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AN OUTBREAK OF CHOLERA AT PADDOCK IN 1849

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It was while examining a routine series of letters written at regular intervals by Alexander Hathorne, resident agent to the Ramsden Estate in Huddersfield, to his superior George Loch, steward of the Estate, that I read of an outbreak of cholera in the village of Paddock, near Huddersfield, in September 1849. Hathorne, who, to judge from his letters, appears not only articulate, but a very humane man and very sensible to the conditions under which the working classes lived, seems during this particular year of 1849, to be almost obsessed by problems of drainage and sanitation. He is concerned with the laying-out of streets and sewers in what he refers to as the 'new town', he is busy rebutting criticisms of the condition of the town's slaughterhouse, he is knocking down the pigsties so frequently found in close proximity to dwellings, and he is engaged in designing new and improved privy-blocks for groups of workers' cottages, (see illustration). (The circular design is not calculated to give them the air of an Italian baptistry, but because it would work out cheaper.) But what appears an obsession may not be so if we look beyond the hills and valleys of this growing Victorian town and the enclosed world of the Ramsden Estate correspondence. In a letter dated Sept. 12. 1849, Hathorne writes:

> The cholera is raging all around us, but happily there have been only one or two cases in the neighbourhood – all possible means should however be taken to prepare for its approach (1).

Not much more than a week later he was to describe an outbreak in Paddock, which, while very insignificant in the light of what had already occurred in other parts of the country, shows very clearly the kind of circumstances under which this spectacular Victorian epidemic disease flourished, and what was believed to be the cause of it.

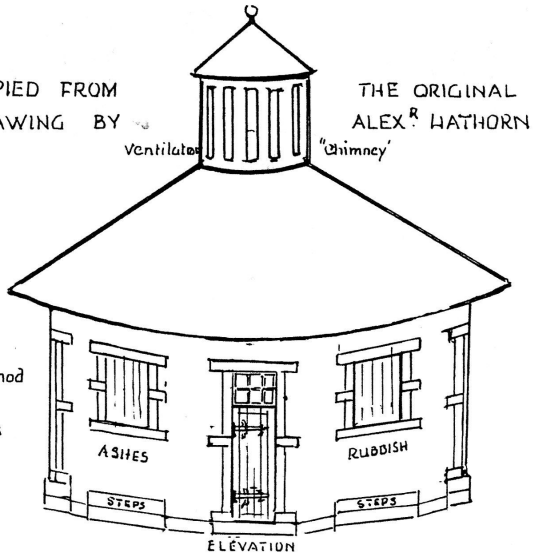
I refer to cholera as a Victorian epidemic disease, since it first appeared in Britain in 1832. The true causal agent was not identified until 1883 after which time it rapidly declined. It has been stated (2) that between 1840 and 1900, cholera, dysentery and diarrhoea were responsible for nearly one-tenth of fatalities from disease (the other scourges being tuberculosis, typhoid and typhus, scarlet fever and smallpox). Another reason for classifying cholera as a Victorian disease is that living conditions in mid-nineteenth century England were ideal for its spread and propagation.

For centuries cholera (Indian cholera or most commonly Asiatic cholera) had been endemic in lower Bengal and the Ganges delta. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it spread to other parts of Asia, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the great pandemics spread from India as far as Europe and North America. These pandemics, each time spreading like shock waves from the epicentre of an explosion, erupted then died away completely before another explosion re-started the process. For instance, the first pandemic began in India in 1817 and reached Russia in 1823; the second began in 1826, reached Britain and North America in 1832 and spread through most of the U.S.A. before dying out there in 1838. The outbreak which interests us here began in India in 1840 and reached Britain in 1848. Other outbreaks began in 1863, 1879, 1891 and 1902. The last outbreaks in Europe occurred as recently as the 1920s but had none of the intensity of these which occurred between 1840 and 1879.

