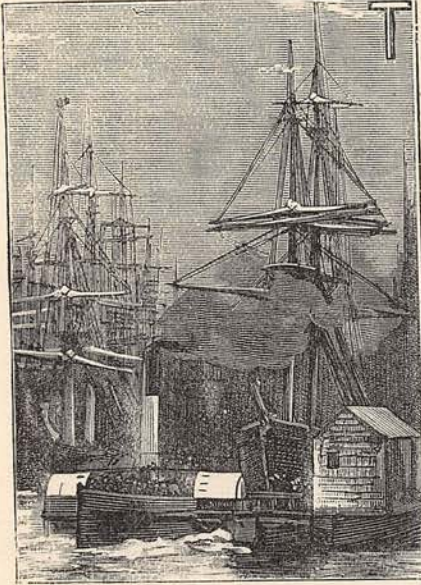


## THE BOARD OF TRADE: ITS POWERS AND DUTIES.



THE office of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade—or Board of Trade, as it is now both officially and commonly termed—is at No. 7, Whitehall Gardens, in an extensive building consisting of a handsome time-honoured mansion

owned formerly by the Earl of Harrington, and previous to its occupation by the Board used as a temporary abode for the Foreign Office. It faces a small open space immediately behind the well-known Chapel Royal. Prior to the formation of that greatest Metropolitan improvement, the Thames Embankment, the river flowed up to the mansion's grounds. Considerable additions must have been made to meet a purpose that could never have been anticipated. The different parts are connected by long passages, quaint turnings, and steps perplexing to others than the official denizens. Possessing several noble rooms of the old *régime*, oak-floored, with ornate gildings and fine ceilings, the task of allotting out the several Departments with justness and convenience was no easy one. Ten years in the new *locale* have apparently done much to shake the Board comfortably into the new quarters, and it may certainly be said that it possesses a very noble office, commanding an enlivening view of the Thames and its Embankment.

There is a permanent secretary of the Board, under whose rare abilities and wondrously comprehensive powers the entire duties are performed in five distinct Departments, each having a secretary, called an assistant (to the Board generally), at its head:—

1. The Marine Department.
2. „ Harbour „
3. „ Railway „
4. „ Commercial and Statistical Department.
5. „ Finance „

Commencing with the Marine Department, more particularly charged with administering and enforcing the Merchant Shipping Acts: this Department has become familiar as a household word through the useful

zeal of Mr. Plimsoll, who found ready made to his hand an office that had, in the course of years, acquired an immense acquaintance with, and grasp upon, the affairs of the vast merchant navy of our empire, boasting nearly 30,000 ships, 10,000,000 tons of shipping, a splendid system of lighthouses, a life-saving organisation around our dangerous coasts, of extraordinary perfection and utility, and a half-million of seamen and fishermen always afloat: such a machinery, so extensive a field, it must be confessed was tempting to the mildest reformer. It is, however, rather easier to give the power than the possibility of using it to advantage, as the moral of the steam-leg warns us. A nice discretion to deal with innumerable cases, any one of which may be a pit-fall, is far to seek in the limits of human fallibility. Hence much heart-burning over the ever-recurring questions of deck loads, grain cargoes, surveys to detect what is unseaworthy, to the chorus of coffin-ships and the sorrows of poor Jack. A few examples of the matters dealt with by this Department will carry conviction that it is not all play from 11 to 5 o'clock for the secretary and subordinates:—Registry of ships, prevention of crimping, enrolment of apprentices to sea-service, engagement and discharge of seamen, examination of masters, mates, and engineers, health of crews, medical inspection of seamen, discipline of merchant ships, crimes committed on board, investigating into wrecks, rule of the road at sea, ships' lights, international code of signals, apparatus for saving life at sea, wreck register and statistics for home and abroad, relief and medical treatment of distressed seamen, the Royal Naval Reserve (jointly with the Admiralty), and miscellaneous questions affecting ships and crews.

