

MUNICIPAL STEAMBOATS.

FEBRUARY 1901.

A GREAT CITY possessing a natural waterway enjoys unrivalled facilities for cheap and pleasant means of locomotion. In taking advantage of such facilities few great cities have been so neglectful as London. Private enterprise has been spasmodically at work, but has woefully misused its opportunities. Since 1840 seven companies and several private venturers have been concerned in supplying Thames steamboat services. Nearly all have achieved temporary success, only to sacrifice it through faults common in privately-managed concerns. Up to October 1900 the Thames Steamboat Company kept up an intermittent service, which is little likely to be renewed. The fares have always been too high and the scale too complex, with that most objectionable of practices, a higher scale for Sundays and holidays.

The best private service, too, would be hampered by the present chaotic pier system. Within the County of London—that is, from Hammersmith to Woolwich—there are in use 29 steamboat piers, the ownership of which is divided among the Thames Conservancy, the County Council, Thames Steamboat Company, East India Dock Company, Greenwich Pier Company, three railway companies, and a lord of the manor. The Conservancy exercises statutory control over most of these piers, and the Board of Trade certain departmental control over all, whilst the Commissioners of Woods, Commissioners for the Lord High Admiral, and others have statutory rights in respect to certain piers.

One vital condition of a Thames steamboat service must be the simplification of pier-tolls and the unification of pier-control, if not of ownership.

Successful Municipal Steamboats.

There are several flourishing municipal river steamboat-services in Great Britain.

BIRKENHEAD.

The Birkenhead Corporation works the principal ferries between Birkenhead and Liverpool. There are ten large steamers, three being for goods and vehicles. The Woodside service runs day and night, at intervals of from ten to thirty minutes. The fare is 1d., except from midnight to 4.30 a.m. Some 25,000 passengers use the service daily, rising at holiday times to some 80,000. The opening of the Mersey tunnel and railway in 1884 temporarily injured the service, the annual receipts falling from £55,000 to £37,000; but by new boats, improved service and careful management the lost ground has steadily been recovered. To March 1900 the receipts were £50,600; working expenditure, £32,272; sinking fund, £2,265; reserve, £7,335; net profit, £8,727.

WALLASEY.

Another Mersey service is that worked by the Wallasey (Cheshire) District Council, whose boats run between Liverpool, Seacombe, Egremont and New Brighton. The fares are: to Seacombe 1d., Egremont 2d., New Brighton 3d., the respective distances being $\frac{1}{4}$ m., $\frac{1}{2}$ m., and 3m. The boats, being built to cope with heavy seas at New Brighton, are large and expensive, and the fares are correspondingly high. Boats run to Seacombe night and day. From midnight to 4.30 a.m. special fares are charged. The total loan raised was £472,000, which is being rapidly paid off. To March 1900 the receipts were £79,241; working expenses, depreciation, &c., £57,080; interest and sinking fund, £20,000; net profit, £2,161. The object of the Council is not to make a large profit, but to give a safe, rapid and comfortable service, in which enterprise it has succeeded remarkably well. There are eleven fine steamers, with certificates for 13,500 passengers. Most of the boats measure over 150 feet in length, and 25 feet to 45 feet in beam, the original cost ranging from £9,000 to £13,000. Each one has a general saloon, a smoking saloon, and a fine promenade deck, and all are lighted by electricity. Between 1885 and 1895 the increase of revenue was 25 per cent.; of working expenses, 19 per cent. In the same period the annual number of passengers increased from seven millions to eleven millions. Last year there was a traffic of fifteen millions.

THE CLYDE.

The Clyde Navigation Trust has two ferries for vehicles and six for passengers, also a service between Glasgow and Whiteinch, extending $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles, fare for any distance 1d. The boats are light and rapid, and, running at short intervals, the delay at landing-stages is reduced to a minimum. The profits are small, owing to the low fares.

THE TAY.

The Dundee Harbor Trust runs an effective service for passengers and goods between Dundee, Newport and Tayport; but no separate accounts are published.

WOOLWICH.

The Woolwich Free Ferry, established and worked by the London County Council, has enormously increased the cross-river traffic at that point, and renders invaluable service to the district.

The Case of the Thames.

