

**Extracted from Men of the Tideway, by Dick Fagan and Eric Burgess.
Chapter 1, pages 12-17 "One of Our Own"**

"My father was a Thames Lighterman. So had his father been before him. And his, and his. Back through the generations. I suppose that, looking back, there was never much option about me following in the footsteps of my ancestors.

I remember walking home from a factory one summer evening when I was just a boy. A man I'd seen somewhere before but couldn't quite place stopped me and said, "Ain't you one of Joe's boys?"

"That's right. Second eldest."

He looked at my face, then down at my hands to see if they'd ever gripped an oar. He was puzzled.

"I don't think I've seen you afloat," he said.

"No," I told him. "I work for Noakes, on a cutting machine."

You could see that he didn't want to believe me, in fact he looked downright upset.

"A Fagan not on the river?" he said, "Come off it, son. Joe wouldn't let any of his boys work ashore!"

Another instance. Though I say it myself, I used to be a pretty fair hand on the football field. After a match in a local park a man who'd watched the game told me I could easily become a professional. At that I stuck my chest out like a pouter pigeon until he asked, "What does your father do?"

"He's a Lightermen."

So then the man gave a sigh as though I'd just woken him up from some dream of heaven, and said, "That's that then. You'll be a Lighterman, not a footballer."

It seemed a cock-eyed statement at the time, but I understood it later on.

That job as a machine-minder was the third I'd tried in the few months since I'd left school. Started off as, of all things, an office boy, hated it so much it put me off office work for ever. Next I was a shop assistant-wrong temperament for it, moreover the shopkeeper went broke. Then the metal cutting factory.

It wasn't long after my encounter with the football fan when one day at home my father jabbed a brown work-worn finger in my direction.

"And you", he said, "can liven yourself up!"

I was fifteen at the time, and surprised because the old man sounded as though he meant it. As a rule he was as mild as any man I've met, with plenty of smiles and kind words for everybody, especially for his sons.

"Stop all this reading nonsense. Forget about football and cricket," my father said. Then he came out with it. "I'm going to apprentice you."

This happened in Bermondsey, on the Surrey side of the River Thames. Bermondsey was then a solid working class district, poor and proud, yet more concerned with the size of the wage packet than with anything else, because the size of the wage packet wasn't big; in many cases it was non-existent. In other words, life was a struggle. When you left school at fourteen you were expected to get hold of the best job that was going, always assuming you could find any sort of job at all to go to. You were certainly considered a bit on the queer side if you found time to do a lot of reading, as I did.

When my father told me he was going to apprentice me my elder brother was in the room. He had a shock of red hair, and more than his fair share of muscle. He grinned as my father said to me "It's not him I'm worried about, it's you with your dopey ways, dreaming all day." He was scared that I wouldn't match up to the demands and dangers of working on London's River. "Next Tuesday," he announced, "we go to Watermen's Hall. I'll bind the pair of you." To me he added, "And just watch your step after that or you'll get yourself drowned before you can lift an oar."

Came Tuesday, the three of us, best suits on, faces scrubbed, walked over Tower Bridge and along Eastcheap to Watermen's Hall.

Small entrance, nothing impressive, just a doorway leading into a narrow passage. Old prints of sailing ships and river scenes on the walls. A turn to the right, you're in the beadle's office.

The beadle was at one time important. It was he who used to row about the river challenging watermen for their licences, the idea being to prevent unauthorised people from working on the Thames. He was always present at the binding ceremony, checking up on the credentials of those who wished to apprentice boys to the trade, because only a licensed Lighterman can ever present a boy for binding. In these days the beadle stays all the time at the Hall, being an assistant to the Clerk of the Court.

Inside the beadle's office were groups of men and boys all there for the same purpose as we were. All the men knew my father. When our names were called out we followed the beadle up the stairs to the Court Room. In this room there were about a dozen men all sitting in a semicircle with the chairman in the middle weighed down with some bronze coloured chain of office. These men were master Lightermen, wharfingers, representatives of shipping companies. Their job was to make sure that only the right type of lad was allowed into the industry.

The beadle put on a great act of announcing us in that kind of over-the-odds voice you get from people who think they're a damn sight more important than anybody else does. The chairman gave a nod, my father turned to me, he looked really fierce with his shoulders held back stiff as

a guardsman's outside Buckingham Palace. He was nervous, of course, though I didn't appreciate it at the time. He thought I was going to let the side down, he needn't have worried. I could see smiles on the men's faces, friendly smiles.

"Why, Joe," said the chairman, "how are you, Joe?"

"Very well, sir" my father said.

"And these are your sons?"

One of the men laughed outright. He said to the chairman, "You'd be blind not to see that. They have the Fagan face, can't mistake it."

