

19TH CENTURY CHOLERA EPIDEMICS IN GLOUCESTER

In the early 19th century cholera, in epidemic form, spread from Asia into Russia, across Europe and reached England on 26 July 1831. Gloucester suffered three epidemics in 1832, 1849 and 1854, escaping a further epidemic in 1866. The history of these local epidemics; and of the measures to counteract them show the advances in public health over the century.

The first epidemic, which involved 366 people and caused 123 deaths raged in the city from 12 July to 14 September. At that time the city had no sewerage system, all refuse and sewage flowed in open ditches, thence to streams and in Gloucester the River Severn. Although the Gloucester Water Company, supplying water from Robinswood Hill had been established in 1760, the Severn was still a source and in the first epidemic cases were around the Severn in the Island, Quay, Leatherbottle lane, Dockham and Littleworth.

The Gloucester Journal of 14 July reported "cholera morbus has made its appearance." The first victim was a Mary Lloyd, aged 26, and although she survived her child and Maria Jones who nursed them both died of the disease. By the end of the first week eighty four cases had been notified and eleven had died.

Before the epidemic had reached Gloucester the local Board of Health had applied to the Governors of Gloucester Infirmary for permission to use the Infirmary burial ground in the event of an epidemic. However, alarmed by the number of interments the Governors speedily rescinded their permission. When by 9 August they had received no reply to their request that the Board provide alternative facilities, they notified that all interments except for Infirmary cases, would cease on 11 August (1). By this time 164 cases had occurred with 43 deaths. It became obvious that a new isolated burial ground would be necessary and a site was chosen behind the New Inn at Longford, on the old Workhouse Farm; the victims being buried in a communal pit.

Little was known of the method of spread of the disease; it was appreciated that it was most prevalent in areas of poor housing, poor water supply and overcrowding. Preventative measures included whitewashing the house where the victim had died, burying the body within twentyfour hours of death, and burning articles of clothing and bedding. The medical men of the city were hard-pressed during the epidemic, and were accused of seeking excessive remuneration, and in some cases of poisoning patients. The Journal was at pains to refute these allegations.

Practical matters to alleviate the epidemic included the purchase of a house in Barton Street for nursing cases and the setting up of a cholera charitable fund to give relief to the families of those afflicted; to which the City M.P. subscribed £100. The total amount of relief was not to exceed 20 shillings, and was given at the discretion of a clergyman or medical gentleman. In later years this fund became the Gloucester Benevolent Fund.

By 18 August there was no diminution' of the cholera; 'the ravages are still confined to the lower orders, the intemperate, uncleanly, and those inhabiting close squalid dwellings; the greater majority in Leatherbottle Lane and Sherbourne St.' The total number of cases was now 227; Worcester had 127 cases, Tewkesbury 29 and Bristol 583.

On Wednesday 22 August the Mayor convened a meeting of the inhabitants of the city to be held at the Tolsey. The meeting passed seven resolutions which included an appeal for funds, and for convalescent homes and recommended preventative measures to the Board of Health and Overseers of the Poor. By 1 September the epidemic was clearly abating and by 22 September had disappeared having caused the deaths of one in three victims.

The city set aside 11 October as a day of thanksgiving; when, except for those owned by Friends, all shops shut. A total of £91. 2s. 3d. was collected for the cholera charitable fund.

In 1847 cholera was nationally prevalent and in November of that year the Sanitary Committee met at the instigation of some of the more prominent of the city's medical men to discuss measures to improve the cleanliness of the city (2). It was stated that 'all the evils arising from a total want of a system of sewage' existed in the city. The city was still surrounded by stagnant ditches, and in those localities where the epidemic had raged in 1832 were reported as in the same 'disgraceful state as existed sixteen years previously'. It was suggested that houses of the poor, lodging houses etc. should be visited to advise on purification. A sub committee was appointed, and, in a burst of enthusiasm, the committee on the following day inspected and reported on the watercourses of Little Meadow St., St. Catherines Meadow and Leatherbottle Lane.

