

MANCHESTER COURIER

22 April 1878

After the 30th of June in the present year, a class of the population which has, in several respects, been hitherto virtually outlawed, will commence to share privileges which ought to be enjoyed by the whole community. It is a lamentable fact that, until very recently, no sufficient effort had been made by the Legislature so to provide for the special circumstances of the class to which we refer, as to bring its numbers within the provisions of several Acts which have, in modern times, been passed for the improvement of the morals or of the physical health of society. That class consists of canal boatmen and those who constitute what may be described as their floating households. It is, of course, not difficult to account for the apparent anomaly involved in the peculiar exception of these people from certain legal obligations. Their mode of life is such as to place them beyond the operation of all, or nearly all, of the official machinery on which the legislature is accustomed to rely for the purpose of enforcing Acts of Parliament in the interests of morality or sanitary improvement. To the rate collector, keen as he is to watch the comings and goings of sojourners in his district, the canal boat, no matter how large the family of which it forms the only recognised – we can scarcely say settled – abode has never formed an object of professional interest. Poor law officials have, no doubt, been too often called upon to make some inquiries with reference to the local habitation, as well as the name of certain dwellers in canal boats ; but that necessity has arisen only in consequence of the not altogether disinterested anxiety of some parish or union to show that to another district belonged the right to claim a special property in the person of some amphibious being, who, for one cause or another, had been compelled to drop by the canal side, and to avail himself of the inhospitable shelter of the nearest workhouse. Even if the principle of household suffrage were extended to the county electors, there is no reason to suppose that the canal boatman would, by the provisions of the Act, be entitled to present himself at the polling booth and record his vote. Nay, so necessary is it – even under a system of manhood suffrage – to define, in some way or another, the persons who are entitled to the exercise of the franchise, that it would not be at all surprising if that necessity interfered with the registration of a man who could not, with propriety, be said to belong to any particular parish or even county. Some compensations, no doubt, there have been for these deprivations. The canal boatman has never known what it is to endure the unpleasantness of having either his gas or his water cut off in consequence of having failed to pay the bill for the previous quarter. We have never heard of a case in which his furniture has been seized for arrears of rent. And, if he has never enjoyed any of the privileges of a free and independent elector, he has never, on the other hand, had to undergo the ordeal of being waited on by half a dozen canvassers in succession, each urging upon him the claims to his support possessed by a candidate, for whose opponent he has already promised to vote after the application of at least an equal amount of moral suasion.

The canal boatman therefore has, virtually, been an outlaw, in the sense of being neither protected by, nor subject to, some very important statutes which materially affect almost every other member of the community. Even the vagrant or “tramp” has been compelled to pay a greater amount of attention to the practical side of the study of sanitary law, since he is compelled, for the most part, to sleep in common lodging houses, registered and inspected, from time to time, by the local authorities. But there can be no question of the necessity of putting an end to the equivocal privileges thus enjoyed by canal boatmen. The peculiar locomotive conditions under which his life is passed, while they constitute an explanation of the fact of that exemption existing, form, at the same time, a very strong reason for abolishing it at the earliest convenient date. Unless all the scientific beliefs on which so much of our modern sanitary legislation is based are altogether unworthy of credit, it is certain that a canal boat, which serves as a habitation for several human beings, and for proper attention to cleanliness in which no provision is made by law, is much more likely to become the scene of an outbreak of infectious disease than is a house under the eye of the officer of health and his assistants. This would be the case, even if all other elements in the two cases were equal each to each. That they are very far from being so it is hardly necessary to remark.

