

War Cabinet: Report for the year 1918, pp194-197

E. Canals.

Of the 2,500 miles of important canals and waterways in England and Wales, 1,025 miles are owned by Railway Companies, and have, since 1914, formed part of the Railway undertakings taken over by the Government and managed, under the supervision of the Board of Trade, by the Railway Executive Committee.

In March, 1917, the War Cabinet, with a view to securing greater service from the remaining canal system, appointed a Canal Control Committee. This Committee, for the purpose of securing localised control, created four Sub-Committees, three with their headquarters at Leeds, Birmingham and London respectively, covering the canals of England and Wales, and the fourth with offices in Dublin, dealing with the canals of Ireland.

Up to the end of 1918 the Canal Committee had taken over the control of 31 separate companies—26 in England and Wales, 5 in Ireland—with a total waterway of 1,530 miles. During 1918 two companies were added to the list. The controlled mileage is as follows :—

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| Controlled through the Railway Executive | 1,025 miles. |
| Controlled through the Canal Control Committee in England and Wales | 1,226 miles. |
| Controlled through the Canal Control Committee in Ireland | 304 miles. |

... making a total of 2,555 miles controlled,

The work which has been done by the Committee during the past year may be divided under four main heads, viz.:—

1. Labour.
2. Finance.
3. Maintenance.
4. Traffic.

Labour.

As was pointed out in the previous report, controlled Canal Companies lost between 1914 and 1917 nearly 3,000 men. In addition, Canal Carriers and Bye-Traders had lost a large proportion of their staffs, so that the total labour available for canal work in 1917 was probably 50 per cent, less than in 1914.

The first work of the Canal Committee was to prevent, as far as was compatible with national interests, the further depletion of the available experienced canal men. No effort was made to retain men under 25 years of age, but protection was claimed for all men over 25, with the result that up to the date of the Armistice 8,000 canal men were exempted from military service. In addition, a number of men of low medical category with knowledge of canal work were released from the Army and resumed work on the canals under their former employers.

In addition, 1,000 men were obtained from the Transport Workers' Battalion, which consists of men belonging to the Home Army, but temporarily allocated for transport work on Railways, Docks or Canals. Only a small proportion of the men allotted from the Transport Workers' Battalion had previously had experience on canals, and a school for training boatmen was therefore started at Devizes. Between August, 1917, and June, 1918, 209 men passed through this school, and received a training which averaged three weeks in duration. When trained, the men were afterwards drafted to Canal Carriers and Companies for employment, all of course remaining in the Battalion. Later in 1918 this school was closed, as a number of the Canal Companies and Traders took up the work of training the men themselves. The school performed a very useful service, resulting in additional boat-men being made available for transport work.

In all questions of War Wages the Canal Control Committee has, in respect of the operating staff, followed the advances agreed from time to time by the Railway Executive Committee, whilst applications from various classes of tradesmen engaged in Canal work have been referred to the decision of the Committee on Production.

Finance.

On taking over the canals, the Government agreed to apply the same financial guarantees that they had arranged on the outbreak of war in respect of the railways, viz., a guarantee of the net revenue of the year 1913. Under this agreement there was paid, up to the 31st December, 1918, by way of compensation, £1,034,527 in respect of English and Welsh canals and £52,046 in respect of Irish canals. In this connection it should be pointed out that the volume of traffic over the canals was necessarily much less than in the year 1913. On the other hand, whilst the tolls chargeable by the Canal Companies remained stationary, the expenditure of the Companies was greatly increased by the payment of war wages and bonuses and by the increased cost of every class of material, the war bonuses alone representing 50 per cent, of the total compensation paid. Whilst it was essential in the interest of the country and in the prosecution of the war that the canals should be utilised in every way possible, they could not without compensation have been kept open and in operation.

Whilst a few canal companies act also as carriers, in the majority of cases tonnage is conveyed by private firms who trade as "canal carriers" or by individual firms conveying their own traffic. During 1918 an arrangement for the control of carriers with more than 10 boats was brought into operation, with the result, that six carrying companies were controlled, having a fleet of 384 boats in commission. These carrying companies were subject to the same increases in wages and cost of material as the canal owners. Under these conditions an arrangement was made under which the "canal carriers" were guaranteed the net revenue of the year 1913 provided they-kept in commission and working as many boats as they had engaged in that year. If the number of boats in commission is less or more than in the year 1913 the guarantee is reduced or increased proportionately. Up to the end of 1918 a total sum of £33,721 was paid as compensation under this arrangement to carriers in England and Wales and £4,274 to carriers in Ireland.

Maintenance.

The work of maintaining the canals under the control of the Committee was carried on during the past year in the best manner possible, consistent with the labour available. During the winter months difficulties are caused by the accumulation of ice. A special scheme was organised to deal with the obstruction, and while in former years traffic has frequently been held up for weeks at a time by the accumulation of ice, during the past year, owing to the arrangements made, no stoppage of traffic ensued.

Considerable care was also devoted to maintaining "the water supply and to securing the necessary dredging. The latter had, prior to the Canal Committee control, been, as a result of shortage of labour, in many cases neglected. A careful watch was kept by the Sub-Committees in the case of any difficulties in the conditions of the waterways, and steps were immediately taken to remedy them.

Traffic.

One of the most important duties entrusted to the Canal Control Committee was to secure the conveyance of traffic by canal, and to relieve the railways, as far as possible, of traffic which could equally well go by waterway as by rail. The Canal Control Committee concentrated its effort on this as its principal object, keeping in close touch with the Railway Executive, the Ministries of Food and Munitions and other Government Departments. As a result the railways were relieved of the carriage of a very large volume of food and munitions—about 400,000 tons of wheat having been conveyed by the Northern Canals in the year ending June, 1918.

There has always been a large amount of coal traffic on canals, and in this direction the Committee have succeeded in assisting the railways by diverting further coal tonnage to the canals.

During 1918 the Committee issued, for the information of Government Departments, manufacturers and all senders and receivers of traffic, a handbook on canals giving detailed information regarding the canals under its control, the towns served by them, the names and addresses of public carriers on them, and various other particulars.