

15 September 1841

SUNDAY TRAFFIC ON CANALS A report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the expediency of restraining the practice of carrying goods and merchandise on canals, navigable rivers and railways on Sundays, has just been printed. The report, which occupies about one hundred folio pages, contains a body of important evidence given by a number of gentlemen of great practical experience, most of whom are, or have been, officially connected with canals or railways, and therefore the most competent persons to speak to the facts they have severally detailed. The following is a summary of portions of their evidence.

Sir George Chetwynd, Bart, of Grandon Hall in the county of Warwick, an extensive proprietor in the Trent and Mersey Canal, and who had been one of the managing committee of that canal for five and twenty years, supplied the Lords' Committee with much important information. He observed that his attention had been a good deal turned to the subject of Sunday traffic, in consequence of petitions very numerous signed having been presented to him as Chairman of the Trent and Mersey Company, as well as by boatmen as others, praying that a stop might be put to Sunday traffic. The following extract from the examination of Sir George Chetwynd will require no comment :-

Have you any reason to believe that the boatmen generally desire a discontinuance of Sunday traffic? I think decidedly they do.

On what ground do they desire it? I think they would be very glad to have one day in seven as a day of rest. I may state with respect to *Ellis in the first place that he is twenty five years of age ; that he was never in any place of worship whatever until he was committed on a capital charge of rape and murder. He is quite uneducated, not having the least idea of God, a Saviour or a future state ; in short having no idea of religion whatever until he came to Stafford gaol. I believe there are a great number of boatmen in a similar situation. Can you inform us whether they are not in general an extremely illiterate and uninstructed class? They are extremely illiterate, uninstructed and depraved.

More so than any class you are acquainted with? Yes. The last time I went on the survey of the Trent and Mersey Canal, from Shardlow to Preston Brook, I went on to Liverpool. I was about three weeks in New Brighton in the neighbourhood of Liverpool, and particularly attended the Mariners' Chapel, in order to observe the negroes. I conversed as I went down with many boatmen, and compared them with the state of the negroes ; and I was decidedly of opinion that the negroes were much more tractable, and I should say better informed. Nothing could exceed the attention these poor men paid when I saw them at the Mariners' Chapel.

In a subsequent part of Sir George Chetwynd's examination, speaking of the nature and extent of the depredations committed on canals, he observed :-

Ellis told me that during the twenty five years he had been a boatmen, there was scarcely a single cargo of liquors, wines or spirits that had not been more or less plundered. He described to me where I might purchase the different implements : hammers, in the handles of which were turn-screws, and everything requisite for breaking open casks. There are syphons, and different sized pumps, some made of tin ; the best are made of copper, and screw together, so that if you found it in a boatman's pocket, you would not know what it was. These being inserted into one of the casks, you may thereby draw off a large quantity of liquor in a very short space of time.

In a later stage of his examination, Sir George Chetwynd stated with reference to the question of discontinuing Sunday traffic :-

I have communicated with Mr Baxendale of the firm of Pickford and Co, and other carriers, who seem to be desirous of putting a stop to Sunday traffic, and I have no doubt that by an arrangement with the carriers and canal companies, Sunday traffic might be put a stop to. Then the next question arises, when you put a stop to Sunday traffic, what will you do with the boatmen? I will put a case in Staffordshire. Take Stone, for instance ; suppose half a dozen boats were to stop on the Saturday night at Stone, there would be eighteen men, three being the number to each boat. You must have a police to attend to them, and someone must watch the cargo, because many of these boats have valuable cargoes on board, silks, wines, spirits, linen and merchandise ; the cargoes must be protected. In the next place, unless there is some place of worship to which these boatmen can have access, and to which they are invited to come, what will they do on Sunday? Wherever the stoppages have been accidental, the boatmen have been found trespassing and plundering, and the greatest possible nuisance to the neighbourhood. In short, when a stoppage happened near a town, we were obliged to swear in special constables, and the farmers had to watch their property, in consequence of the boatmen being stopped, and not going to any place of worship.

