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In the current number of the Fortnightly Review, Mr George Smith (of Coalville, Leicester), whose successful labours on behalf of brickfield children are well known, contributes an important paper in the interests of another much neglected class - "Our Canal Population". This is a subject which (we need hardly say) has a special application in Warwickshire and neighbouring counties, and a brief summary of the weighty case presented by Mr Smith will not be out of place in these columns. The writer's description of the canal boatmen and their families is certainly startling. In early life he tells us he lived close to the canal in Tunstall, Staffordshire, and the scenes he there witnessed he will never forget. "Drunkenness, filthiness, cruelty, selfish idleness at the cost of children and animals, thieving, fighting, and almost every other abomination prevailed among them". He often saw the boat women strip and fight like men, and sometimes bite and kick each other - to say nothing of the peculiarly female accomplishment of pulling the hair out of their adversaries' heads. His subsequent experience he paints in colours equally black. "The boatmen", says Mr Smith, "are great drinkers and, almost as a natural consequence, a large number of their wives can do as much in that way as their husbands". But this is not all - parents will give their children liquor, and as much of it as they like to drink. A case of this kind came under the writer's notice a short time since at Nuneaton. The father and mother of a child four years old got drunk, and made the child drunk also. "When I saw the child," says Mr Smith, "it could not stand, and the parents, as the poor little thing fell, picked it up again, in order to see it fall forward time after time. While the child was tumbling about, the father and mother enjoyed the scene with boisterous shouts and laughter". The freedom with which boatmen indulge their own idleness at the cost of their offspring is not less remarkable. The illustration given of a boat on the canal near Atherstone, with the boatman propped up against the helm smoking, while a wretched looking, ill clad, badly shod girl of seven or eight trotted painfully along the tow path driving the donkeys, may be verified almost every day. An extract from a letter written by a gentleman practically acquainted with boatmen and their families, possesses a special local interest :-

"I have", says Mr Smith's correspondent, "made some observations and enquiries, which all tend to confirm the opinion that I expressed to you that, next to the poor creatures employed in the brickyards, no class seems less cared for than the poor wretched children in the Staffordshire boats. My remarks, however, apply mainly to Coventry and the district. You are aware that on this canal, there are three distinct classes of boatmen. First the "flymen", who work in crews of three men, with their well fitted, well painted, and well cleaned cabins, so clean that no one may scruple to enter them. Next, there are the boats employed in the coal trade, well built and arranged, but sadly deficient in the size of cabin, when that place contains father, mother, three or four children, and generally a strong youth of fifteen or sixteen ; and which constitutes dining room, bedroom, nursery and all. The cabins of these boats contain in gross measurement about 202 cubic feet, of which about 50 or in some cases 60 feet are taken up by the beds, cupboards and fittings, leaving only, say, 150 cubic feet, badly ventilated, for the sleeping apartment of (very often) three adult people and three children. In the city of Coventry no habitable room is allowed to be of less than 900 cubic feet, so that if occupied by two people, there are 450 feet for each person. In the cabin I have described, there are only 25 feet for each person, with no ventilation but the chimney pipe. When I contrast this state of things with the stringent requirements of the Local Government Board in the casual wards of the workhouses, where adequate means for warming the wards in cold weather, and proper ventilation at all times, whether in winter or summer, is insisted upon, one is forced to the conclusion that the health and mortality of the lower class of boating people has been sadly ignored. But to return to the lowest class on the canals, viz, those employed in conveying ironstone from Warwickshire and Staffordshire. Here I am puzzled to decide which point to touch upon first. However, as to the boats themselves, which are in very many instances scarcely fit to be used ; old and worn out, leaky and therefore very damp, never painted or well cleaned for years (beyond an occasional fumigation) and consequently filthy beyond description. Bad as they are, they generally

