

### September 8 1877

GENERAL NEWS In referring to the disclosures made before the City Coroner, a few months ago, when an inquiry was held into the cause of death of an old woman on board a canal boat, we dealt with the subject of life on board canal boats generally. We took occasion to point out that the Government had not taken up the question one moment too soon. Men, woman and children were packed together in these boats in defiance of all sanitary laws, and in a manner quite shocking to all sense of decency. The ignorance of these people was of the most dense kind, and so their round of life went on. "Eating, drinking and smoking" as a correspondent says in another part of our issue, with reference to boatmen generally, enters largely into the occupation of their lives, and he might have added, varied by frequent fights and violence of various kinds, and the free use of as foul a vocabulary as could be found among any class of men anywhere. In January next all this will be changed. An Act for regulating these boats will come into operation, and with the Elementary Education Acts now in force, ought soon to change the aspect of canal boat life for the better. In the letter referred to, it is shown that the earnings of a boatman and his wife and children are put down at about £2 5s a week. That amount is higher, we are told, than the wages received by boatmen on the canal with which our readers are familiar, but even under the Shropshire Union Company, their pay equals the wages of the skilled labourer or the mechanic, and is ample to enable them to pay for the education of their children, and keep a house. We observe that an attempt is being made to set up a floating chapel upon the canal in Chester, with the view of bringing the canal population under good influences. We wish the scheme all success, and hope its promoters will be able to make a better report of the results of their operations than the clergyman whose parish abuts upon the Grand Junction Canal. The main difficulty with these people will be their ignorance. In the course of time, under recent legislation, this will be overcome, but for the present any attempt to reach these people must prove to be uphill work. Still, the idea is well worth a trial, and we hope it may not hang fire for want of the small amount which is required to commence it.

### May 11 1878

THE BOATMEN'S BETHEL In a letter to *The Christian*, the Rev P W Darnton gives an interesting account of the recently opened "Boatman's Bethel". We extract the following:-

The Bethel was completed by the end of 1877, and early in the present year was opened by the Mayor of the city, ministers of various denominations taking part in the opening meeting. The first Sunday afternoon a free tea was provided for all the boat people who could be found. They were a little shy at first, but a goodly number came, and an interesting service was held. We felt quite uncertain whether the numbers which were attracted by the "tea" could be maintained without such an attraction but to our intense gratitude we find that those numbers have been considerably increased. The attendance fluctuates according to the number of boats at the station, and, while it has risen to seventy, it has fallen as low as twenty four. The average for the three months just ended has been of children in the afternoon, nineteen; and of all classes at the evening service, forty eight. About ninety four children have passed under the teachers' notice during the three months, for it seldom happens that the same persons are present on two consecutive Sundays. It is one of the chief difficulties of the work that with the exception of a few who have houses on shore, the congregation does not repeat itself for some five or six weeks.

That the boat people appreciate the effort made for their welfare is quite evident from the fact that when they come back to Chester they almost invariably come to the Bethel of their own accord. On the Sunday previous to the day on which I am writing, fifty seven people came to the evening service, *not one of whom had been solicited to attend*. Other indications from time to time appear of the interest felt by many of the people themselves in the services. Conversations have been overheard which give the key to the character and condition of the speakers, and indicate how they look upon the work we are doing. "How should we know anything", said a man, the other day, to a companion after the evening service, "when we never go to any place to hear it – no chapel, nor anywhere else. We know nothing but eating and drinking, and cursing and swearing, and steering and driving". "Good bye, and God bless you for the words I have heard tonight", said another, on taking leave of the leader of the meeting. "Well how do you like it?" said a boatman to his wife as they were going back to their boat. "I haven't spent such a happy hour in all my life, as I can remember," was her reply. "Well," said the man, "I've worked harder on Sunday than any day of the week for a many years, but this has been a happy day; and I tell thee what – if thou'll stick to it, I will".

Notwithstanding that so few of the men can read, the little lending library we provided has proved too small for the demand. No less than fifty two persons have borrowed books – some several times; and if they cannot read themselves there is generally someone at hand who can manage to make sense out of a book, and the art of acquiring knowledge is almost as new and delightful to many of these people as to the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands.

It will be seen, I think, that there is an extremely important and most interesting sphere of labour open to those who dwell near any of the stopping stations upon our canals. When we consider the isolation of the boat people from our ordinary shore life, and the utter absence among them of "Sunday clothes" or indeed of any clothes except the roughest and rudest garments, we cannot expect them to enter our churches and mingle with well dressed congregations. The Gospel must be taken to them; and there are no people known to me who are so accessible and ready to receive instruction, and withal so grateful, as those known as the canal population. In conclusion, I should like to point out one or two features of our work to which, I think, we owe – under the blessing of God – the encouraging success which has hitherto attended it.

In the first place, then, the Bethel is a *floating* structure. No one who has had anything to do with sailors or persons accustomed to the water will fail to see the value of this. Then, secondly, the Bethel is *exclusively* for the canal people. With the exception of those who conduct the meetings, no one but persons engaged on the canal is permitted to enter. Again and again refusals have to be made to persons belonging to other classes who wish to attend the meetings. Even the wives and friends of those who are engaged in the work are dissuaded from attending. The boat people have been told that the Bethel belongs to them. Whenever it is open they are welcome to enter, either to attend a school or service, or to sit and read, or look at the books and pictures. So long as they can find no one there but persons of their own class, many of whom they know well, there is no fear of their deserting the Bethel.

And once more, the services are conducted by the right class of men, in the freest and least formal manner – addresses short, simple, even "rough and ready", delivered by man who can talk the language and refer to the life of those they address.

The workers in connection with the Bethel meet every Sunday morning "on board" for special prayer; and as their prayers *are* always "special", they obtain answers to their petitions, and the blessing of God is manifestly resting upon their labours. The good seed is being sown in new and unusual places, in soil which seems unpropitious, but already we see that we dare not judge by appearances, and there are signs of a blessed harvest.