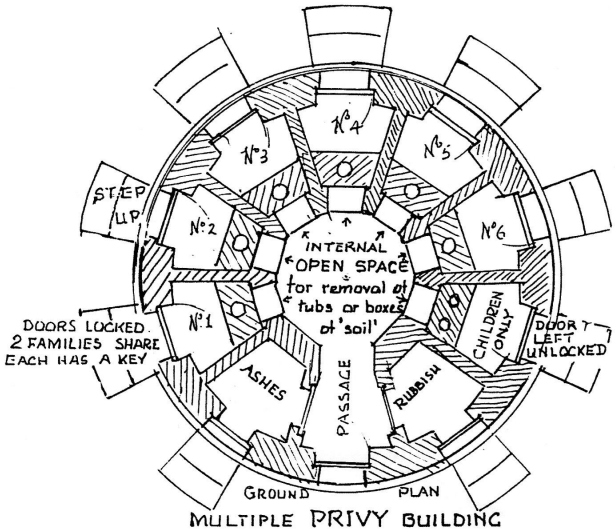
Cholera may also be described as a very spectacular disease. Rapid in its outset it can lay a victim low in a matter of hours. After a spell of incessant vomiting and diarrhoea which leads to acute dehydration, the appearance of the patient changes rapidly: lax wrinkled skin, cold and clammy to the touch, sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, an anxious and apathetic look. The blood pressure falls rapidly and urine is suppressed leading to renal failure. The disease is spread by a bacillus harboured in the fecal material of the sufferer which must be transferred to the gut of the next victim through food or more often water. Although the disease can be caught from contact with a sufferer, it is most likely to spread as a result of poor sanitary conditions, an easily-polluted water supply, and flies. Cholera is a disease of man exclusively and is caught by direct infection from a victim. When the disease occurred in Britain it could strike anywhere, but individuals most likely to succumb were those with low gastric acidity or with gastro-intestinal disturbance as a result of purging, alcoholism or infection from enteric bacteria. The following extract taken from an article in the 'Leeds Mercury' of June 16, 1849, shows that contemporary opinion was not too far away from the truth with regard to the causes and prevention of this disease, though bad air was blamed rather than bad water:

> This fatal disease has broken out again in several parts of England, as well as with much greater severity in France, Russia, Holland and Ireland. 2 or 3 cases have appeared in our town and it has broken out in other parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire.
>
> Though no constitution and no situation can be said to be above danger, yet the persons generally attacked are the drunkards, those of irregular habits, those living in low and filthy localities and unventilated houses, the debilitated and the ill-fed.
>
> The grand precautions are, sobriety, plain but nourishing diet, avoidance of much fruit and

COPIED FROM DRAWING BY THE ORIGINAL ALEX.R HATHORN



Alexander's method of drawing the 'Elevation' in his own version of perspective, is unconventional but informative



MULTIPLE PRIVY BUILDING
With RUBBISH provision
PROPOSED & DESIGNED
By Alexander Hathorn
Manager of the Ramsden Estate, Huddersfield.
1849
Estimated cost £50

> acids, personal and domestic cleanliness, ventilation, moderate exercise – indeed whatever is favourable to the general health.
>
> Cholera appears not to be strictly contagious but persons breathing the same air as the patients for any length of time are more liable to take the complaint.
>
> The removal of all nuisances tending to injure the purity of the air is at once a private and public duty. We hope the proper authorities in this and other towns will lose no time in adopting measures for the inspection of districts where such nuisances are most likely to be found and yet least likely to be voluntarily and regularly removed by the inhabitants.

Despite the moral tone of the article, the advice is reasonably sound and humane. If later, we look at Alexander Hathorne's preoccupation with privies, dunghills and drainage, we cannot help but feel that in many minds the connection was beginning to be made between sanitation and the disease. It was five years later, in 1854, that the first realisation of the connection between contaminated drinking water and cholera was made, at the Broad St Pump in London.

The outbreak of cholera which occurred in Paddock in September was derived from the most serious outbreak to reach Britain and one which claimed 60,000 victims nationwide. It entered the country from Hamburg earlier in the year, an earlier outbreak from the same source had affected Scotland in 1848 and by January 1849 had arrived as far as Huddersfield where 'a poor working tailor who had walked to Huddersfield from Selby' (3) succumbed to the disease while in the vagrant ward of the workhouse and died 56 hours later. Perhaps owing to the cold weather, there were few further outbreaks from this particular source, but by mid-July the disease was again rampant, and this time it seems to have spread northwards from London. Between the 13 and 23 July there were, according to the 'Leeds Mercury', 1,036 deaths in England and Wales of which 721 had occurred in London. By this time the disease had reached Leeds and Birkenshaw. For the week ending September 1 we read of 1,276 deaths in London alone, and in the West Riding, 75 deaths in Leeds, 28 in Bradford and 49 in Hunslet. So great was the concern in the country that there were calls for a National Day of Humiliation and Prayer, although this did not take place. Such days were normally organised on a regional basis, both by the Church of England and by most non-conformist denominations.

