

Local press coverage of the 1832 cholera outbreak in Liverpool

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In the nineteenth century there were four epidemic outbreaks of cholera in Liverpool. The first of these was in 1832. It infected some five thousand victims and killed just over one thousand. Cholera is a condition which is caused by the faecal contamination of drinking water. It causes death in 25-50% of cases untreated by modern therapy.¹ Fatalities are caused by dehydration resulting from violent diarrhoea and vomiting. Death is often very quick, and very uncomfortable with violent abdominal cramps.

The disease caused considerable public disquiet throughout Europe to the point where this spilled over into serious civil disturbances. Local disturbances of this nature have been described in detail elsewhere.²

The investigation presented here examines the coverage of the epidemic in the contemporary local press: the *Liverpool Mercury*. The *Mercury* was a weekly publication which served the city with coverage of local, national and international news. It also served as a forum for local debate about topics facing the city.

Editions of the *Liverpool Mercury* were examined from 1 January to 31 December 1832. The results of these investigations have been presented chronologically.

The approaching catastrophe

The outbreak of cholera in Liverpool was not an event which was restricted to the city alone. Cholera was and is thought to have originated in India. In 1831 it spread from India through Russia and Germany and was perceived as an epidemic wave of disease that threatened the whole of Europe.

By the turn of 1832 and months before the disease attacked the city articles began to appear in the press which expressed alarm. One on 10

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¹ A. Mondal, R.B. Sack, 'The clinical picture of cholera', *Principles and practice of cholera control* (Geneva, World Health Organisation, 1970), p. 57.

² G. Gill, S. Burrell, J. Brown, 'Fear and frustration – the Liverpool cholera riots of 1832', *Lancet*, 358 (2001), 233-7.

January recommends a ‘hot air bath’ apparatus for the treatment of the cold extremities, which were a notable sign of the disease.

On 20 January the *Mercury* printed an article intended to distance itself from its own article published ‘some months ago’ about one of the journal’s printers who, they had said, had contracted a case considered by ‘an eminent physician’ to be Indian cholera. The paper was at pains to point out that in fact it had been instead considered by the physician to be ‘a case of English cholera of the worst description’. Whether this case was in fact an early instance of ‘Asiatic cholera’ or ‘English cholera’ is almost impossible to say. With no accepted diagnostic test the ‘eminent physician’ only had clinical signs to inform him and it might have been hard to distinguish between different types of violent and life threatening diarrhoea with any accuracy.

The impression of cholera approaching was so strong that by early February controversy was animating the Select Vestry about the financial measures that would be required to meet the oncoming crisis. On 3 February a meeting of the Vestry was reported which rejected a proposal to levy extra rates to meet the expenses which the epidemic would bring. The rejection was passed by only 100 votes against 95. The Lord Mayor argued that if the proposal were not adopted ‘the cholera morbus might rage among them unopposed’. The measured tones of the Mayor were not echoed in the correspondence column of the *Mercury*. A correspondent on 10 February, signing himself ‘Non Medicus’, berated ‘in sorrow and disgust’ the Select Vestry for refusing a ‘trifling rate’ increase for the relief of the poor:

For God’s sake! Let us not wait, like men deprived of all sense, till death reaches our dwellings. All England...has striven more or less to meet the Destroyer, who has stridden over half the World to attack us, - and shall we alone let our friends fall around us on the right and the left, or die ourselves, for want of the time we are now losing, and the money which then will not buy life?

The funding which caused this controversy was intended for the establishment of emergency hospitals which would receive the poor of the city who contracted the illness. In the main the intention of these hospitals was to offer comfort and good nursing care to victims rather than to isolate cases of infection. Even at this early stage of the crisis, whether cholera was contagious or not was a matter of intense controversy. One Dr Becker had his views on the matter uncritically aired in the *Mercury* on 10 February when he declared that:

It is, beyond all doubt, capable of being propagated from one individual to another...by contact.

On 17 February however the views of Dr Hancock were publicised, who was 'neither ultra contagionist or ultra anti contagionist'. In the same issue an article appeared under the heading "Cholera! Cholera! Cholera!", with a subheading quoting Macbeth: 'The cry is still, they come' (Act V, Scene v). In it Dr Robert Walker of Kilmarnock, a confirmed anti contagionist, was quoted making a startling claim that was not repeated during the rest of the 1832 outbreak. Of cholera he said that:

there is a circumstance connected with the cholera which distinguishes it from most other diseases with which mankind is afflicted:-we advert to its attacking other animals in common with man...and that vast numbers of fish and hares in particular have been found dead.