"You're right," the chairman agreed. "And I'll say this, if they make half as good Lightermen as their father we'll all be happy."

"Can they swim?" asked another member of the panel.

My father told him we could swim. A man at the far end of the semicircle said, "Perhaps I shouldn't ask you, Joe, but have you had these boys out with you yet?"

"Yes, Mr Piper. A drive down from Hays Roads to the Albert Dock, and one from the Albert to Fresh Wharf."

"Good man! The early impressions are important," Mr Piper said, he patted his own arm like he was the cleverest bloke in the world.

The chairman looked round at the Court.

"Well, gentlemen, I think we can trust our friend Joe Fagan to see that his lads will thoroughly learn the arts and crafts of our trade?"

And they all nodded and mumbled agreement, and the beadle let us out of the room.

"Back at three o'clock sharp for your indentures," his voice boomed. "Three pounds seven shillings to pay, and don't forget the Almshouse box."

That was that. I'd taken the first step, I was "bound". I'd become what is called an unlicensed apprentice.

For two years after his binding every apprentice has to be in the company of a fully licensed lighterman all the time. While at work, that is. It's important that it should be this way, this being the time when you have to learn how to move around safely and quickly along the narrow gun'les of the Thames barges, how to row craft up and down the various reaches, how to cope with wind and tide. This is the time you have to learn the geography of London Port, its docks and locks, its bridges and wharves, its traffic and its temperament. And a thousand and one things beside, such as some of them I shall be writing about later on.

The work was heavy, the hours were long, you never knew from one day to the next when you'd have to start or when you'd leave off. I got the point of the man who told me I'd be a lighterman, never a footballer. Often I didn't have enough time left for enough sleep, let alone sport. And if I'd had the time I doubt if I'd have had the energy, whatever strength I had was reserved for the river.

I suppose that of all things that impressed me in those early days, what stuck out most was the part that families played among lightermen. I have said that my own family had been watermen for generations, we were no exception. Like all the old crafts, there was a strong tendency for sons to take up their fathers' trade: a handful of names seemed to account for an astonishing number of lightermen. Also many lightermen had married daughters or sisters of other lightermen, so you had a great number of uncles and nephews and cousins sculling around, as well as sons, fathers and grandfathers. Often the family resemblance between relatives was striking, could be a bit frightening too to begin with. You'd keep thinking you were running into the identical man at different parts of the river twenty times on the same day. In the end you managed to sort out one from the other, you stopped making a fool of yourself by calling twenty different people by the same Christian name.

At one point there were no less than thirteen Fagans working for the same small firm which only had a total of seventeen men on its payroll. Among other family names you were constantly stumbling across were the Shepherds of Bermondsey, the Peaks of Poplar, the Snellings, the Coles, the Slatterys (originally of Blackfriars), the Eagans-all six footers-the Barrys and the Phelps, both famous racing families, the MacSweenys, the Doves (all giants), the Easterlings, whose roots go far back into ancient history. Needless to say there were also numerous Smiths, both related and otherwise. One firm, Vokins & Co., had several Smiths on its wage list. To simplify things the labour master tried calling them Smith 1, Smith 2, Smith 3 and so on. The men wouldn't stand for it, they insisted on the use of the nicknames they'd gathered up somehow or other such as "Houseboat" Smith, "Wage-Bill" Smith, "Boxer" Smith, "Black" Smith, "Farmer" Smith, "Tarpaulin" Smith. So whenever a hand phoned for orders, if he had a Smith working with him he'd say, "I've got 'Tarpaulin' with me", or "Houseboat" or "Boxer" as the case might be. The sense of family, of belonging, of tradition, was very strong. There was a phrase I often heard-"he's one of our own". It was always said with a kind of affection and trust, as though the speaker was saying, "I know you, you belong, you're all right."

"He's one of our own" meant that he was part of a lighterman's family, part of generations of river workers, part, in a way, of the river itself."

Reviewer's notes

Men of the Tideway was published in 1966. The co-author, Dick Fagan, had been working on the Thames for approx.

40 years. He first took to the river as a fifteen year old apprentice, around the year 1926. This is one of only a few surviving written accounts of the process of becoming an apprentice.

I am struck by several things from the account. Firstly, the obvious hardship of the times. Secondly, the overwhelming sense of timelessness, of a trade passed down for generations, of well oiled officialdom, continuing in time honoured fashion. Then we see the pride of a skilled working class community. Where a man was known by his character and his work.

I'm struck too, as a parent, by the relationship between Joe and his father. Even in the 20th century, it seems faintly strange to learn that a father's word was law. I can't imagine telling my son that, hey ho, you're an apprentice gardener on Tuesday son!