

## CHOLERA PRECAUTIONS IN HIGH LITTLETON

Little was known about cholera in 1830 and no one knew its cause or how it was spread. What was known was that it was a malignant disease, which had been endemic in India for centuries. With the passing of time Asiatic cholera gradually spread westwards through Asia and Europe. By 1831 it was raging in the Baltic region, which was only a short sea journey from these shores. Parliament became sufficiently worried as to alert the country to the threat in the King's speech in June 1831. A Central Board of Health was established in London and a Code drawn up in the event of an outbreak but in general apathy prevailed. In October the first cholera fatality occurred in Sunderland. The first outbreaks in this region arose at Bristol and Bath in July 1832 and by mid September had reached the Somerset Coalfields.

Nowhere in the locality suffered as badly as Paulton, where the first cholera death took place on 28th September. In Paulton Churchyard a monument records the death of 23 men, 23 women and 26 children, *"who fell victims to that dreadful scourge, Asiatic Cholera, which it pleased the Almighty to visit the parish from the 28th September to the 10th of November 1832."*

When the disease first struck Paulton it seemed inevitable that it would spread to the neighbouring parish of High Littleton, but what could be done to mitigate the effect? The Vestry met on 3rd Oct 1832 to *"arrange precautions against the cholera, which is unhappily now in the adjoining parish of Paulton"* and resolved *"that the following measures be adopted without delay by the Overseers:-*

- 1. To purchase 4 pairs of blankets, 6 bedcases and bolsters, to be filled with straw or chaff. All the indigent poor, who have not within 12 months been supplied with a change of body linen and are now without the same, shall forthwith be furnished therewith.*
- 2. Such as are unable to purchase soap for washing their linen, shall be supplied with sufficient quantity for that purpose.*
- 3. Every room in the poor houses shall have at least one casement and lime supplied to all applicants for the purpose of washing their houses.*
- 4. Chloride of lime, vitriol or vinegar shall be used in filthy and infected houses.*
- 5. As the house of James SAGE, from the size of his family, is an object of immediate consideration, Mr. MAGGS is authorised to take such measures for cleansing the same as he thinks necessary.*

In the event of cholera appearing in the parish, it was resolved that:-

- 6. Lime be placed near the houses in which cholera may exist and that fires, with pitch or tar or other matter to create smoke and purify the air, be made.*
- 7. Medicine be left at Thomas HARRISON's for the poor of Hallatrow and at William MAGGS' for the poor of High Littleton.*
- 8. If any death shall occur from cholera in this parish, the entire bed, bedding and all clothes which the deceased may have worn subsequent to the attack, shall be immediately burnt and other bed and bedding supplied in lieu.*
- 9. Interment be as speedy as practicable and the body borne to the grave either in a cart or a bier made for the purpose. Graves to be at least 8 feet*
- 10. A small space be procured in some central situation between High Littleton and Hallatrow for interring the dead. Messrs. BEAK, COX, BLINMAN, HARRISON and DUDDEN were requested to look out for a spot and to apply to the owner for permission, trusting that, from the peculiar circumstances and from a feeling of humanity, such owner will consent thereto, the parish undertaking to fence such spot and to pay any reasonable charge.*

Another Vestry meeting was held on 11th Oct, which approved the measures and resolved that immediate application be made to Mr. MOGG of Farrington for permission to appropriate one corner of a field called Langford's Ways in Langford's Lane, as a place of burial, that spot being considered very

suitable. It was also resolved to immediately purchase 1 cwt. of rice and  $1/2$  cwt. of soap, half to be placed with William MAGGS and half with Thomas HARRISON, to be given by them to the poor of the parish, in a dry state, on two days a week, in such quantities as the state of the families may require. Capt. SCOBELL, Capt. FESTING, and farmer WEYMOUTH for High Littleton and Richard COX, farmer Jonas WEEKS, farmer DOWLING and William WILLIAMS for Hallatrow, together with the Churchwardens and Overseers, were authorised to issue tickets for the rice and soap. Furthermore, a meeting of the inhabitants of the parish would be called to determine upon the establishment of a Board of Health for the parish.

The ratepayers and inhabitants met on 15th Oct and resolved to set up a Board of Health and instructed William WILLIAMS, the local solicitor, to make immediate application to the proper quarter. The parish officers and most of the principal residents were recommended as members of the Board.

