

Cheshire Observer Saturday October 11th 1873
BOATMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN – AN APPEAL

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CHESHIRE OBSERVER

Sir, - The subject of our sailors is at long last being abundantly and satisfactorily discussed, and, thanks to Mr Plimsoll, there is the prospect of adequate legislation, spite of the selfish resistance of vested interests and of the very "uncertain sound" given forth by the committee appointed by the House of Commons, for the nation's heart is true, and goes with the (so called) "indiscreet" Mr Plimsoll, rather than with your ultra prudent dignitaries who always display a ludicrous timorousness lest the taking out of a rotten pin of an existing institution will fetch down walls and roof and all.

I have now very respectfully to claim the attention of the public, through the press, to a much-too-long neglected department of our sailor population – if sailor is the proper word when not the sea but our canals are the scenes of their occupation. As the heading of my letter indicates, I refer to the boatmen and their children, At a rough estimate there are 100,000 of canal boatmen in active employment in England alone, so that, with their families, we have a population approximating well on half a million. It is no trivial or small interest, therefore, that I am now concerned about. Well, Sir, it will probably be news to 99 out of 100 of your readers, that these boatmen, their wives, and families, in a very large proportion *have no home on land*, but pass their lives habitually on their boats. By an accepted phraseology, the boat-home is called a cabin (as is poor Paddy's), but practically it is a miserable hole, averaging 6 feet by 7 feet 6, by 4 feet 6, or in other words the cabin contains about 202 cubic feet of space: and in such places will be found from four to seven persons, over and above fire-stove, seats, beds, pots, and other necessaries. So they are stowed together from year's beginning to year's end. I may be permitted to give actual examples as (1) J H of Stoke Golding, with wife and five children, live constantly in the boat, having no other home (2) W G, Copready, near Banbury, with wife and six children, the same (3) J O, of Stockton Wharf, with wife and seven children, the same. So throughout.

Of the children of these 100,000 boatmen not more, probably, than 2000 will be found to attend either day school or Sunday school. Of the boatmen themselves 2 per cent as able to read and write would be a full proportion.

I do not enter at present on the condition either physically or morally of this population. Very appalling are the facts within my knowledge, and these must sooner or later come out. Neither do I just now enter on the question of wages and earnings. But even these few data must satisfy, I humbly think, that there is a loud call for legislative enquiry, legislative supervision and legislative redress. On the face of it, it seems monstrous that with the Factory and Workshop Act of 1871, passed and in activity, it should be possible to have women and children herding together and employed as in these boats, so that the Education Act should be inoperable in relation to these boatmen's children.

Trusting that the whole subject of our boatmen and coasting coal boat families will secure the powerful advocacy of the press so as to command legislation, I am, Sir, your obedient, humble servant

G S Smith

Dial House, Coalville, Leicester. Oct 8th 1873