



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

## ***It is Enough, Stay Now Thine Hand!***

### ***(The 1832 Cholera Outbreak in Wantage)***

**by Alan Rosevear**

This quotation comes from a wooden plaque, fixed to the north wall of Wantage Church. It symbolises the helplessness of those facing the “Angel of Pestilence” in an age before public health could be taken for granted. Disease and premature death were a constant part of early 19th century life but the Asiatic or malignant cholera seems to have had a particular impact on English society. The measures adopted to deal with this imported pestilence were the forerunner of the great improvement in public health legislation, which was to tame the squalor of Victorian urban life. However, at that time the cause of the disease was a mystery and the practical measures taken against it were a mixture of faith and desperation.

It was not until late in the 19th century that Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch showed that “germs” were the cause of many infections, giving some logical basis for the development of public health policy. Nevertheless, cities such as Oxford had for many years taken measures such as removing dirtiness from the streets, controlling the multitude of poor hovels, moving away butchers’ slaughter houses, preventing the stagnation of water and improving ventilation. Although “abating these Nuisances” reduced the impact of many common diseases, they were inadequate to cope with this new, virulent plague, caused by intestinal infection with *Vibrio cholerae*.

Spasmodic cholera originated in Asia and the pandemic which reached Britain in 1831 had first flared up in India in 1826. Its westward progress was viewed with “deep concern” by William IV when he opened Parliament in June 1831. Cholera had already wreaked havoc on the continent and the government took rapid action to prevent its spread when the first case was reported in Sunderland on 19th October 1831. An act passed in February 1832 gave local Boards of Health powers to make sanitary provisions in every parish in the land. As early as November 1831, Oxford had set up a Board and made ready nurses and isolated buildings such as the National School Room to cope with the anticipated crisis.

The disease appeared in Hagbourne in April 1832 but was initially contained. The main epidemic began in Oxford on June 25th and by the following day the first victim, James Leach, died in Oxford Gaol. He was a resident of Bicester where the disease was already raging. Outbreaks continued spasmodically through to September with up to 8 new cases per day being reported out of a population of 18,144. There was a total of 174 cases of which 86 died: 25 children, 35 men and 26 women. Diagnosis was not always certain, with 772 cases of “diarrhetic distress”, some fatal, being reported over the same period. By late September, the tide of pestilence was lapping at the boundaries of Wantage. The correspondent of the Reading Mercury reported that on the 29th of that month:

*“The disorders usually prevalent at this season of autumn have assumed a more than commonly serious character in the town of Wantage. Its vicinity to Oxford, where the cholera has so lately disappeared, combined with one or two deaths from diarrhoea, in the early part of the week, very properly induced the inhabitants to adopt, the precautionary measures of inspecting and abating nuisances, which have too long suffered to accumulate in the closer parts of the town; and as there has been no new case even of suspicion within 24 hours preceding the date of our correspondent’s letter, we are not without hope, that part of our County may still be spared the awful visitation.”*

Wantage depended for its wealth on market trade with the surrounding villages. Anything which interfered with this must have been of great concern to the business community. The attitude of George Woodward in his letters from East Hendred in the late 18th century indicate the seriousness of an epidemic on trade: he avoided visiting Wantage while smallpox raged there. Hence, one must suspect that the Reading Mercury correspondent was concerned with building public confidence when on October 6th he reported:

*We are happy to state that the circulating reports of the devastation of the cholera at Wantage have been most grossly exaggerated. The earliest cases that occurred were on the 27th of September since which period the total number of deaths has been 14; and the daily numerical return on the Friday evening was as follows; new cases 0, died 0, remaining 4. The ravages of the disease were confined to Mill St and with 3 or 4 exceptions, to its and southern side; all the inhabitants of which side, by the prompt exertions of the Board of Health, were to be removed to a House of Observation in the course of yesterday, in order to give time for a more complete purification of the dwellings than could be conveniently effected while the families remained in them.*

*There have been a few cases of cholera in the hamlet of Grove, and those who have died of that disease have very properly been interred in the burial ground of their new chapel, although at present an unconsecrated spot.”*

By October 20th the correspondent was able to continue his confidence building propaganda with a short report:

*The last week’s report of the Cholera cases at Wantage was unfortunately mislaid. We are happy, however, to state that, the favourable account then given is borne out by the experience of another week. No new cases, nor deaths from that fearful disease has occurred for the last 10 days. The fair on Wednesday was but scantily attended, but the neighbourhood is regaining its confidence and we trust the tradesmen will now find their business proceeding in the usual train.”*

There was no further mention of the disease by this correspondent. The individuals concerned were:

William Blackwell	50 yrs	John Hobbs	72 yrs
Jane Broad	69 yrs	Henry Hulcup	4 yrs
James Green	1 yr	Simeon Lee	5 yrs
Martha Giles	7 yrs	Ruth Pert	48 yrs
Lucy Gregory	42 yrs	Sarah Wells	?
William Gregory	45 yrs	Thomas Wenman	71 yrs
Charles Grigg	4 yrs	Robert William	5 yrs
William Hale	27 yrs	John Williams	78 yrs
Sarah Hine	46 yrs	Sarah Whitfield	80 yrs
John Hine	45 yrs		

None of these appear to be from the wealthier sections of Wantage society and the composition of the group is similar to that in Oxford. They are in general the more vulnerable individuals, children and older adults from a number of different families.

Cholera is a water-borne infection and so contamination of water supplies coming from above Mill St must be suspected as the source of the epidemic. The death rate of 19 out of a population of 2,507 is significantly higher than in Oxford and even if 3 of these were in fact in Grove (population 520), it still represents a traumatic experience for a small town.

An examination of deaths during the period 1831/2 (see the graph below) shows that the epidemic had a marked impact on mortality, although death rates in general were high throughout 1832. This was a period of poor agricultural prices and the Mercury reported in March 1832 that “72 persons of the labouring classes” had recently embarked on a coalboat for Bristol, to ship thence for the Canadas and N. America and that “several persons of the same class in Wantage have expressed an ardent desire to follow them”. Cholera must have been the final straw for some!



MONTHLY TOTALS OF DEATHS IN WANTAGE DURING THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC

Further epidemics were to follow in the middle decades of the century and it seems likely that this community was not safe until the piped water supply was introduced in 1876. Despite the use of Beaufoy's concentrated disinfecting solution of soda of lime (advertised in Feb 1832 to combat Cholera morbus) and the use of mustard potions, the populace were generally helpless in the face of this disease. It struck worthy and the unworthy with equal disregard for “fairness”. A passage from Rev Thomas’ book on the progress of the disease in Oxford encapsulates this perplexed view; “though filth, noisome smells and close damp and confined situations are hazardous especially when combined with irregularities of life and decayed and vitiated constitution of body, the pleasant abode, neat and cleanly chamber and well ordered household, decencies and delicacies and purities of virtuous domestic life present no insurmountable barrier to the inroads of Cholera “.

AIDS is not the first plague to send a shiver down the spines of all classes and conditions of men!

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