Alexander Hordern Esq of Banbury in the county of Stafford, and extensive shareholder in four canals, and connected with the managing bodies of two of them, described the boatmen as a degraded class of society,

and attributed that state of degradation to the want of proper moral and religious training, of which he believed there was a total neglect. He was decidedly of opinion that the discontinuance of Sunday traffic would confer a great benefit, not only on boatmen but on clerks, agents and all other persons employed on the canals. He was of opinion that Sunday traffic could only be put down by compulsory measures and which, to be equitable, should extend to carriers of every description.

Mr Josiah Anthony Hayes, general agent and receiving clerk to the Worcestershire Canal Company, and John Wheeler Lea Esq of Worcester, have evidence to a similar effect.

T Bagnall Esq, an extensive coal and iron master residing at West Bromwich in Staffordshire, and who employed a number of boats to carry material along the canal, had for a considerable period discontinued Sunday traffic along the canal, and had also allowed the furnaces of the firm to stop on a Sunday. In reply to a question as to what had been the effect of that stoppage, he stated, "We have made rather more iron since we stopped on Sundays than we did before. I have stated it at public meetings, and said any gentleman may come and refer to our accounts. We thought we should have great difficulty in getting our men into the arrangement, instead of which they were all prepared for it, and we had no difficulty whatever."

Francis Twemlow Esq, Chairman of the Quarter Sessions for the county of Stafford, and a shareholder in the Trent and Mersey Canal, confirmed the opinions of other gentlemen as to the demoralised state of the boatmen, and the necessity that existed for some remedial measure.

Mr John Crowley, of the firm of Crowley, Hicklin and Company, extensive canal carriers at Wolverhampton, Birmingham and London, R Heath, of the firm of Heath and Sons, canal carriers, residing at Stourport, and several other gentlemen connected with canal navigation, were examined, and gave it as their concurrent opinion that the suspension of Sunday traffic would confer a great blessing on the boatmen, not only as giving them a day of rest, but as affording them opportunities of attending to religious duties.

The Rev J Davies, rector of St Clement's, Worcester, had for many years paid considerable attention to the moral condition of the boatmen on the Severn and the Birmingham and Worcester canals. His pastoral duties had led him much into connection with them, and he had had many opportunities of tracing the sources of their demoralised state. He thought that they were capable of improvement, and many of them were desirous of obtaining religious instruction, and of having their children religiously educated.

The Hon P P Bouverie, a member of the select committee for conducting the affairs of the Grand Junction Canal Company, entertained opinions somewhat at variance with those who had been previously examined, as to the practicability of stopping the trade on canals on Sundays. He had been chairman of the select committee a great part of twenty years, and as the traffic on the Grand Junction Canal was perhaps greater than that of any other in the kingdom, the subject had frequently been brought under consideration.

R C Sale Esq, solicitor to the Grand Junction Canal Company, was of opinion that no general law would answer the purpose intended ; the evil could only be met by a law prescribing the hours during which the stoppage should take place ; but full powers should be given to canal companies to make bye laws and appoint stations, and make the regulations requisite to enforce the observance of the law.

Mr Joseph Baxendale, manager of the firm of Messrs Pickford and Co, who had been connected with the carrying trade of the canal for upwards of twenty five years, considered the plan for stopping the Sunday traffic on canals an impracticable one, unless there were a legislative prohibition of traffic as regarded the carriage of luggage both on railways and canals. Such a prohibition would produce advantage to the railway traffic, though as a trader he should not object to it. He described the state of the boatmen generally much as the other gentlemen had done ; but was of opinion that if churches were to be built at proper distances, and the clergy with the public to give their attention to it, there could be no doubt but that good would result.

The committee, of which the Marquis of Normanby and Lord Hatherton were respectively chairmen, ordered to report, "That the committee have met and examined several witnesses upon the subject, and have directed the evidence taken before them, together with an index thereto, to be laid before your lordships".

**Ellis, it will be recalled, was one of the men concerned in the murder of Christina Collins.*