Further in this article, geese, turkeys, fowls and crows were said to be affected by the disease. Even the roots of trees and 'herbage' were said to have withered away.

Elsewhere, in an article entitled "Desultory remarks on cholera", the views of the *Morning Herald* were quoted with approval by the *Mercury*. The *Herald* article argued that the poor may suffer disproportionately from cholera and that 'people in easy circumstances...have little or nothing to fear'. However, the poor had one advantage over the rich, 'they appear to have no apprehension of the disease':

However liable they might be to the cholera they...escape the infection of cholera phobia, a mental disease which is, perhaps nearly as painful, though not as fatal, as the disease itself.

The fear engendered by the disease, the confusion about its origins and even the degree to which it could be prevented was given poetic voice in the edition of 3 March:

THE CHOLERA.
BY MISS LANDON.

The wind, the wind, it comes from the sea,
 With a wailing sound it passed;
 'Tis soft and mild for a winter's wind,
 And yet there is death on the blast.

From the south to the north hath the Cholera come,
 He came like a despot king;
 He hath swept the earth with a conqueror's step,
 And the air with a spirit's wing.

We shut him out with a girdle of ships,
 And a guarded quarantine:
 What, ho! now which of your watchers slept?
 The Cholera's past your line."

There's a curse on the blessed sun and air:
 What will ye do for breath?
 For breath, which was once but a word for life,
 Is now but a word for death.

Wo for affection! when love must look
 On each face it loves with dread—
 Kindred and friends! when a few brief hours
 And the dearest may be dead!

The months pass on, and the circle spreads;
 And the time is drawing nigh,
 When each street may have a darken'd house,
 Or a coffin passing by.

By 13 April disturbing news from was published from Paris. Rioting had broken out in the streets, led by rag gatherers ('*chiffoniers*'). The *Mercury* reported that these were occurring because of:

an absurd idea among the mob that the magistrates, police, medical men and the government are engaged in an attempt to despatch as many of the poor as they could.³

Perhaps to allay public anxiety the French Prime Minister, Casimir Perrier, was reported to have visited a cholera hospital. Soon after the visit he became ill with 'fever'. On 13 April he was described in the

³ France. *Liverpool Mercury*, 13 April 1832.

Mercury as ‘convalescing’. On 25 May, the *Mercury* reported his funeral.⁴

The seriousness of the outbreak in Paris and the precise nature of the disease were questioned by 20 April:

Numerous cases...after a short period were found to be ordinary ailments and that the alarm of the capital magnified the violence of the epidemic.⁵

This latter idea, that the mental disposition of a person or a community could exacerbate the impact of the disease, is discussed by Hamlin in his biography of the disease, *Cholera – the Biography*,⁶ and emerges again and again in the local press coverage throughout the summer in Liverpool. There were frequent references to the harm done by raising fears about the condition and by the press exaggerating the situation. In fact the *Mercury* explicitly advanced the hypothesis that fear of the disease could deepen the crisis in an article on 29 June entitled “Effect Of Imagination In The Production Or Aggravation Of Disease”.

When the disease broke out in Dublin and Belfast an impression of encirclement was sharply conveyed in the columns of the paper. For the next four weeks the figures from Ireland were recounted, as was geographical information about the location of outbreaks. Its progress was remorseless. Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Bundoran, Galway, Limerick, Newry, Drogheda are all reported as experiencing outbreaks between 4 May and 25 May, by which time the total number of deaths in Ireland was given as 1,863.⁷

As well as the fearful mortality, the authorities in Ireland also had the problem of public order to attend to. On 27 April the *Mercury* reported that ‘outrages’ had been committed on medical men by mobs who ‘seem to have got it into their heads that the cholera patients are poisoned for the sake of getting their bodies for dissection’. Despite the tone of editorial incredulity in the report the *Mercury* emphasised that, for the duration of the emergency, the study of anatomy was to be suspended.⁸

⁴ France. *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 May 1832.

⁵ Cholera in Paris. *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 April 1832.