contain the boatman, his wife, and five or six children, and in several instances even seven. How they are packed to sleep is a mystery, and one I have no anxiety to investigate. But I am credibly informed that some of the smaller ones actually sleep in a cupboard. As a class, these boatmen are the lowest in the social scale of any I have ever met ; profligate, and brutal to a degree you can scarcely believe ; too idle to get off and drive the donkey, their ingenuity is displayed by suspending an old tin “nose basket” or tin kettle, or even an old frying pan, behind the poor animal, on the same principle, one can only suppose, and in order to obtain the same result, as tying a kettle to a dog's tail. This is called a “lazy driver” and is seen daily and many times a day in summer time. Even this does not always succeed, and the man (or rather the brute) is compelled to get off his boat and drive, which he performs not with a whip, but with a tough bludgeon some two or three feet long and an inch and a half thick. I have seen one of these men strike his donkey with such a weapon some dozen times as hard as he could, and without a halt between the blows. Indeed, I have repeatedly counted the blows inflicted on the poor animals while in my bed at night, and the actual distance from the towing path to my house is over a hundred yards. With such brutes as parents, reared in such a demoralising atmosphere, accustomed to cruelty in every form, the poor boat children's is a hard and sad lot.”

The sanitary condition of the cabins, the same writer vouches, is sometimes fearful. Vermin muster in such strength that the legitimate inmates can only hold, or rather regain their own, by retiring with their bedding and cooking utensils, and burning brimstone inside until the unwelcome intruders are reduced by suffocation. This interesting process is known as “bug driving”, and it may be seen any day along the canals. Domestic comfort under the conditions of canal life is of course impossible. Mr Smith gives several illustrations of the wretched sights which may be witnessed, and he adds an illustration of another kind. A boating woman with whom he was recently in conversation stated she had not slept in a dwelling house for twenty four years, had scarcely ever seen a flower bed, and never went to a place of worship. She had reared eight children in the cabin, and on being asked how she and her family slept, she replied – herself and her husband in the largest bed, one child across the pillow, one at their feet, one in the large cupboard, and the remainder distributed as best they could – the ordinary size of the cabins, it should be observed, being about that of a second class compartment of a railway carriage. The effect of living in such a polluted atmosphere, together with exposure to all kinds of weather, and the want of cleanliness, intemperance, deficiency of clothing and food that characterise canal life, may be seen in the appearance of the men, many of whom look ten years older than they really are. “It is superfluous”, continues Mr Smith, “to say that there is little semblance of religious feeling among such people. Sunday, indeed, seems to them as any other day”, - and indeed, there is no reason why it should not, for Sunday labour on canals is the general rule. On two canals, however – the Grand Junction and Shropshire Union – orders have been issued prohibiting the running of boats on Sunday, except in special cases ; and there appears to be a feeling, both among the owners of boats as well as the men and women employed, that something general should be done to stop Sunday labour. As to the wages earned by the boaters, Mr Smith, premising that in other districts there may be some difference, says that from Moira and the Leicester district, Polesworth and a few other places, to Oxford, the sum paid for conveying a load of coal is £5 10s. It takes sixteen days to perform this journey, and to earn the money there must be employed two men and a horse or two donkeys. Deducting all expenses, the amount earned by each man is about 2s 7 1/2d each day, from which food, clothing and *drink* have to be provided. The number of persons included in our “Floating population” is not easy to ascertain, but Mr Smith puts it down at 96,000. This estimate includes 40,000 children, and the question at once suggests itself, “Should these children be allowed to grow up uneducated, and subject to all the unenviable conditions of the sphere in which they are born?” They belong to no particular district – no School Board has any responsibility for them, and except in very rare instances they grow up as ignorant as their parents. A considerable number of the boaters, Mr Smith tells us, wish that their children should be educated, and he quotes from a memorial signed by some of them, in which it is affirmed that “our children ought to be educated

and protected as children on other work are, “ and that “no child under 13, and no female under 18 years of age, should be employed on, or allowed to sleep in, canal boats”. Coming to the remedy for the frightful social sore thus described, Mr Smith urges the application of (1) the Elementary Education Act ; (2) the Factory and Workshops Acts ; and (3) the Sanitary Act. There is, he says, such elasticity in all these Acts, that if any of them were put in force, improvements would soon follow. He is, however, convinced that to grapple with the evil, special legislation will be required, and in this opinion most people will agree. He adds that he has reason to believe the Government intends to deal with the question, and it is an obvious remark that this is the kind of reform upon which the Conservatives have been accustomed to pride themselves. Under any circumstances, the subject is too pressing to be long postponed, and Mr Smith has done good service in the cause of humanity by the disinterested zeal with which he has pleaded for a class that seems without the pale of civilising influences.