Learning Links

Public Health in 19th Century Manchester Cholera

Teacher's Notes

King David High School History Department worked with Manchester Archives and Local Studies in 2008 to produce resources using the archives for Key Stage 3 History teachers to use in class. The project was funded by Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) North West.

This resource sheet uses digitised archive sources to investigate the outbreaks of cholera in the world's first industrial city. It is intended as an introduction to the archives and the ways in which they can be used in class, both to convey the content of the sources and to analyse their reliability. Please feel free to copy or modify the notes for educational use. All of the images can be downloaded from the website.

Teachers should call 0161 832 5284 or email archiveslocalstudies@manchester.gov.uk to arrange class visits to the archives, for access to more digitised sources, or for more information.
Cholera is a bacterial disease that is caught from infected water, food or excrement. It can cause death within a week if left untreated. We now know that the disease can be treated using oral rehydration and antibiotics but in the early nineteenth century 'bad air' was thought to be the cause. This is a description of the very first recorded case of cholera in Manchester in 1832:

- When did James Palfreyman first complain of being ill? When did he die? How long did the disease take to kill him?
- What were his symptoms?
- Was James Palfreyman poor, or infirm, or old?
The first major cholera outbreak in the UK took place in 1831-1832. In 1831, with cholera spreading across Europe, the British Government set up a temporary Board of Health to co-ordinate national and local action against the disease and to issue advice to the public. This is part of its advice:

2nd. All unnecessary Communication should be prevented, as far as possible, between the infected and the healthy.

3rd. As Space, Cleanliness, and pure Air are of the most vital Consequence, both to the Recovery of the sick Person and to the Safety of those about him, the Patient labouring under Spasmodic Cholera should either be placed in a separate, well-ventilated Apartment of his own House, if it afford such Accommodation; and be attended by as few Persons as the Circumstances of his Case will admit, or be induced to submit to an immediate Removal to such Building as may have been provided for the Reception of Persons whose Circumstances will not afford the Advantages at Home, of Space, Air, and Separation from the healthy.

4th. When an Individual shall have been attacked with this Disease, and placed under the most favorable Conditions, as already pointed out, both for the Recovery of his own, and the Safety of the Public Health; — the Room or Apartment where he may have been attacked, and from which he may have been removed, should be purified by scrubbing, lime-washing, free Ventilation and Fumigation by heated Sulphuric Acid and Common Salt, with Black Oxyde of Manganese, or the same Acid with Nitre; or, when these Materials cannot be obtained, by strong Vinegar thrown upon heated Bricks. The Bed, Bedding, and Clothes should be immersed in Water, washed with Soap, and afterwards fumigated as above.

\[ M9/36 13 Dec 1831 \]

- What measures does the poster suggest for the containment of the disease?
- Which of them do you think would help, and which would not?
- What is the modern treatment for Cholera?
- How is cholera spread? Do you think the report writers knew this?
The local Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association issued the following advice in 1853, in an effort to combat the third wave of cholera in Britain in 1853-1854:

6.—There should be a careful inspection of the Ashpits, and of the Traps connected with Soughs, in every part of the district.
7.—The Sewers should be flushed with water every day.
8.—The watering of Streets, by means of water carts, should be conducted more carefully, and less profusely, than at present; so that waste Water may be prevented from lying in the Streets.
9.—The Authorities should take immediate steps to furnish a constant supply of good Water to every part of the district— as the practice of keeping water in open vessels is highly injurious.
10.—The removal of Nuisances, and of all objectionable refuse, should be stringently enforced; according to the ample powers now conferred upon Authorities by the Order in Council of the 15th September inst., reviving the operation of the “Diseases Prevention Act.” And the precautionary Measures recommended by the General Board of Health, should be immediately carried into effect.

M126/5/1/19

- What measures does the poster suggest for the containment of the disease?
- What are the differences between the two advice posters?
- Which poster do you think would have been more useful in preventing the spread?
- Where is cholera a problem now and why is this?
This is a map of cholera outbreaks in Chorlton upon Medlock published by the Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association in 1853:

This is a description of the rivers in the area from the same report:

- Without sewers, where could human waste be dumped?
- Without water pipes to reservoirs, where would drinking water be sourced?
- What would a flooded river mean to the people living beside it?
- Why do you think the shaded areas are the unhealthiest?
Glossary

**Antibiotics** (noun) *a substance which kills bacteria or stops them from growing*

**Bacterial** (adjective) *spread by bacteria, which are single-cell organisms*

**Co-ordinate** (verb) *to organise the actions of a number of people*

**Excrement** (noun) *waste material expelled from the body after digestion*

**Oral rehydration** (noun) *a drinking solution of salts and sugars*

**Outbreak** (noun) *the appearance of a disease in a population*

**Symptoms** (noun) *signs of disease from the body*
Further reading

Aston, J. *A Picture of Manchester*, 1816 (942.739 As) p. 84


Gaulter, H., *The Origins and Progress of the Malignant Cholera* (614.514 G1)

Longmate, N., *King Cholera – the Biography of a Disease*, 1966 (614.514 Lo1)

Niven, James, *History of Public Health Effort in Manchester*, 1923 (614 094 273 Ni1/a)

Whitehead, James, *Rate of Mortality in Manchester*, 1863 (q 614.094276 He1)

M9/36 Proceedings of the Board of Health, Manchester, 1831-1832

M126 Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association, 1848-1924

MSf 310.6 M5 Manchester Statistical Society, c.1800-1850

M71/1/2/3 Newspaper cutting of report of committee of Cholera Relief Fund, 1833

Cholera burials at Manchester Cathedral, *Manchester Cathedral News*, Dec 1999, p. 5-7

Map showing cholera district, 1849 (616.93 Li)

Coverage of riot at Swan Street Cholera Hospital, Sep 1832: *Manchester Times* (8 Sep), *Wheeler’s Chronicle* (8 Sep) and the *Manchester Courier* (8 Sep)

Medical Officer of Health Reports, 1868-date (352.2 M1)

Irish and Cholera in Manchester Walking Tour by Mervyn Busteed

http://www.mangeogsoc.org.uk/egm/3_2.pdf
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