The poorest hut ashore will be a curiosity if it does not give more space – and consequently more air to breathe – to the inmates than do the best of the boats engaged in what is somewhat quaintly called our inland navigation. And when infectious disease does break out in the living cabin of a canal boat, it may reasonably be calculated that the danger to the community at large is, in such a case, much increased by the fact that its fatal germs are conveyed, with the boat, frequently for a long distance, and through districts where the population is dangerously dense. It may easily be supposed that the inhabitants of canal boats, as a rule, do not show very great alacrity in calling in medical aid, and even if they were always ready to do so when it is necessary, it does not always happen that such aid is available. It is wisely provided, therefore, in the Canal Boats Act, which, as we have intimated, comes into operation on the 30th of June in the present year, that, in case of serious illness occurring on board a boat, a master thereof is required to notify that fact to the sanitary authority of the district through which the boat happens, at the time, to be passing. This, of course, will give the local sanitary authority an opportunity of ascertaining whether or not the serious illness is of an infectious or contagious character. In the event of its proving to be so, the sanitary authority will then be empowered to detain the boat for the purposes of inspection and cleansing and, before it will be allowed to proceed on its “journey” - the draughtsman of the bill must have had a doubt as to whether he ought not to have said “voyage” - it will be necessary to obtain either from the medical officer of health or from some other legally qualified practitioner, a certificate to the effect that the boat has been duly cleansed and disinfected.

So much for the provisions made by the new Act to prevent the spread of disease. Other clauses have for their objects either the creation of safeguards against the initial outbreak of such disease, or the removal of those conditions under which the want of proper accommodation for living and sleeping becomes directly destructive of all ideas of common decency and morality. Every canal boat which is to be used as a dwelling will have to be registered, and no boat will be registered until it has been inspected and ascertained to be fit for the purpose. Regulations as to the size and ventilation of the cabins are made which will, of course, act as guides to the inspecting officers. It will be illegal for a cabin occupied as a sleeping place by a husband and wife to be occupied by any except young children. These, and many other useful regulations will, it may be trusted, do something to introduce an approach to civilisation into the lives of people who have, in many cases, been living a life of barbarism. But even in the event of this new Act being carried out in all its entirety, and with the utmost success, there will still be ample scope for the labours of those philanthropists, some of whom have for years past shown a laudable anxiety to ameliorate the condition of the canal boatman. It is to be hoped, indeed, that the working of the Act will be such as to give the praiseworthy efforts of these philanthropists and canal side missionaries a better chance of success than they ever had when they found their most strenuous efforts confronted by the barbarism of thought which was the natural result of a virtual absence of civilisation from the lives of the livers on the canals.

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Sunday last ought to be regarded as a red letter day in the records of the men, women and children who are engaged in what is, somewhat quaintly, described as the “inland navigation” of England. For that day witnessed the commencement of the operation of the Act which was passed, last Session, for the registration and regulation of canal boats which are used as dwelling houses. This Act, it may be remembered, was one of the last to receive the Royal Assent previous to the close of the Parliamentary Session of 1877. It is an Act, however, with regard to which it was arranged that it should not come into practical effect except under the regulation of the Local Government Board. The result of this arrangement has been that the Act only became a power for good or evil on Sunday last. So far as it is possible, for the present, to judge, there is no reason for supposing that the effect of the working of the Act will be anything but absolutely beneficial to that section of the community – numerically, at least, by no means an unimportant one – in whose interests the Act has been passed. The probability, which is by no means inconsiderable, is that many of those who should benefit by the operation of the Act will be amongst the last to acknowledge the advantages

