

PROSECUTIONS UNDER THE CANAL BOATS ACT BIRMINGHAM

April 11 1881 **Birmingham Police Court**

A WARNING TO BOATMEN The following persons were summoned at the instance of Mr Thomas Hastings Dale, inspector under the Canal Boats Act, for using canal boats as dwellings without having them duly registered :- **Richard Dayus**, St John's, Worcester; **Shadrach Speak**, Factory Street, Darlaston; and **Henry Griffin**, Birmingham, were each fined 5s and costs. The inspector stated that he had decided to deal with every contravention of the Act which came under his notice.

July 19 1884 **Stoke-on-Trent**

HOW SMALLPOX IS SPREAD Yesterday, at the Stipendiary's Court at Fenton, **Edward Bannister**, boatman, Wolverhampton, was charged with an offence against the Canal Boats Act. The defendant's boat was registered and licensed to carry three persons, but on the 3rd instant the Sanitary Inspector (Mr Howell) found it lying at Stoke with the defendant, his wife, and three children on board. One child was suffering from smallpox, and a second was just recovering from the disease, but defendant had given no notice of the fact that he had infectious disease on board to the Sanitary Authority. He was reprimanded for his reckless conduct, and fined 5s and 12s costs.

December 15 1884 **Wolverhampton**

CONTRAVENING THE CANAL BOATS ACT On Saturday, at the Police Court, **John Stokes**, boatman, of the boat Dublin, belonging to the Severn Canal Carrying Company, was fined 10s and costs for disregarding the regulations of the Canal Boats Act. On October 15th, Inspector Blanton examined the boat, and found that the defendant, his wife, and three children were living in it.

Edward Bannister, of the boat Margaret, belonging to Messrs Fanshaw and Pinson, was also fined 10s and costs for a like offence.

September 14 1887 **News of the Day Birmingham Post**

Among the contents of the volume just issued by the Local Government Board is a report for the year 1886, by Mr John Brydone, Chief Inspector under the Canal Boats Acts. As this document relates to a subject of considerable social interest, and one in which Birmingham is much concerned, the statements it contains are deserving of attention. The Inspector appears, on the whole, to be fairly well satisfied with the progress thus far made in bringing the provisions of the new law into operation. He recites many instances of neglect on the part both of sanitary authorities and of boatowners ; but these are attributable to the novelty of the regulations, and the short time they have been in force, rather than to intentional disregard. Referring to local authorities, the Inspector says only a few of them had kept any record of the work they had done, so that he had to rely for information on the mere recollection of their officers, which information was necessarily of an imperfect description. Some of the local inspectors appeared to believe that if boatmen could produce their certificates of registration, they fully satisfied the law, while others considered their duty fulfilled when they had seen that registration marks were duly subscribed on the sides or sterns of the boats. One authority, exercising jurisdiction over nearly forty miles of six different canals, was not only ignorant of the extent of these waterways, but had done nothing to carry out the Acts beyond the nominal appointment, without salary, of "an inspector who made no inspections". In some cases the local inspectors were not furnished with copies of the Acts, and in many others the inspectors had not been required to take action. The Chief Inspector, in noticing these examples of neglect, was informed by some of the authorities that they did nothing beyond appointing inspectors, because they considered it his duty and not theirs to see that the officers performed their work. We are glad to find, however, that praise is bestowed on the Birmingham Sanitary Authority. In this instance, Mr Brydone says, "A most useful form of caution has been adopted, and if it had been sufficiently employed by the officer specially appointed, its use would have spread, I have no doubt, through the Midlands at least, if not throughout the whole country". It is then explained that this document is so specific and so thoroughly comprehensive of the points requiring attention, that a boatowner in returning it, is not put to the trouble of writing a single word beyond his name. In Birmingham, however, although 1,233 inspections had been made, and many notices of warning had been given, the work was much of it left imperfect. The number of warnings was 232, out of which 114 were complied with, nothing being ascertained as to the 118 remaining. Had the local office been asked for an explanation of this discrepancy before the statement was published he might perhaps have given some reasonable cause for it.

