

February 28th 1882

OUR CANAL CHILDREN

Gentlemen – In the midst of surroundings of canal life of various phases and hues at Paddington Basin, which, to be fully realised, must be seen, I came upon, a few days since, a poor boat girl of ten winters, belonging to a registered boat, in charge of a big heavy boat horse with a foot that seemed ready at every step to crush the poor child into the mud upon the towing-path, as they tramped along together. A few questions gently put elicited the fact that she was born in the cabin, or dark floating cage, and that there were living in the cabin at the present time, father, mother, and five brothers and sisters of various ages, not one of whom could tell a letter, except the little girl, and she had only attended a day school one week in her life ; and during that one week, she remarked – with pleasure in her face and fire in her eyes - “I learned my A B C”. She further stated that she had had three more brothers and sisters born in the cabin – one of whom – a big boy – was drowned in the “cut” some time since ; and a sister of six years old died of fever last Whitsuntide in the boat cabin, and was carried, when cold, by her mother in the public streets to her aunt’s. Just as she was in the midst of her pitiful tale her father came “storming” along the towing-path, the sight and sound of whom sent the poor little girl into tears. With much persuasion and a little tact I turned aside the threatened vengeance, and on the poor girl sped her way at the heels of the horse, shouting with a trembling screaming voice, “Come up”.

If the Canal Boats Act of 1877 was made a living reality, in accordance with the amending bill I am humbly promoting, instead of a dead letter, as is now almost the case, through a few faulty pieces in the act of 1877, this and many thousands of cases, similar in many respects, would be impossible. In the midst of the parliamentary chaotic confusion, which our legislators find themselves enveloped in law making, by clouds of words like swarms of flies darkening the object, “full of sound and fury” signifying something (*nothing?*), I do – and I am uttering the voice of thousands – most sincerely hope that the rescuing hands of the government may be seen clutching the measure held out to them, and turn into law a bill which will, without any increased cost or inconvenience to those interested worth mention, be the means of saving the 40,000 poor canal children of school age from further degradation and misery, and lift the salvators nearer heaven. Your obedient servant,
GEORGE SMITH (of Coalville)

May 12 1883

OUR CANAL AND GYPSY CHILDREN

TO THE EDITORS OF THE LIVERPOOL MERCURY

Gentlemen – A Sunday evening or two ago, while the church bells were echoing heaven's enchanting strains in the air, and people were wending their way with light heart and step, joyfully, to church and chapel, I came across three canal boats tied together, waiting to be tugged through a long dark tunnel – with a moral outlook for those living in the cabins darker still. As the boats lay under the overhanging branches of lovely trees budding into exciting spring life alongside a beautiful park, I could not resist the promptings of my heart to inquire into the condition of the poor neglected creatures living in the suffocating cabins. In No 1 boat there were man, woman, and four children of both sexes, from eight to 14 years of age, none of whom could tell a letter. I gave them some picture cards &c, which the good woman, with sorrow upon her face and grief in her eyes, said, “I shall take them to Birmingham for my mother to read to us in our cabins, as she often does”. In No 2 boat there were man and two grown-up daughters. The man could tell a “big letter”, but neither of the young women could do even this much. In No 3 boat there were one woman, a young man, and four children of school age. Out of the fifteen men, women and children living in three cabins, in a total space of less than 9ft square, not one could read or write a sentence.

The previous day I came upon a poor boatgirl of about ten winters doing horse work in pulling a laden boat along. A strong woman was at the tiller and the man was in a public house.

Should the time ever arrive – which seems doubtful – when the Canal Boats Act Amendment Bill I am humbly promoting becomes law, and my plans carried out, this state of things will be remedied, and the children receiving a free education with but little cost or inconvenience to either boatmen, boat owners or canal proprietors – in fact they will be gainers in many ways.

With reference to the amending bill, as the matter now stands it has been “blocked” by Mr Warton, M P for Bridport, and Mr Algernon Egerton, M P for Wigan, and opposed by Mr F S Powell and the Canal Association.

Freezing wintry darkness and cruelty is to be the lot of the 60,000 canal and van children of school age – 55,000 of whom cannot read and write, and with day and Sunday schools in our midst on every hand that might be at the antipodes for what good they are and will be to the poor children – in the future, as it has been for many centuries in the past, with no parliamentary hand to deliver nor Government to protect, although caravan and canal children are living in blacker, darker ignorance, and suffer more cruelty and hardship, than the children of other working classes in England ; and this is the state of things in our country, which is reckoned the first in the world to protect the children within its borders, and to extend the blessings of civilisation over the globe. Very sincerely yours,
GEORGE SMITH of Coalville.

June 13 1884

CANAL WOMEN AND CHILDREN

To show that the Canal Boats Act of 1877, and the regulations of the Local Government Board, are openly violated every day and on every canal, as Messrs Pilcher and Lloyd can ascertain by their toll clerks, without going a hundred miles from Birmingham, and with less trouble than taking haphazardly the incorrect numbers of those living in the cabins, I will give three additional cases that have recently come under my notice.