Further meetings recommended beside the cleansing and covering of ditches that baths and wash houses should be established. The committee also recommended that a complete system of sewerage was needed together with a constant high pressure supply of water. The paving of streets and courts were also recommended, and an Inspector of Nuisances was appointed. A prize competition was announced for the best plan, with sections and levels for the complete drainage of the city. In December, in his seventh report, the Inspector complained of the state of the parishes of St. John the Baptist, St. Michael and St. Mary Lode.

By 1848 general measures for public health had improved considerably and a Board of Health had been established at national level. In this year John Snow published his famous paper on cholera; arriving at his conclusions at the same time as Dr. William Budd of Bristol, a physician to the Royal Infirmary (3). It was now recognised that the disease was caused by a living organism, that water spread was important and that excreta contamination of water was important. The theory of an airborne spread was not however ruled out by this knowledge.

Cleansing of ditches and general covering continued through 1848 and it was not until 9 May 1849 that one of the Union Medical Officers reported seven cases, two fatal, confined to a yard called Levy's Yard immediately adjacent to the Island. Although drainage was deemed adequate it was pointed out that the only supply of water came from the Severn, which was highly charged with offensive matter from adjacent privies. It was proposed that the 1832 burial ground should be used again, as the adjoining land was unoccupied.

Unfortunately the sanitary committee minutes book finishes at this point and the only sources for the epidemic are the Gloucester Journal and the city gaol records. The county gaol suffered badly in the epidemic but the relevant records are no longer extant.

On 12 May the Journal reported the first fatal cases at Levy's yard and two at Wheatleaf Yard, Thomas Evans and Elizabeth Haines. The latter had been cohabiting with Evans, a boatman, and the couple were reported as 'of intemperate habits'. They had attended the funeral of Wilks, another boatman and the first cholera victim, had become intoxicated and 'remained so for several days'.

A Journal advertisement of this period drew attention to a 'patent self acting effluvian trap' for sewers or drains: It was said to prevent the escape of noxious vapours. In June, as the weather grew warmer, the epidemic flourished, there were as many as 20 cases in the county gaol. In all cases the water supply to the dwellings was from the river. To help combat the gaol epidemic there was a wholesale discharge of prisoners from the county gaol; all prisoners whose sentences would expire by 14 July were released.

Plans were formulated for the erection of a hospital in the garden of the Union workhouse 'between the building and the path leading to the goods stack of the S.W.R.'; the building was to be 60 feet by 16 feet and have two wards. These plans were later abandoned, after the visit of a government inspector.

The epidemic raged throughout July, and disappeared in early August, there having been 213 cases, and 92 deaths, a higher mortality than in the previous epidemic. The asylum visitors in their annual report could however congratulate themselves, 'although the pestilence so fearfully desolated some other similar establishments ... and some persons fell victims in the immediate vicinity of the asylum not a single case occurred in the asylum.'

The surgeon's journal for the city gaol provides a picture of current cholera therapy. On 4 June a prisoner named Clark developed diarrhoea and vomiting. He was treated with a mustard poultice to the stomach, castor oil, and turpentine rubs. All the prisoners were issued with tobacco and the diet was upgraded to fresh cooked meat and rice instead of soup. The patient recovered, but on 26 June another prisoner, Bennett developed the disease. He also was immediately ordered a rice diet, and mustard poultices to the stomach. In addition he was allowed a cup of tea and a glass of hot brandy with cayenne pepper.

In the evening he took arrowroot and sago. On the following day beef tea, barley water were prescribed together with another mustard poultice. However, over the day his condition deteriorated rapidly and in his evening report the surgeon noted that a quart of brandy had been consumed that day by the prisoner and his attendants. He died that night, the inquest and burial were finished by dawn.

The next epidemic occurred in 1854, by which time considerable improvement had been made with respect to water supplies and sanitation in the city. In the early months of the year negotiation for the purchase of the Gloucester Waterworks Company, established in 1740, were at an advanced stage.

In March Alderman Waller, referring to the probable approach of Cholera, suggested to the Board of Health that a medical officer should be appointed. His colleague Mr. Clutterbuck felt that the expense was unjustified; 'the medical gentlemen of the city are always ready to volunteer their services whenever required'. Mr. Brown commented that 'if they did not get on with the sewerage scheme cholera was a certainty'. However, in spite of cholera in Cardiff in April, in Stroud in July, cholera did not arrive in Gloucester until September when the epidemic started in the county gaol.