The means of communication other than steamers between the riverside districts of London are better than those in most of the towns previously mentioned. Moreover, the variation of tidal currents and the stretch of mud flats between London Bridge and Westminster are difficulties in the way of an efficient steamer service. It must be remembered that some of these difficulties have been overcome even by competing companies, under the existing divided pier authority, and they could be faced with infinitely greater success under a centralized municipal service conducted by a committee of the County Council. The tidal difficulties will want the careful study of experts

so that the boats may be specially constructed. The companies never attempted to cope with these difficulties. Yet their failures were never due to their hopeless unpunctuality, but to general bad management and false economy, and above all to over-capitalization and other financial follies.

Failure of "Private Enterprise."

Since 1840 seven steamboat companies and several private owners have plied upon the Thames. For twenty-five years the London, Westminster and Vauxhall Steamboat Company ran seven boats between London Bridge and Vauxhall, any distance for 1d. The service was fairly good, and was profitable. The company promoter stepped in; a new company bought up the service and raised the fares. High fares and over-capitalization brought bankruptcy.

The City Steamboat Company was established in 1848 with eight boats. The company paid 10 per cent. and an occasional bonus, and built a new boat every two years out of revenue. In 1875 the London Steamboat Company bought them out, with the usual result—bankruptcy.

The River Thames Navigation Company, which followed, collapsed through bad management. A syndicate of financiers bought them up for £24,000 and immediately afterwards sold the concern to the Victoria Steamboat Company for £75,000. The new company within a few months wrote up their property to £90,000. The traffic continued to increase rapidly, despite a system of fares unparalleled for complexity. Moreover, despite inexplicably high expenditure, handsome profits were made from the first, but these were immediately divided, no proper allowances were made for reserve, depreciation, etc., and the accounts generally were very badly kept. In the last three years of the company's existence its average gross earnings were £70,000, and its average annual profits, after allowing for depreciation, £6,450. But the over-capitalization and financial mismanagement led to bankruptcy in 1894. In 1896 the Thames Steamboat Company commenced the service which was intermittently kept up until the past autumn.

Practical Proposal for a Municipal Service.

The report to the Rivers Committee of the County Council, presented in 1895 and revised in July, 1900, advocates a central service of short interval traffic in conjunction with extensions up and down the river: the central service to run from London Bridge to Vauxhall, about 2½ miles, calling at Blackfriars, Waterloo, Westminster and Lambeth; the eastward extension to run down to Woolwich, about 9½ miles, calling at Cherry Garden, Limehouse, Greenwich and Blackwall; the westward extension to run to Hammersmith, about 6½ miles, calling at Chelsea, Battersea, Wandsworth and Putney. On the central service the fare would be 1d. for any distance; the same for any points between Vauxhall and Wandsworth, or between Wandsworth and Hammersmith, going west; and

between London Bridge and Greenwich, Greenwich and Woolwich, going east. Thus the fare for the whole route from Hammersmith to Woolwich would be 5d. For the same distance, when boats are running, the companies charge 1s. or more, whilst for each of the proposed 1d. stages they charge 3d. or 4d. Self-registering turnstiles, as used in the Birkenhead and Wallasey services, would obviate the complicated and expensive ticket system. The times occupied and the fares charged would compare favorably with the fares and times of competing rail, tram and omnibus services.

Why should London Wait?

With 33 million passengers annually the traffic would pay. The annual passenger traffic of Greater London is about 1,300 millions. For the metropolis it is calculated at 878 millions, of which 453 millions are within the central area, or adjacent to the river. One-tenth of this central traffic diverted to a river service would make it pay handsomely. As a fact every new facility for travel increases the total of passengers, that is to say it creates a large proportion of its own traffic. In London the number of single journey passengers per head of the population is 202, whereas in New York, where there are better facilities for travel, it is 284.

The Wallasey service, with less than a million of population to draw upon, and with but four stations—corresponding, say, to London Bridge, Greenwich, Woolwich and Gravesend—carries fifteen million passengers, mainly a residential and pleasure traffic. A Thames service, with twenty or more stations, with 5½ millions of population to feed it, and running through the heart of the greatest business centre in the world, could hardly fail to carry five passengers to Wallasey's one, or 75 millions more than double the required traffic. It is ludicrous to contemplate a citizen of London nervously apprehensive that his County Council may fail to possess as much business capacity as a provincial District Council!

AUTHORITIES.

- (1) Report of Statistical Department, London County Council, to the Rivers Committee, originally made 25th October 1895, and amended, added to, and republished July 1900.
- (2) Abstract of accounts and other information received from (a) General Manager and Secretary of the Clyde Navigation Trust; (b) Clerk and Solicitor of the Wallasey Urban District Council; (3) Ferries Accountant of the Birkenhead Corporation.

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