

OUR FLOATING POPULATION

1874

Some shocking revelations have been made by Mr Davenport, the inspector of the Nantwich Rural Sanitary Authority, in a report relative to the boatmen and their families who live in the canal boats which ply on the river Weaver. He says that exclusive of the "fly boats", three fourths of what are termed "slows" are not, as might be supposed, the temporary residences of persons in pursuit of their calling, but they are the floating homes in which whole families reside from year's end to year's end, in which children are born, as may be seen from the registers, and in which men, women and children, as a matter of course, sicken and die. They have no other residences, and nowhere else to go. The fly boats do not take women and children on board, but the "slows" have frequently a family of five or six children besides the father and mother. One boat which Mr Davenport met had eleven on board; another had seven on board, and the captain's wife said she had gone with twelve. A family of five or six, and these sometimes of both sexes full grown, however, is frequent enough. The dimensions of the cabins of two boats, which were stated to be of average size, were measured. The *Woodcock* had a cabin 8ft 6in long, by 5ft 6in wide, by 5ft high, giving a cubic content very little over 200 ft. The *Coot* had a cabin 8ft 6in long, by 5ft 10in wide, by 5ft high, giving a cubic content very little over 250 ft (the width of the bed place was about 3ft 8in); and when it is considered that 300 cubic feet are generally taken as the allowance for one individual, it may excite some surprise how seven or eight persons can be stowed away in 250 or 260 cubic feet. These boats generally tie up at night, and when they have a good round family on board they must be uncomfortably packed. Another evil is when disease, and especially infectious, occurs on board. A case was brought under Mr Davenport's notice in which persons suffering from smallpox were being conveyed through the district in a boat. Only three weeks ago, in an adjoining district, a case transpired where there was a dead body of a child, who had died of typhus fever, on board a boat, and the mother was ill with the same fever in the cabin. Another child had died just before from the same cause. That there may be some danger of such boats going about the country and spreading disease will be admitted, and the laying out of bodies that have died of infectious disease in the body of a boat, perhaps amongst a cargo that may have to be distributed here and there, must have some little element of danger about it. The occupiers of these floating houses, the report says, seem to be outside the pale of influences, both religious, moral and educational. At the last census there were some 7100 women in Lancashire and Cheshire living in boats lying moored at the time of the taking of the census, and these would probably represent a little army of children whose wandering life enables them to bid defiance to Educational Acts. For a similar reason, the overcrowded boats with their crews and their diseases are practically independent of the Sanitary Acts.