On 25th Oct a Select Vestry met to consider what powers should be deputed to the Board of Health appointed by H.M.'s Privy Council, but felt unable to do so and therefore adjourned discussion until 27th Oct. In the meantime George MOGG had obviously declined to make his field available for a burial site, which caused the Vestry to minute *"that unless the landed proprietors of the parish, so far as depends on them, will enable the Vestry, the tenants and the Board of Health to make arrangements for the prevention and mitigation of cholera, the responsibility of the evil consequences that may ensue, will not rest with them."* The Churchwardens were then requested to apply to the Misses LANGFORD, as the principal resident landowners in Hallatrow, *"for a small spot in Hallatrow, in any convenient situation, for the purpose of a burial place, if it shall unhappily be required for persons dying of cholera in that part of the parish"* and also to apply to Mr. MILES, as representative of Mr. BURDETT, for a similar spot in High Littleton.

A Select Vestry met on 2nd Nov, but refused to grant any powers to the new Board of Health, so adjourned the meeting for a week. On 9th Nov an estimate of £20 was submitted for money to be placed at the disposal of the Board of Health. On being put to the vote, this sum was refused by the majority of the Vestry, who also refused to grant the Board any powers whatsoever - and that was the end of that!

By now the cholera in Paulton had subsided and there is no record of further meetings on the subject. During the period only 2 people from High Littleton died - neither from cholera - and no cases were reported. Whether this was due to luck or good management one must draw one's own conclusions and also how effective the cholera medicine might have been.

Some indication of the contemporary treatment of cholera can be gained from printed posters displayed in Kingswood in Jan 1834, when the disease was rife there:

*"The following simple remedy has been found very useful in cases of Cholera:*

*Take a tablespoonful of brandy and as much powdered rhubarb as will cover a shilling. Make a strong tea of camomile flowers, mallow and mint, either dry or green and take a tea-cupful frequently, or*

*Get two pieces of wood (if wood cannot be got, 2 pieces of tile will do) each 6 inches square and 1 inch thick. Place them against the bars of the fire-grate or a heated oven till quite hot, wrap it in a flannel and lay it on the bowels. Heat one while the other is cooling. It is strongly recommended that the above articles be provided in every family for immediate use in cases of attack of the bowels."*

It was observed that the incidence of cholera was generally associated with poor sanitation and contaminated drinking water. In the ensuing years attempts were made to improve the situation but this did not prevent cholera returning to Paulton in 1849 and claiming another 62 victims.

There had been a national cholera epidemic in 1845 and it broke out spasmodically around the country in the following years. Without actually

mentioning cholera at their meeting on 30th July 1849, it may be significant that the Vestry appointed "two committees, one for High Littleton and one for Hallatrow, for the purpose of inspecting from time to time all nuisances in the respective districts with a view to their removal...". The Committee reported back on 9th August to say "that they had visited and inspected the several houses in their respective districts and had given recommendations for the removal of several nuisances, many of which had been removed accordingly, but that some still remain." The Vestry resolved "that the Committee do continue their visits weekly and that they be requested to report to the Board of Guardians from time to time any cases which may require legal interference." At the same time it was resolved "that the Parish Officers be requested to provide white lime to distribute through the parish for the purpose of whitewashing the houses of the cottagers."

At the next two meetings of the Vestry Findlater Crang, the local surgeon, was present. On 4th October 1849 it was reported that three cases of Cholera had occurred in this parish but the disease to all present appearance had disappeared. Nevertheless the Vestry maintained the pressure on sanitation nuisances. On 9th October it was resolved that "for the purpose of visiting from House to House, the Parish be divided into the following Districts, viz:

Rugborne & Kingwell & Mearns to be visited by Captain SCOBELL, Mr George FLOWER and Mr James HALL.

Ratcombe, including the Inn, to be visited by Captain SCOBELL with Mr George BLINMAN and Mr Henry DOWLING.

The Houses on the Turnpike Road as far as ELMES' Beer House to be visited by Mr William ROBBINS, Mr Henry DOWLING and Isaac COWEN.

The Houses in front of the Church & as far as the School Room to be visited by the Rev'd H.H. MOGG and Mr John REES-MOGG, Stephen's Hill, Holly Bush and Langford's Lane by Mr William BEAK and Mr James WEEKS.

Hallatrow to be visited by Mr James WEEKS, Mr John BLINMAN, Mr William WILLIAMS, Mr Thomas BATT, Mr Charles DOLMAN, Mr Charles DOLMAN Junior, Mr Edw'd DOWLING, Mr Thomas HARRISON."

On the next page of the Vestry Minute Book, undated and unsigned, is recorded "..... in case of burial of cholera cases, that the grave should be 10 feet deep, for which the sexton was to receive 10 shillings and in pauper cases 6 shillings, being 2 shillings extra in the first case and 3 in the latter case." No one is identified in the Burial Register as having died from cholera and in fact, there were less burials in 1849 than there were in 1848 and 1850. Once again High Littleton had "got away with it."

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