The work done and the Parliamentary papers and returns annually produced by the Marine Department have a wide public interest. Upon this Department is cast the weight of tracing out the true causes of ocean disasters, and apportioning the liability of officers and men, with the further necessity of providing safeguards against fatalities from similar causes in the future. Public attention is sharply drawn to such proceedings when some splendid vessel has been lost, with wholesale destruction to human life, and the result of the inquiry is eagerly watched for, and when announced closely scanned by the nation. Many of the functions of the Department are quite paternal and philanthropical as regards poor Jack. There is a special arrangement to prevent the evils of crimping, certain vessels being commissioned to save the poor sailor from the craving harpies of our ports. By statute, Jack must swallow so much lime-juice per diem against the scurvy scourge; his health and accommodation are studied, while he and his mates can legally appeal to be saved from outgoing in an unseaworthy vessel. He knows that there is an official angel aloft to protect him from the harshness of his

skipper, to decorate him with the Albert Medal \* for bravery in saving life, and carefully administer his wages and property to a sorrowing widow when he has lost his own life at sea. Again, the rule of the road at sea is quite a host by itself, conjoined as it is with the big subject of an international code of signalling. Mr. Gray, the well-known secretary of the Department, lays down instructions in verse to vessels passing each other, apparently most simple to follow ; and yet, alas ! frequent collisions occur, proving that "Red to red, perfect safety, go ahead," is often difficult of fulfilment, and that the highly useful injunction, "When in safety or in doubt, always keep a good lookout," is too often whistled away by the sea-sirens or too incautious splicing of the main brace. Few can have failed to see, at least in pictures, the exciting scene when the rope thrown by the rocket and mortar apparatus reaches the well-nigh perishing crew of the wrecked vessel. Over 300 such admirable appliances are supplied to the coasts, and entrusted to the working of the local coastguard, assisted by volunteer companies of over 2,000 men. There are also some 500 stations supplied with life-belts and lines not included in the rocket and mortar stations. Looking at the Wreck Register and Chart of each year, we perceive how essential this service is, and how considerable a saving of life must be effected by a means as ingenious as wise and timely.

Then, referring to the Royal Naval Reserve, let us not forget that the efficiency of the splendid navy we are so proud of is indissolubly connected with the efficiency of its nursery, the mercantile marine. And fully alive is the Department to this fact, and every attention is given to making good, robust, fully qualified sailors, with sound vessels to man. Finally, this Department has attached to it a branch, named the General Register and Record Office of Seamen, and has in connection with it local Marine and Mercantile Marine Boards in various parts of the kingdom, together with a large number of surveyors of steam ships and inspectors of crew spaces, lights, &c. An immense amount of correspondence and communication by telegrams is necessarily involved.

Equally important are the duties performed by the Railway Department (so called), as the main business is the administration of numerous general Acts of Parliament providing for a certain State control of the whole system of railways in the interests of public safety and convenience. The supervision of the joint-stock companies, sanction to form and work Art Unions (protected lotteries for disseminating works of Art), literary and artistic copyright, Metropolitan gas legislation, the granting of provisional orders to gas, water, and tramway companies, are also among the onerous and extensive duties included. On these subjects the various Acts of Parliament mostly leave

ample responsibility upon the Board to carry out the principle of legislation.

Some thirty general Acts have brought heavy work to the Railway Department since the year 1850. Among the most onerous duties is the requirement of law, that every new line of railway shall be inspected and passed by the Board as safe for the public conveyance of passengers, before being brought by the railway company into use, the Board having absolute power to stay or postpone the opening of any new line until they are in a position to certify to its fitness. Recently, further legislation has made it requisite for every new work affecting an already opened line and its passenger traffic to be inspected, and the four engineering officers of the Department who act as inspectors have little rest throughout the year, seeing that they have a large number of train accidents, more or less serious in principle or effect, to inquire into and report to the Board upon. Every such accident must, under penalty, be at once reported by the railway company, and the reports of the Board's inspectors are presented to Parliament and publicly circulated. Complaints from local bodies and from individuals are numerous. The inspection of stations, bridges, and level-crossings *over*, and even mines *under* railways, are in the category of duties. Indeed, the provisions of the General Railway Acts, empowering interference by the Board, are legion, and can only fairly be estimated by a glance over Mr. Bigg's most excellent volume of "General Railway Acts."

What the Marine Department is for the ocean, the Railway is for land. Its importance to the community may be estimated when we learn that above 17,000 miles of railway are open for traffic ; that, exclusive of season-ticket holders, 565,024,455 passengers were in the past year conveyed, and that 206,735,856 tons of minerals and merchandise were carried. With these stupendous figures before him, the reader needs not to be assured that the management of the Railway Department is no sinecure, and that its employés have no time for the relaxation and red-tapeism of the immortal "circumlocution office." Proposals for legislation on these and kindred subjects, in addition to executive duties, rest upon this Department, which has done much to render Mr. John Bright's assertion correct, that a seat in a first-class carriage is about the best and safest place for a nervous individual to seek shelter in.