conferred. That, however, will not alter the nature of the case. It may, indeed, be regarded as constituting one of the highest developments of civilisation, when a Government, acting under a free constitution, and with the consent of the great mass of the population, undertakes to accomplish, on behalf of large bodies of the community, reforms which would probably be resisted by those principally interested in the question. The Canal Boat Registration Act is simply one of many measures which have been passed since the present Government came into office, in redemption of the pledge given by the Premier, when he announced his *sanitas sanitatum* programme. We have already, on more than one occasion, referred to the leading provisions of this measure, and recommended the principles on which it is based to the friendly consideration of all who are disposed to interest themselves in the sad case of a large class of her Majesty's subjects, who, owing to the peculiar conditions of their lives, have hitherto been shut out from almost all the benefits which social legislation has, during the present century, conferred upon the inhabitants of these islands. The Act, however, has a special interest for this part of the country, where, in spite of the extraordinary development of the railway system, the traffic on the canals is still of very large proportions. Writing in the absence of actual statistics on the subject, we should be inclined to hazard the supposition that no two counties will be more affected by the operation of the new Act than will Lancashire and Cheshire. There is something unique and picturesque in the life of canal residents which, in itself, constitutes a sufficient excuse for recurring to the subject of the Act. It is, no doubt, too true that this very picturesqueness, which has frequently arrested the attentions of graphic artists, working both in colours and in words, has been often associated with the utmost degradation of social and family relations, as well as with the most undesirable sanitary conditions. It is to be trusted, however, that the healthful spirit of reform which is embodied in the present Act of Parliament will enhance, rather than destroy, in every respect, the attractive conditions of life on the canal – a life which, apart from its frequent degrading surroundings, might be made to combine many of the requirements of those whose happiness is found in frequent change of scene, without the sacrifice of habitual occupation and companionship. These are objects for which people socially removed far above the position of the canal boatman and his family are found constantly making very considerable sacrifices ; and there is no reason why, if the objects aimed at in this Act could be thoroughly attained, these conditions should not be realised, to a very large extent, by the inland navigator of commerce and his family circle.

The commencement of the working of the Act affords a convenient opportunity for setting forth, briefly and concisely, the results which we may reasonably hope will be achieved by its operation. For the future, when on a pleasant lazy, hazy summer afternoon, a good natured idler, smoking his pipe on the parapet of a canal bridge, finds an artist like pleasure in watching the slow progress of a barge placidly cleaving the many coloured waters of a tree-overshadowed and thoroughly Netherlands looking canal, the pleasure he experiences at witnessing such a scene may be considerably enhanced if he knows that the little column of smoke rising from the cabin chimney no longer denotes, as it once did, the presence of a family, living under conditions which have been a disgrace to civilisation. The leading feature in the Act is that, for the future, no canal boat can be legally used as a dwelling place unless it is registered. And this requisite registration cannot be obtained unless certain regulations are first complied with. These regulations, it may be stated generally, affect such conditions as those of space, ventilation, storage of water and sanitary requirements. Thus, for example, every person who for the future may be allowed to reside in a given boat must be provided, in the cabin or cabins, with not less than sixty cubic feet of free air space, in case the resident is above twelve years of age. Should he be under that age he will be entitled, under the Act, and as a condition of registration, to forty cubic feet. A reduction of ten cubic feet per each young person, however, is permitted in the case of boats which have been built before last Sunday. Nor have arrangements for the maintenance of decorum been forgotten. A cabin occupied by a husband and wife, as a sleeping place, is not to be occupied at the same time by any female above twelve, or by any male above fourteen. Nor, again, is any sleeping cabin occupied by a male over fourteen to be used by a female over twelve, unless she is his wife. It would be well if every dwelling in Lancashire and other counties – even when their inmates are not,

in the least degree, amphibious – could be placed under a similar code of regulations. So far as the sanitary and moral condition of the canal boatmen is concerned, if the working of the new Act prove to be successful, they will soon be able to realise the sentiment of the old sea song, and to “pity the poor fellows on shore”. Other requirements in the wording of the Act provide for the storage of not less than three gallons of water for drinking, so that the inmates of the boat may never be forced to use the filthy water of the canal, or the possibly filthier beer of the canal side public house ; for the presence of a stove and a chimney ; for lockers, cupboards and other furniture. None of these requirements can be held to be excessive, and all of them are, undoubtedly, necessary. We have, on former occasions, explained at some length, those provisions of the Act which render it compulsory that, on the outbreak of any infectious disease, notice is to be given to the sanitary authority of the district where the boat is at the time of the outbreak. Canal boats, therefore, will no longer be permitted to be locomotive centres of pestilence. Not the least important of the provisions of the Act is that which places the children under the educational authority of the place where the boat is registered, which authority will, of course, be responsible for the educational care of these little ones, who number – be it remembered – over seventy thousand. Their neglected condition would, of itself, have constituted a sufficient reason for the passing of the Act.