By the time we read of the first outbreak in the Huddersfield area, the Leeds Mercury of September 22 1849 reports that the epidemic was already declining, and there were to be comparatively few deaths in the Huddersfield district in 1849. The outbreak is particularly well-documented, it occurred some thirty years before the disease was properly identified and it occurred very close to the time of the passing of the first Public Health Acts. Furthermore, a study of this outbreak reveals most clearly the conditions under which cholera could flourish, and shows the poorest kind of housing to be found in a thriving industrial area. Concern for the conditions under which the working classes existed is shown very clearly in Alexander Hathorne's letters. A similar concern is shown in the following passage from Angus Bethune Reach, who describes a visit to a house in Huddersfield which had recently been a lodging-house for 'low Irish' (4):

> The occupants of the two rooms of which it consisted (the house) were an old woman, her two daughters and a tolerably numerous array of grandchildren. In a corner of the lower room, a flock bed with a dirty rug was rolled up. The grandmother slept here. When the place had been a lodging-house she slept down in the cellar. We descended the stairs to inspect the dormitory. It was light-less and airless and the smell clearly showed that the place was used as a cesspool as well as a cellar. In this noisome hole the family kept their supply of drinking water. The bedroom above the common apartment might measure about 16 feet by 12 feet... In this room when the dwelling was used as a lodging house, upwards of twenty people were accustomed to sleep, huddled together upon rags flung on the floor.

A classic situation for the propagation of cholera was drinking water infected by sewage. To be fair to Huddersfield, Reach, despite strictures on some of the sanitary conditions of the town, found it a relatively prosperous place:

> Taking wages as the test of social condition, the operatives of Huddersfield may be considered as very fairly situated.

and conditions found in the older part of the town and described above, were not universal:

> The houses inhabited by the factory hands of Huddersfield consist in most cases of a large parlour-kitchen opening from the streets, with a cellar beneath it, and either two small bedrooms or one large one above. In some instances a scullery is added to the main apartment... The clock and the corner cupboards and the shelves glittering with ranges of dishes and plates are to be found as universally as in Manchester, and a plentiful supply of good water is in general conducted into every house.

Nevertheless he considers Huddersfield 'by no means a well-built town'. He does not like the back-to-back houses nor the 'necessary conveniences... erected in front of rows of houses, in positions perfectly destructive of anything like decent or seemly reserve'. The observations of Reach were intended for publication, those of Hathorne were not, but both convey very well the conditions under which the working-classes lived. Reach criticises back-to-back housing, while in the letter quoted below, Hathorne speaks of the three and four storey terraces and higgledy piggledy siting of cottages on the steep hillsides in this part of the country. In this letter

Hathorne is writing to his employer about conditions in the villages around Huddersfield. He names two: Berry Brow and Paddock:

> When visiting lately the above portions of the Trustees' estate (the owner of the estate, Sir John William Ramsden, being at this time a minor), my attention was arrested at discovering the very bad condition of the sewerage and general arrangement as to privy accommodation especially, of almost all the cottage property at each place – Berry Brow is most especially bad and the filthy conditions of some portions of it are really quite dreadful.
>
> This unfortunate state of matters has, in a great measure, arisen from the original laying of the ground for the building, not the least regard being had to any proper provision for the necessary conveniences – privies and pigsties are crowded around and in front of dwellings in the most unaccountable manner...
>
> The next great evil is the total want of any common sewer to carry off properly the house drainage. The evil is rendered still worse from the houses being built one above another – in some instances the drains from the cottages on the higher levels run under the cellar floors of those immediately below them – many of these and other cottages fronting to the main thoroughfares are entirely without drains. Everything is therefore thrown on the surface in front of the buildings (5).

These were ideal conditions for cholera to flourish in. Hathorne, though ignorant of the real cause of the contagion is conscious here as elsewhere of the degradation of the inhabitants of such places. In the same letter he goes on:

> Many of the poor people seemed most anxious to be relieved from the fearful nuisances with which they were surrounded, but they seemed to have very little hope of much, if any abatement of them unless their Landlords, (the Trustees' tenants) were stirred up to action and exertion...
>
> Under all these circumstances and with the prospect of such a fearful epidemic as the Cholera before us, I would beg to submit that much good might be done and the permanent interests and benefit of the Trustees' estate be advanced by their appropriating a sum of money, say £100 towards assisting to make common sewers and drains in all of the above portions of the estate.

He goes on to remind George Loch that the Earl Fitzwilliam, a powerful kinsman of the Ramsdens has recently spoken in praise of those in authority who have taken urgent steps to try to prevent, by sanitary means, the spread of cholera.

Unfortunately, however, the disease was to declare itself in the Huddersfield district within ten days of the above letter having been written. Why it had taken so long to reach the area we can only surmise and had it struck earlier, in the height of summer instead of in late September, there can be no doubt that the effect would have been greater. We have no indication as to who was the carrier of the disease, although it seems most likely to have been a vagrant. The Leeds Mercury of September 22, 1849 contained the following news item:

> We are sorry to have to report that four deaths in this dire disease have occurred at Paddock, in the neighbourhood of Huddersfield during the past week and that there have been three other cases one of which is expected will terminate fatally.