The table of these Birmingham cases furnishes a list of the different abuses which the acts are intended to remedy. They are as follows: - Overcrowding, boats not properly marked, having no certificate of registration, boats not registered, no proper vessel for drinking water, females over age, dirty cabins, having no pumps to remove bilge water, partition not supplied for separating the sexes, registered as a flyboat working as an ordinary boat, defective or no ventilation, cabin in a dilapidated state, and carrying offensive cargo without proper bulkhead. In some instances several of these defects have been discovered in one and the same boat. At Kidderminster, for example, a case occurred in which the boat was unregistered, and the cabin was dirty and totally unfit for use ; while it was occupied by the boatman, his daughter (twenty two years of age), and his son (twenty years of age), the son and daughter actually sleeping together in the same bed. It is satisfactory to learn that, in cases such as these, the improprieties are often removed on their being pointed

out. A boatman, carrying with him his wife and three daughters (aged seventeen, thirteen and four years), being told that he was infringing the law, had his older daughters removed, the oldest being placed in service, where she is said to be doing well. As to this and other like instances, the Chief Inspector says "it has been a source of real pleasure to me to receive the hearty and at all times courteous recognition which one and all of these boat people, whom I have previously met with, invariably extend to me". The regulations prohibit any girl over twelve years of age from occupying a cabin as a sleeping place at the same time as any male person. To meet this requirement, some boatmen have taken houses on land for the occupation of their families, while others, like the one just mentioned, have placed their elder girls in service. We gather from the general tenor of the report that the boat population is far from constituting so rude a class as may be generally supposed. Now that civilising and humanising influences are being brought to bear upon them, they appear quite sensible of the advantages they are promised, and quite willing to conform to the provisions of the law. The Inspector quotes, from a letter written by a literary friend who had made an extensive tour on canals, the following passage, "So far as we did see the canal boat population, we were agreeably surprised, after the harrowing accounts which have appeared from time to time in the papers. The men were quiet and respectable, and invariably most civil to us ; the women seemed clean and healthy looking, and as for the children, well, I wish my childhood had been passed as pleasantly as they appeared to be passing theirs".

The Inspector has paid particular attention to the subject of educating the children of canal boat families, which is necessarily one of some difficulty. Boatmen are not only a migratory class, but some of them appear to think rather lightly of the services of the schoolmaster. In reply to expostulations for not having sent his son to school one of them retorted, "If the lad grows up as good as his father he will do"; adding, "I never had any schooling, nor do I see what good it does them ; it only makes them above their work". Being then asked if he was in want of a boy to go with him in his boat, and two boys otherwise equally capable offered themselves, whether he would not rather engage the one that could read and write, so as to help him with his cargo notes, toll tickets &c, his reply was "No, he would prefer the one who could neither read nor write, as lads that had a bit of learning "put it on" so". The missionary efforts pursued in many of the canal localities, such as London, Bristol, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Liverpool, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, and others have, however, not only overcome these prejudices, but have been to a considerable extent successful in conquering the difficulties offered by the circumstances of the boat population. The report furnishes particulars of 312 boats registered in Birmingham, of the masters of which 78 were either single men or had no children, or only had children over or under the school age. The remaining 134 were the parents or guardians of children of school age. As to these children, 351 in number, there had not been time for a perfect investigation of their school attendance ; but =, as it came to the knowledge of the parents or guardians that the children would be required to attend school, many of them were removed to houses on land, so that they might be able to comply with the requirements of the law as to education. And at one school in Birmingham, connected with the Seamen's and Boatmen's Friendly Society, cabin children alone, excluding those having homes in the town, had made 3,760 attendances during the year. This figure may not account for a great many children, but it is at any rate a beginning. There is one passage in the report which deserves notice, from the bearing it has on a question now being much considered in local circles. It is stated that boat people experienced great hardship last winter from canals being frozen up. Some of the companies kept the waterways open for short local traffic, but the long distance traffic was for a time entirely suspended, seventy boats being ice-bound in one coal-loading district alone, while large numbers were blocked up in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and, in fact, in all the large boating centres. The state of things here described will naturally receive the attention of persons interested in the scheme for constructing a ship canal from Birmingham to the mouth of the Severn. Reverting to the boat people, we find Mr Brydone concluding his report with the following encouraging statement : - "I think it may be gathered from this report that the Canal Boats Act of 1877 and 1884, and the regulations of the Local Government Board, continue to effect a marked improvement both in the habits and conditions of the men, their wives, and families, and consequently in the cleanliness, healthiness, and comfort of their floating homes".