

At the start of Queen Victoria's reign the boatmen earned good wages enabling many to rent houses near the canals. The boatman would often take one boy afloat with him to help with the steering, leading the horses and operating the lock paddles and gates.

In time wages fell as a result of competition from the railways. By the 1880s most canal families had been forced to leave their homes on land, due to lack of money, and live on their canal boats. This led to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and limited education for the children as they were constantly on the move.

In 1876 the Factory and Workshop Commission noted:

*"...during the last few years owing to the severe competition between railway and water, the rates have gone down and the canal carriers have a difficulty in competing with the railways, and they cut down the bargemen's wages, who as a necessary consequence are not able to support a man, and they bring their wives and children."*

It was due to the persistent campaigning of George Smith, a Wesleyan social reformer born in Tunstall, Staffordshire in 1831, that Parliament was made aware of the need for legislation to improve the lives of the people living and working on the cut.

*"Some of the canal cabins are models of neatness and a man and two youths might pass a few nights in such very comfortably. Others are the most filthy holes imaginable, what with bugs and other vermin creeping up the sides, stinking mud finding its way through the leaky joints at the end to the bottom of the cabin and being heated by a hot stove, stench arises therefrom to make a dog sick. In these cabins fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers sleep in the same bed at the same time..."*

Our Canal Population, George Smith (1875)

The first Canal Boats Act was introduced in 1877. It required that every canal boat that was used as a dwelling had to be registered and regularly inspected. This was carried out by urban and rural sanitary authorities, which kept records in journals. The Health Registration Journals hold a lot of information about a boat, including its name and number, the name and address of its owner, its dimensions and construction, the amount of cabin space and the name of its master at the time of registration. Inspection journals also show who was on board at the time of inspection and the condition of the boat, including the last time it was painted.

The 1884 Canal Boats Act required local authorities to make sure that boat children attended school. Inspectors began to check that children were going to school but the Act was difficult to enforce. The boaters' way of life made regular attendance difficult, and the schools they attended did not always give them a warm welcome.