



A Particular Year

BEATRICE HOLLOWAY

Be different: buy direct
from the author or
tslbooks.uk

It was the job of the lock keeper to keep breaking any ice that formed behind the gates. Pa said once or twice in the past the ice had been so thick that the canals could not be navigated and everyone had to wait for the thaw. 'And that took weeks,' he'd added.

The keeper came along to the men. 'It's more than I can do,' he said. 'Everything's freezing up again as fast as I be clearing it.' He let out a big sigh. 'I don't reckon there'll be a let up for a few days, but I'll keep at it this night and see what the morrow brings. My shoulders are aching swinging this axe, but I got to keep at it.' I heard his boots heavy on the cobbles as he strode away.

'Best we help the bloke out,' pa suggested. 'We could spare an hour's kip each I reckon.' When he had finished saying this, I saw three men with choppers make their way to the lock gates. They spoke to the lock keeper who was wiping sweat away from his eyes with his forearm. I saw him nod and then point and the men began work immediately. They hacked away and I thought yes, we'll be away in the morning. 'I'll be there in an hour or so,' pa called after them and I heard another voice call out,

'Aye, do yer best so we don't have to work too ... hard.' There was a swear word before 'hard'. Swearing cheerfully was the language of boatmen. The remark caused some light laughter, but most men were anxious about the coming hours.

My sleep that first night was broken by the thump of the various tools chopping away at the ice. I was aroused when pa returned. I half opened my eyes and saw pa nudge Jack.