

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RIVER THAMES AND THE RAILWAY ENGINEERING SHOPS

Nothing illustrates the importance of local conditions in the engineering trades more forcibly than the rise and fall of the shipbuilding and engineering works on the River Thames. In the Victorian period some of the principal British shipbuilders and engineers were running prosperous businesses at various points below London Bridge. Their names were better known than most of the North Country firms to whom reference has been made in preceding pages. Economic conditions in the present generation, however, have forced them out of existence. It is cheaper to use steel, iron and coal where it is produced than to bring it hundreds of miles by rail or water to the seat of manufacture. The skilled workman also prefers as a rule to live in that district where a great variety of work is carried on and where the conditions point to more constant employment and higher wages.

The result of the growth of these industries in the North was to deprive the Thames of its pre-eminence. Of all the great firms which flourished fifty or sixty years ago, hardly any, except Gwynne & Co. of Hammersmith, whose capital account is being reconstructed, remain, unless they have migrated to some more suitable spot. The old Blackwall shipyard dated back to 1612, and was probably the longest-lived in this country. It was the cradle of the Orient Line, which was formed forty years ago, by the union of the two firms of Green and Anderson. Green's