Case 1. In a boat cabin near here I saw man, woman – not his lawful wife so report has it - “chap” about 22 and a girl about 15. The sleeping and living quarters for these four would not be larger than an ordinary canal boat.

Case 2. In a boat cabin there were man, woman, and five children – some say six children – of both sexes, some of whom I should imagine to be in their teens. Within this cabin home of 6ft square, which has to serve for all purposes for the whole family afloat, the woman was confined of a baby, although they had a house on land, and she could have passed through the trying hour with friends at her elbow and poverty on the wing.

No 3 is the case of a woman who left her cottage with husband a several children on the Sunday morning, and was confined of a baby in her cabin on the Monday, and on the Wednesday morning following she was steering the boat as if nothing had happened.

Without going further back or deeper into my notebook, full of cases showing how the Act and the regulations of the Local Government Board have been set at nought during the last few years, I am prepared to lay them privately before any two disinterested gentlemen, with the understanding that, if proved to be substantially correct, as I have stated, Messrs Pilcher and Lloyd will help forward the bill which I am promoting, instead of doing their best to kill past resurrection a measure that is to secure a free education for the canal and gypsy children at a cost of not more than five shillings per annum. But for their information, neither it nor its author are going to be frightened out of existence by the wrathful fumes of over-heated selfish interests.

It is true that I have not taken any further steps to enforce the carrying out of the Act than those I laid before the Select Committee and friends, and to the public through the press, from time to time, during the last six years, for the simple reason, I have not had the power to enter a cabin to obtain the necessary information. No man has power to enter a cabin, except the sanitary officers appointed by the registration authorities. The Manchester authorities decided years ago, owing to a flaw in the Act, not to enforce the regulations of the Local Government Board. Then again, I should not know who to prosecute, as neither the name upon the cabin nor the registration certificates – owing to want of power in the Act to see that the transfers of ownerships and captain are properly executed – consequently the certificates are not to be relied upon. Providing they were, the boatmen are not such simpletons as to voluntarily hand me, or anyone, their certificate of registration, in order that I might prosecute them. The fact is, for years the registration authorities all over the country have ceased to institute proceedings under the Act.

The Act of 1877 places the children under the School Authorities at the place the boats are registered as belonging, but by an oversight it has not provided the proper machinery to carry this feature into effect. A School Board officer has not power, at any rate they have not done so, to enter a canal boat cabin, and the result is, so far as I know, not one School Board Authority in the country is attempting to educate the canal children.

With reference to the numbers I state, namely, that there are 100,000 men, women and children upon canals, or connected with the traffic in one form or another, I have based my figures upon a statement given to me many years ago by Mr Mercer, secretary to the Grand Junction Canal Company, namely that there were about 1,000 boats on this canal between London and Birmingham. Against this I set a long canal upon which there are but few boats; and taking the two together, after walking thousands of miles along the banks of canals and closely observing both the boats and their inmates, I arrived at the estimate that there are about four boats per mile on the canals and navigable rivers in the country.....I estimate that when registration has done its work under the powers of the bill, we shall find 20,000 boats &c upon our rivers and canals.....

The Act has done a little towards reducing the numbers living in the cabins in some districts. The way the Canal Association or canal proprietors have recently taken the numbers is worse than a farce. In reply to some of the toll clerks' enquiries, the boatmen have poked lies, absurdities and fun at them. Then again, the number of boats lying at wharves have not been taken into account. It was not to be expected that a boatman would say that he had six children in his cabin, when the law allows only two. Further it was not to be expected that a boatman who is living with a woman in an unmarried state would tell the toll clerk of the fact..... I have stated all along that there were some grand noble men and women to be found among the boaters. If the agitation has done nothing more, it has resulted in more lawful marriages taking place than formerly. A very marked improvement has taken place among the boaters working upon the Oxford Canal, which, I am informed by the officials, is chiefly due to the company closing their canal on Sunday. Will the Grand Junction, Warwick and Birmingham, Worcester and Birmingham, do likewise?.....

In one word, the bill is to make the Act of 1877 a workable measure, bringing health, happiness, morality, and virtue to canal workers, with but little cost and inconvenience to either boatmen, boatowners or shareholders. Legislative indifference to the wants of our canal toilers, and the requirements of the country relating to canal matters, has brought about the sad state of things every wise man and well wisher deplures; but which can be put right by wise, healthy legislative activity if applied to canals and canal workers on the lines I have for long laid down; and if Messrs Pilcher and Lloyd and the Canal Association are wise, they will help it forward instead of trying to stamp it out, to the injury of the shareholders, and further degradation of some 60,000 canal and gypsy children.

Very sincerely yours,
GEORGE SMITH of Coalville