⁶ C. Hamlin, *Cholera – the Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

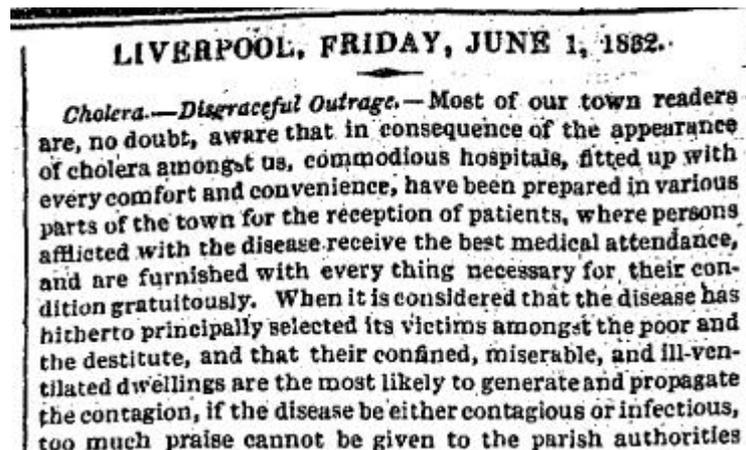
⁷ The Cholera. *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 May 1832.

⁸ Cholera. *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 April 1832.

The arrival of cholera in Liverpool

The *Liverpool Mercury* first covered the arrival of cholera in the city under the headline “Cholera – Disgraceful Outrage”.⁹ The story referred to the public order problems that occurred when doctors attempted to remove a patient to a local cholera hospital. The patient was a docker who had ‘all the symptoms of malignant cholera’. Crowds of up to one thousand people, chiefly composed of women and boys, hurled abuse at medical staff and followed them to the cholera hospital situated behind St James church. They then attacked the hospital and broke windows. The *Mercury* reported that this was because:

Amongst great numbers of the lower classes...an idea is prevalent that the cholera is a mere invention of the medical men to fill their own pockets, and that the hospitals are nothing more or less than receptacles for victims of experiment when living and subjects for the dissecting knife when dead.



In the same 1 June edition of the *Mercury* someone using the name ‘Desultor’ offered a contribution regarding the cause of the disease. He first located the disease as being spread by the atmosphere and theorised that this might be due to the presence in the air of ‘animaliculae’. These, he argued, abounded in greater than normal amounts during epidemics and “though they may evade detection with the naked eye” rendered the atmosphere poisonous. Desultor reported the results of an unattributed experiment in which a kite was flown high in the air over a cholera zone. The kite carried some butchers meat, some fish and some bread. After ninety minutes the kite was retrieved. The meat and especially the fish

⁹ Cholera – Disgraceful Outrage. *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 June 1832.

were in ‘a putrid state’, while on examination by microscope the bread was found to be ‘pervaded with legions of animaliculae’. He quoted unnamed reports that in both Moscow and Paris swarms of tiny insects were observed in the air during outbreaks of cholera. Desultor additionally put forward the view that during periods of high mortality from cholera, the mortality from other diseases was reduced. This meant that the overall mortality as observed in St Petersburg and Moscow remained the same. No evidence was given for this perception.

Under the heading “Caution to Drunkards” (8 June) it was reported that ‘excessive drunkenness’ can produce all of the symptoms of the disease. The case was reported of a man in Barter Street (close to modern day South Street in Liverpool 8) who had been drinking for three to four days. His symptoms so resembled cholera that doctors ordered the hospital ‘palanquin’ (litter). A crowd assembled who broke up the litter. The man, who did not wish to go to hospital, then escaped.¹⁰

The violent reception for doctors who attended victims was the subject of a letter on 8 June. In it there was the first of many threats made that the free treatment of the sick would cease if the insults and violence did not. This appeal was echoed by the newspaper itself on 15 June under the heading “The Cholera and the Medical Men”. In this article the newspaper pleaded with ‘our friends in the humbler walks of life’ to desist from attacks on doctors. It informed them that, so far from profiting from the outbreak, the doctors were working free of charge and that only two doctors employed at the Lime Street cholera hospital received any pay.¹¹

In the same 15 June edition of the paper an account was given of the death of a family in Upper Frederick Street and the subsequent death of some neighbours. Total figures were given of 181 cases for the city and 80 deaths.¹²

As dramatic as the above account of fatalities was, the 15 June edition of the *Mercury* added a new twist to the growing crisis. An emigrant passenger ship, “The Brutus”, was compelled to return to Liverpool from Cork. A letter was published from a man who signed himself ‘An Englishman who sympathises with all those who feel compelled to quit the island’. He reported that the ship had been obliged to return to port having lost eighty two persons ‘from the generally prevailing disease’.

¹⁰ Cholera – Caution to Drunkards. *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 June 1832.

¹¹ Cholera and the Medical men. *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 June 1832.

¹² Ibid.

