called out to the walls near Avonmouth and sometimes patched them up while bombs were still falling all around.

After the war there was much maintenance and improvement work to catch up with, and new equipment to get used to. The soft-spoken steam shovels had gone, along with the horse and cart, and saddest of all, the sailing trows. In their place came diesel bulldozers and lorries and barges. There also came new and exciting projects: another barrage proposal in 1945; first discussions about the Severn Bridge in 1946 leading to its final completion in 1966; the Oldbury and Berkeley nuclear power stations in the 'fifties and 'sixties; and the removal of the Victorian rail bridge across the estuary at Sharpness during the late 1960s.

The need for greater control of pollution, with the use of the river as a source of raw water, saw the old Catchment Board give way to the River Board in 1948. In turn the River Board was succeeded by the River Authority in 1965 when the prospect of water shortage brought emphasis to conservation. Fred Rowbotham was the vital link between all three.

Throughout his professional work he has studied not only the physical aspects of the river but also its social history, navigators, vessels, bridges, industrial archaeology, fishing — and, of course, that most famous feature, the Severn Bore.

He has written a book, *The Severn Bore* and a guide called *The Severn and its Bore*, both illustrated by his own accomplished photographs and drawings. He gives many talks around the county and is a gifted speaker. He produces sets of Bore predictions and explains with great patience to countless new and surprised enquirers that there is not one or two bores in a year, but about two-hundred-and-sixty.

He has always been sympathetic to riverside dwellers who called on him when the river was in flood, and to all who brought him novel ideas for the use of the tideway; he would listen sympathetically, too, to the various types of Bore-rider and to prospective "sand yachtsmen".

Fred Rowbotham is an accomplished musician and, as an organist, was a pupil of Dr. Sumsion at Gloucester Cathedral. During his retirement other fruit may ripen. He has more pictures to paint and books to write about the river he loves; and, as he gratefully knows, an infinity of things still to learn. ■