The business of the Harbour Department, principally connected with the physical adjuncts of navigation, consists in carrying out the duties imposed by some thirty general Acts of Parliament passed since 1850. Through this Department supervision is exercised over the lighthouses of the United Kingdom, and certain colonial lighthouses. It manages Holyhead, Dover, Ramsgate, Portpatrick, and Alderney Harbours, and protects the water-way of navigable harbours and channels ; it has charge of fore-shores belonging to the Crown, and has certain control over pilotage and sea fisheries. It examines private bills and plans on such subjects ; prepares provisional orders under the General Pier and Harbour Acts, and

\* This decoration can only be awarded on a recommendation of the President of the Board of Trade. (See Warrant, 12th April, 1867.) Under a further Warrant, the medal can now be gained for other than acts of bravery at sea—*e.g.*, the recent presentation to certain brave colliers.

for the grant and regulation of oyster and mussel fisheries, &c.

Unlike other Departments, the most important function of the Commercial and Statistical is consultative rather than administrative. The statistical work of this Department is of great value and utility: preparing and publishing the Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom, British colonies, and foreign countries; miscellaneous statistics of the United Kingdom; agricultural statistics; corn returns, or the average price of corn computed on weekly returns from market towns in England and Wales; and a register of the rates of duty levied by the various tariffs of foreign countries upon British produce and manufactures; the supervision of monthly trade and navigation accounts; and the preparation of special statistical returns. We may here mention that the care of the standard weights and measures and the verification of local standards is with the Board of Trade. The Weights and Measures Act, 1878 (41 & 42 Vic., c. 49) clearly defines between central, *i.e.*, Board of Trade administration and local administration, and throws on the latter the duty of seeing to the due provision and verification of local standards. Those of our readers who are of an antiquarian cast of mind will discover excellent reading in the Parliamentary papers and reports of the warden. A large and most interesting collection of the ancient Exchequer standards is under the care of this Department. Standard measures of capacity and length of the reign of Elizabeth were up to 1824 employed as the State standards, and are still in very good condition. The standard yard of Good Queen Bess, a rude end-bar of brass, half an inch square, has acquired a natural bronze, and has been broken in two and roughly mended with a dove-tail joint, under what circumstances is not known.

In close connection with this subject, is the curious but by no means empty ceremony of the Trial of the Pyx, or box containing duly authenticated specimens of the coinage of the realm, which is considered to have been instituted by Henry II. There is clear evidence of its establishment about the year 1279, and it now continues the safe-guard of a proper coinage. Specimens of every separate coinage effected are lodged in this ancient muniment box, and examina-

tions are at given periods made by a jury of independent members of the Goldsmiths' Company, while the Master of the Mint is surety in a sum of £20,000 to secure true accuracy in the coinage. A minute account of the actual processes of the trial is to be found in a Parliamentary paper of 1866. It is, as far as can be judged, a most methodical, exact, and scientific analysis, but one that can hardly be appreciated by those unskilled in the mysteries of chemistry.

The Finance Department, first established in 1851, has since received an important addition of work in the management of the lighthouse accounts in connection with the Mercantile Marine Fund. It also deals with the Merchant Shipping Fund, pensions to merchant seamen, their money orders, wages and effects, and receives and examines the accounts of life insurance companies. The business of this Department is administrative, not simply the keeping of accounts, since it has the control of receipts and expenditure in the various classes of work mentioned.

The expenses of this big Board are necessarily large, but owing to the fees receivable for services rendered, prominent among which are the light dues on shipping, the total cost is comparatively insignificant. During the past half-century the Board has gradually drawn to itself highly useful and responsible duties of a very varied and difficult nature, which it has zealously and efficiently performed: protecting lives on sea\* and land; securing the health, comfort, and morality of our merchant sailors; looking to the safety of life and limb of the yearly millions of railway passengers; circulating information of inestimable value in the interests of trade; guarding our iron-bound coasts, and dread shoals and rocks, with the saving lights.

A perfect galaxy of past and present statesmen have occupied the post of its President—to wit, Huskisson, Gladstone, Bright, Cardwell, Lord Clarendon, the present Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Duke of Richmond.

\* It may not be generally known that the Board of Trade strenuously supported and subsidised that great institution, the National Life Boat Institution, in its early struggling days.