THE CHOLERA AND THE MEDICAL MEN.

We understand that owing to the unjustifiable abuse to which the Liverpool professional gentlemen have been subjected, in the arduous and gratuitous discharge of their duties, caused by the infatuation of the poor persons who have been attacked with the cholera, they have been obliged to come to a determination to decline attending patients whose friends will not permit them to be removed to the Cholera Hospitals. We have done all in our power to abate the absurd prejudice which exists amongst the humbler classes against the medical men in the town, to whom they ascribe the worst, instead of the best motives. We can inform our friends in the humbler walks of life, for whom we have as much regard as for their superiors, that amongst all the professional men who have volunteered to serve them upon this emergency, only two in Liverpool receive any pay whatever. These two are the medical officers in

In the same edition the paper carried the headline “The Ship Brutus – Awful Mortality”. A large article painted a bleak picture of life on board. The ship left for Quebec with 300 passengers. On 25 May illness broke out. At first there was little disquiet. But as fatalities mounted ‘each passenger began to view his fellow with a look of fearful apprehension. Sympathy became absorbed in the fear of general danger’. The increasing total of deaths led to stupefaction among the passengers; ‘the doctors melancholy movements were viewed with almost the listless gaze of inanimation’.¹³ The paper reported that a ‘Lazaretto’ ship used to contain outbreaks of infectious disease had been summoned from its mooring place in the River Tyne.

An editorial comment on 15 June expressed outrage concerning the conditions of emigrant ships. This is a subject the paper returned to again and again during the outbreak and exercised the columns of the paper previous to the epidemic. In a recommendation which anticipated the discovery of the connection between cholera and water contamination the paper urged ‘We particularly recommend an examination of the water casks as the quality of that element may have had much to do with the production of the pestilence which has proved so fatal’.¹⁴

¹³ The Ship Brutus – Awful Mortality. *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 June 1832.

¹⁴ The Brutus Emigrant Ship. *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 June 1832.

SHIP BRUTUS.—AWFUL MORTALITY.
(From *Gore's Advertiser* of yesterday.)

With feelings of the deepest sorrow we have to convey to our readers intelligence of the most distressing nature, which will carry dismay to many, and regret to all, and further arrest the public mind to the consideration of a disease which is so fearful and desolating in its progress. After devastating the land, it has invaded the deep; and the sum of human suffering which we this day announce, shows how fell and destructive has been its short career on the waters.

The subject of the Brutus returned in the edition of 22 July. Under the headline “Accommodation for Emigrants – The American Law Much More Humane Than The English Law – The Ship Brutus” an editorial returned to a case argued by the newspaper against the Passengers Regulation Bill (1828). This legislation allowed, said the article, a maximum of four persons for every three tons of the ‘registered burden’. The article argued that this ‘actually permits the carrying of more passengers on board a ship than the number of slaves that were allowed to be carried...in the latter days of the traffic’.¹⁵

The latest mortality statistics from Ireland were carried in the 22 June edition. ‘The cholera has been, and is making frightful ravages in Limerick, principally, it appears in consequence of the poverty and destitution in which thousands of the population are plunged.’ Total figures from Ireland were 10,511 cases and 3,430 deaths.¹⁶

Under the heading “Cholera Hospital” the case was reported of a boy removed from a court in Hanover Street. The boy was in the ‘second stage’ of the disease and was ‘blue and cold’. He was removed to the hospital and made a full recovery.

The question of whether the disease was contagious or not was revisited on 29 June. This question was not entirely academic. Great public policy issues hung on this issue. Contagion mandated quarantine, and nothing was as inimical to trade as quarantine. For a city whose life was trade the question of contagion was of the utmost importance.

In the 29 June edition the gentleman owner of the property in Upper Frederick Street, which saw the tragic events reported on 15 June, expounded his views on the question of contagion. He offered his opinions which were based on perceptions he had gained whilst serving in India. He was a confirmed contagion denialist: ‘The monster enters a house here, and then another at a considerable distance, leaving the intermediate ones free’. He argued that quarantine in the city would serve

¹⁵ Accommodation for Emigrants – The American Law Much More Humane Than The English Law – The Ship Brutus. *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 June 1832.