The outbreak was not to be serious by national, or even regional standards. However, it is well-documented and well-reported, allowing us to see clearly the conditions under which it occurred, the means taken to combat it, and what was believed to be its cause. Firstly let us consider Hathorne's letter to his superior, telling him of the outbreak which occurred on part of the Ramsden estate:

> I am sorry to have to inform you that this dreadful disease has broken out at the top of Paddock on 'Johnny Moor Hill' (sic) with much virulence. It commenced its ravages last Saturday week or Friday week, on the whole of which latter day, Thomas Brook and myself had been at the lower part of Paddock, inspecting and ordering the removal of a number of nuisances and arranging for the alteration and entire removal of sundry pigsties and privies many of which we found in a fearful state of filth, and almost sufficient of themselves to engender and spread disease and sickness.
>
> I have set some men to cut a sewer on the site of what has hitherto been an open ditch, and as soon as this work has been completed, the several tenants shall be called upon to make proper branch drains into it, to carry off what has hitherto been allowed to run on the surface.
>
> Mr Hobson and several of the respectable inhabitants of Paddock have been aiding our exertions. The Board of Guardians have almost completed the erection of a temporary cholera hospital in the neighbourhood of the infected district, and every exertion has been used by all parties concerned, in endeavouring to stay as far at least, as human means and effort may be able, the progress and spread of the disease.
>
> Up to Friday afternoon there have been 17 deaths and 26 cases still under treatment, some of them not expected to recover. Since that time there have been several fatal cases in the town. I hope however that the pestilence may now be said to be decreasing in intensity, at Paddock at least (6).

It was after reading the above that I first became interested in the 1849 cholera outbreak. I examined the Leeds Mercury for the whole of 1849 to look at accounts of the outbreak in other parts of Yorkshire and was

surprised at the amount of coverage given to the Paddock outbreak in that newspaper. The report on September 29th cites bad air as the culprit:

> Paddock is a portion of the hamlet of Marsh and lies about a mile south-west of Huddersfield. It stands at the opening of a series of deep and abrupt valleys that reach from that point named up to the foot of the hills of Standedge. In almost the entire of the village of Paddock there is no drainage. The slops and refuse from the dwellings are thrown on the surface forming most dirty and offensive places with many score yards of evaporating surface, or else forming cesspools of filth open to the action of the sun and the atmosphere. The petty accommodation is also disgracefully inferior – mere shells erected on the surface, without cesspools or any means of preventing the filth from running on the surface, beyond in some instances a hole open and exposed to view. As for a properly constructed and covered ash-place, there is not such a one to be found in the entire village. About 150 yards west of the dwellings on what is called Johnny Moore Hill, there is a dirty and filthy pond, formerly used as a fish-pond by the late Sir Joseph Radcliffe when he resided at Milnes Bridge. For thirty years this pond has not been cleaned out. It is full of aquatic vegetables and these and the slimy deposits have in many places raised the bottom nearly up to the surface. A short time ago when the Huddersfield and Manchester Railway which skirts the hill at this part was in progress of construction, the water of this pond was mainly drawn off to enable one portion to be used as a spoil bank. Since then no water has been admitted into it, and the quantity remaining is stagnant, and greened over. The drawing off left a great portion of the slime on the surface, and the aquatic vegetables deprived of their watery covering and support, were left there to decompose. Altogether this pond composed of stagnant water, semi-fluid filth, and decaying vegetable matter of the worst kind, presents an evaporating surface of upwards of 1400 square yards. It is a remarkable fact that for two days before the cholera manifested itself in the dwellings we have been speaking of, a westerly wind prevailed which blew directly upon the dwellings, bearing along with it the emanation from the pond in question; and it is no less remarkable a fact that to three points exposed to the malaria arising from this pond, according as the wind may happen to blow, and skirting three of its sides, has the disease hitherto been confined in that intense degree as to be destructive of life; and so intense has it been at 'Johnny Moore Hill' that entire families have been swept away and every dwelling affected. Some of the parties have not been more than seven hours affected. The consternation in the neighbourhood has been great, and many of the parties that lodged on the 'Johnny Moore Hill', and also some of the permanent residents, have quitted the place, taking with them, as has been ascertained in some instances, the germs of the disease.

