
Synopsis

A description of the navvies' working life, especially barrowing soil.

Text

All you that delight in the railway making
Come and listen awhile to what I do sing;
In summer time they will use you all well,
In winter you'd best stay at home with your girl.

Chorus: That's the rule of the railway makers,
 Rare good jolly bankers O.

On Monday morning its one of our rules
For every man to choose out his tools;
and they that come first do pick out the best,
And they that come after must just take the rest.

Now when that we come to the bottom run
We fill our barrows right up to our chin
We fill our barrows, right up, breast high
If you can't wheel it, another will try.

And when that we come to the main plank wheel
We lower our hands and stick fast on our heels
For if the plank does bend or go
Our ganger on the top cries "lookout below!"

Our master he comes with his staff in hand;
He knows very well how to measure the land,
He measures our dumpling, so deep and so wide,
He measures it well for his own side.

Now when we are struck by the frost or the snow,
We'll blow up our mess boys, and off we will go;
We'll call to our timekeeper without any damp
To let us have our time before we go on tramp.

On Saturday night we receive our pay;
It's then to the ale-hose we go straightway,
And each sits his sweetheart upon his knee,
And we treat them well with the barley bree.

Last Saturday night, I received my full pay;
On Monday morning I ran away.
I buzzed the tommy shop and stopped that score,
And swore that I'd never go that road no more.

But when several months are gone and past,
Those pretty young girls got thick round the waist,
They run to buy candles they learn lullabies,
And wish that they still had their dear banker boys.

Glossary:

Bankers	A labourer who makes banks of earth, ditches, etc. (Chiefly used in the eastern counties of England.)
Ganger	Leader of a gang of navvies who was often a sub-contractor for their labour.
Staff	Probably a level-staff; a graduated rod, used to determine differences in elevation.
Dumpling	The OED give dumping as "A heap of material flung down or deposited". Presumably in this context "dumpiling" could mean a length of embankment. A Dumpy level is a surveyors instrument. See notes on the song and its historical context.
Mess	Shared accommodation usually an eating place.
Buzzed	Left quickly
Tommy	The system of paying wages in the form of notes or tokens that could be exchanged only in "Tommy shops"; i.e. stores run by the employers and which habitually charged inflated prices.
Barley Bree	The On-line Scottish Dictionary (http://www.scots-online.org/dictionary/search_scots.asp) gives Baurley-Bree as juice of the barley, whisky

Source of Text: Bodleian Library, *allegro* Catalogue of Ballads; [Firth b.34\(202\)](#)

Music. No tune given

Source of Music: No tune given

Date:

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Notes on the Song and Its Historical Background

This is a version of a song called "*The Bold Navigators*" (See Raven, John, *Victoria's Inferno*, ISBN 0950372234, British Library Music Collections X.439/8529) the text of which is almost identical to that given above; the main difference being the chorus which in *The Bold Navigators* is "*For that's the rule of the bold navigator / For we are jovial banksmen all*" Canal building went on well into the railway age and navvies moved easily between the two sorts of contract. The reference to Barley-Bree does not occur in *The Bold Navigators*. Perhaps that song was taken up by Irish navvies who changed the chorus to suit a railway setting.

The barrow work referred to is probably barrowing soil along a series of planks to excavate cuttings or make embankments. The main plank wheel could well be the wheel at the top of a barrow. See the illustration below.



Navvies were paid according to the amount of earth they had shifted so the measurements made by surveyors were of critical importance to them. A theodolite is still referred to as a “dumpy leveller”, a usage which supports the idea that the “dumpling” in question is the heap of earth created by the navvies.



A 19th century surveyor's dumpy level

This version of the song probably dates from after work began on the construction of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1826 <http://www.mosi.org.uk/media/33871623/theliverpoolandmanchesterrailway.construction.pdf> although it is possible that it dates from the time of the construction of the Stockton and Darlington that opened in 1825.