The epidemic was of a milder nature, and of shorter duration than its predecessors - the total numbers and deaths were not recorded. The pages of the Journal were enlivened by a public wrangle between medical practitioners over the treatment of a lady who ultimately died. Negligence was alleged, and the argument continued through two meetings of the Board of Health to be followed by dissension between the medical members about the accurate diagnosis of the disease; it was suggested that asiatic cholera was being reported where cases were merely those of ordinary diarrhoea or 'English cholera'. By mid November the epidemic was over, besides the gaol. Lower Quay St., Anim St., Union st. were the areas chiefly affected.

This was the last year a major epidemic came to Gloucester, although in 1866 there was a serious national outbreak involving both London and Bristol. By this time the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1849 and the Local Government Act of 1858 had produced public sewerage works, and public water companies thus eliminating the main sources of contamination and epidemics.

A. Bailey

(1) Church collections October 13 1832 for Cholera Fund

Gloucester Cathedral	£14. 8. 0.	St. Aldate	£ 2. 3. 6.
St. Nicholas	7.10. 0.	Spa Church	22.18. 6.
St. Michael	11. 0. 8.	Independent	4. 3. 0.
St. Mary de Crypt	11. 2. 1.	Chapel	
St. John Baptist	6.10. 3.	Baptist Church	1. 7. 0.
St. Mary de Lode	7.15. 3.	Lady Hurty	2. 4. 0.
		Chapel	

Medical Men Instigating Sanitary Improvements in 1847

T.C. Buchanan
G.W. Charleton
Alfred Clarke
Charles Clutterbuck
Ambrose Cookson
Paris Thomas Dick, M.D.
Thomas Evans, M.D.
R. Fletcher, Sen., Consulting Surgeon Glos. County Hospital
W.H. Fletcher
Peter Goullett, Surgeon
J.P. Hearne, Surgeon
S. Heath
Thomas Hickes
W.M. Meyler,
H.W. Ramsey
J.W. Turner
W.W. Williams
John W. Wilton
Alfred J. Wood.

(2) Cases reported in 1849 Epidemic

Wilkes, Levy's yard
Thos. Evans)
Elizabeth Haines) W heatsheaf yard
Patrick Winters, lodging house keeper in Island
James Sheen, Columbia Street
Maria Bowle, Union Street
Richard Driver & wife, of Littleworte
Elisabeth Hawkins, Black Dog Yard
Matthew Burton, Union Street
Charles Coles, Sweetbriar Street
John Bragg)
William Bartlett) Ponthers place

(3) Deaths in Cholera Epidemic of 1849, tabulated by parish.

(May 7 - August 2)

St. Nicholas, St. Catherine, Holy Trinity, St. Mary de Lode;
Hamlets of Kingsholm & Longford 52 deaths

St. John Baptist, including whole of parish of St. John,
Union Street, Columbia Street, Brothers Place and Black Dog
Yard 30 deaths

South-Hamlet 9 deaths 3 city, 6 country

Kingsholm 1 - taking place in parish of Sandhurst.

SOURCES

Gloucester Journal, 1832, 1849, 1854, 1866

Gloucester City Lib., Glos Colln, 5191, H.J. Taylor,
MS notes relating to cholera epidemic in 1832

Glos. R.O., GCR 1592, City Gaol Surgeon's journal, 1825-37

GCR 1595, City Gaol Surgeon's Journal, 1848-54

GCR 1589, City Gaol Govenor's journal, 1846-52

GCR 1536, Sanitary Committee minutes, 1847-49

GCR 1539, Board of Health minutes, 1849-54

GCR 1540, Board of Health minutes, 1859-73

GCR 1544, Board of Health Committee minutes, 1863-67

Annual Report of Gloucester Lunatic Asylum, 1849

Glos. R.O., HS/B10 Infirmary weekly board minutes, 1832

D. Large & F. Round, Public Health in Mid-Victorian Bristol
(1974).