The houses in question are described by Joshua Hobson, at this time, Clerk to the Board of Works under the Huddersfield Improvement Commissioners, as:

> ...two rows of dwellings built into a hillside... The dwellings are damp, have no drainage, but cesspools on the surface and the privies are very offensive... (The houses) have only openings at the front and no means of through ventilation (7).

It would appear from the article in the Leeds Mercury, that these dwellings of very low standard were occupied on a temporary basis by workers new to the town or by itinerants and this could explain why the cholera declared itself here. However the census of 1851 gives the impression that the houses were not occupied by people of the lowest classes and the family in whose home the outbreak had begun, two years earlier, were still living there, minus the members who had succumbed. Furthermore this particular family had been in residence there at the time of the previous census. Be that as it may the Guardians were convinced that the cholera was the result of the malevolent effluvia of a stagnant pond, and applied to the local magistrates to apply the Nuisance Act and force the owner of the pond, Sir Joseph Radcliffe, to clean up the mess. However the landlord's agent convinced the magistrates that they had no jurisdiction in the matter. Undeterred, Joshua Hobson wrote to the President of the General Board of Health, which had been set up in the previous year as a result of the first Public Health Act. It may seem curious but a version of this very letter appeared in the Leeds Mercury of October 13, 1849. However, it must have had its effect because the Guardians were given authority to abate the nuisance. So the story ends. It was a minor outbreak without doubt, but even a cursory investigation of it, brings before us a very clear picture of the squalor which prevailed in the area before the improvements in urban sanitation which were to come about during the second half of the century. But more than this, there seems to be a very definite sub-text in both letters and articles. The last words on the subject must go to the Leeds Mercury of October 20, 1849:

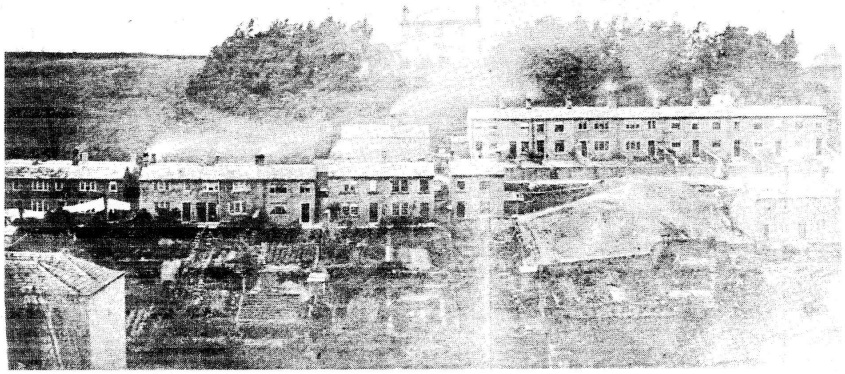
> We understand that there are 3 patients under treatment in the new house of refuge at Paddock, one of whom is Mrs Micklethwaite whose son was the first victim to the disease at Paddock. She was smitten along with her husband while the dead body of her son was in the house. Her husband died and for seven hours she was in the same bed with the dead body before anyone could be prevailed upon to

remove her (8); she is however now gradually recovering and is expected to be able to leave hospital in a few days. Huddersfield may be said to be in a very healthy state.

REFERENCES

1. Letter from Alexander Hathone to George Loch dated September 12, 1849. This letter and all the others quoted in this article are to be found in the Ramsden Estate Correspondence, catalogue numbers DD/RE/C/62-71, held by Kirklees Public Libraries.
2. G.M. Howe. *Man, Environment and Disease in Britain* Penguin Books, 1976. This is a popular treatment of the subject and deals with all the epidemic diseases of the nineteenth century.
3. Leeds Mercury, January 12, 1849. At this period, the Leeds Mercury was the local newspaper for the Huddersfield district.
4. Reach was a correspondent of the Morning Chronicle who visited the north of England in 1849 to investigate the living conditions of the working classes. His letters on *The Yorkshire Textile Districts in 1849*, from which the extract is taken were edited and re-published in 1974 by C. Aspin for the Helmshore Local History Society.
5. Letter dated September 12, 1849.
6. Letter dated September 30, 1849.
7. Leeds Mercury October 13, 1849. This is an extract from the letter mentioned below. It is worth noting that this letter is often similar in style and vocabulary to the news item of September 29, 1849.
8. She may not have realised her husband had died – the bodies of cholera victims remain warm for some time after death.

I am very grateful to Clifford Stephenson who copied out and elucidated Hathorne's drawing of a privy-block. It was to stand at Stocks, in the area of Viaduct Street not far from the centre of Huddersfield, but as far as can be ascertained it was never erected.



Paddock in the early 1860s