

# Keels

Keels and Keelmen were particular to the Tyne and Wear rivers. Keels carried coal from shore to ships lying in the middle of the river near the coast and were also used for carrying other kinds of merchandise.

The word "keel" comes from the Anglo - Saxon word "ceol" meaning boat. The design of the boat remained little changed from the time of the Saxon invasion. They were once described as being "chunky, blunt - nosed, unwieldy craft, big in belly and broad of beam - a direct descendant of the ancient coracle."

The keel was a wooden, flat-bottomed boat, almost oval in shape. Each one was about 42 feet (approx. 14 metres) long and was about 18 feet (approx. 6 metres) at its widest point.



Keels carried twenty one tons of coal when fully loaded. The crews were responsible for loading and carrying the coal, which was why they needed to be so strong. They shovelled the coal into the hold from riverside spouts or wooden chutes. Lengths of board were put on top to make sure that the load did not slip.

There were three or four crew members, including the skipper, although the fourth member was usually a boy, called the "pee-dee". The rest of the crew would give small amounts of their food or "victuals" to the pee-dee while he was on board.

Each keel had a single sail that would be hoisted onto a mast if the wind was in a favourable direction. The mast could easily be lowered for going through the old, low Tyne Bridge.

However, if there was no suitable wind, the keel was propelled by a single oar, worked by two keelmen and the boy while it was steered by means of a long oar, called a "swape" , at the stern.

The keelmen usually harnessed the power of the tides to help them move up and down river. So, at low tide they would be seen travelling towards the mouth of the Tyne while they used the incoming tide to ease their journey back to the loading points.



Keelmen at work