¹⁶ The Cholera. *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 June 1832.

no purpose: ‘The monster rides in the air, alights on victims at his demoniacal will and defies all restrictions’. From his experience in India he offered the following advice:

- Food – avoid pork and veal and ‘the generality of vegetables’. Eat lamb, mutton, beef and poultry that is one day killed. ‘Let your food be fresh and of the best quality’.
- Clothing – he advocated flannel drawers and a flannel bandage wrapped around the belly.
- The mind – ‘The mind is to be kept serene, as nothing is more likely to bring on the complaint than fear or an agitated mind’.
- Treatment – Two tablespoons of castor oil. Twenty drops of laudanum. Half a glass of French brandy. Beaten together then ‘drank off’.
- The poor – ‘Medical men have a deal to contend with in attending the lower classes. It is not only a trial of skill but a trial of patience’.¹⁷

The same 29 June edition carried a rival recipe to treat the disease. This came in the form of a letter republished from the *India Gazette* under the heading “Alleged Cure For Cholera”. It was made up as follows: two grains (= 130 mg) opium, two grains Assafoetida (a foul smelling herb thought to be good for digestive problems), two grains of black pepper rolled into a pill and chewed.

Another confirmed contagion sceptic with an India background, one Captain Mundy, was even more outspoken on the question of contagion. Whilst in India he had seen cholera but had ‘never heard as much as the POSSIBILITY OF ITS CONTAGION CANVASSED’ (original emphasis). When back in Europe he observed that ‘The Faculty’ would ‘jump down the throat’ of anybody who did not accept the contagion orthodoxy.¹⁸

Even though the 29 June edition carried a lot of coverage of the disease there was some optimism that the incidence of the condition had peaked. Even so the deaths were mounting. Total cases in Liverpool were reported as being 754 with 227 deaths.

By 6 July the crisis aboard the *Brutus* was abating but other debates about the ship started. Most of the remaining passengers were allowed off the Lazaretto. The *Mercury* reported somewhat tactlessly: ‘The inhabitants of the New Ferry [a place on the Wirral coast] will

¹⁷ Alleged Cure for Cholera. *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 June 1832.

¹⁸ Cholera Not Contagious. *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 June 1832.

sincerely rejoice at their departure'. In another article under the headline "Was the Complaint aboard the Brutus the Cholera?" the paper questioned whether the cause of the mortality was entirely due to cholera. It reported that a Manchester family aboard the ship had recently suffered from typhus, a disease carried by ticks and fleas. A letter written to the *Mercury* from the Brutus said that ninety three had lost their lives because of cholera and smallpox. Of the passengers remaining on board eighteen had smallpox and four had cholera.

Was it of such importance that the precise cause of the fatalities were pinpointed? The *Mercury* argued that being clear as to the cause of the deaths might 'allay the panic which is now doing so much mischief in the country'.

On 6 July the figures from Ireland were given, without any further comment. Total cases 12,847, deaths 4,280.

From the middle of July a different note started to emerge in the discussion of the epidemic. The discussion started to engage questions about what the outbreak meant, its significance and implications. On 20 July, one correspondent signing himself 'A Mortal' complained that no attempt was made in the death statistics to distinguish between 'spasmodic or Asiatic cholera' and 'inflammation or English cholera'. He suggested that mortality figures should not be included in reports without the figures for the corresponding period in previous years. He argued that this approach might reduce 'the dread now felt' which was so damaging to business. Taking the cue of A Mortal, the paper presented a table of "Comparative Mortality in Liverpool during the months of May and June for five years". The average rate of mortality for the previous five years for May and June was 825; for May and June 1832 it was 887.

On 3 August an article appeared under the heading "Cholera Theories" which contained two theories, neither of which were given much support by the *Mercury*. One was merely an observation that domestic flies increased in number in the Summer months and may possibly be connected to the outbreak. The second 'theory' again rested on a simple observation. A *Lancet* article reported that a Dr Prout who had 'weighed the atmosphere' with a barometer three times daily had noticed that it always got heavier during an outbreak. The paper was sceptical of this observation and any possible inferences that might be drawn from it.

Under the heading "Prevention of Cholera", Dr Prout's observations of post mortem studies were treated more respectfully. Dr Prout reported that at post mortem 'the whole system was saturated with acid', and found the perspiration which 'in life is usually slightly acid, now to be very much so'. To prevent this acidosis he recommended as a preventive measure the consumption of a blend of carbonate of soda and

ginger. Dr Prout made it clear that he had no financial interest in the advice being followed. This declaration was not uncommon in doctors advocating lines of treatment.

Mortality figures for 3 August were 3,040 cases and 848 deaths. The only mention of cholera on 17 August was the censure of a surgeon, Mr Grierson, who was convicted under the Cholera Act for neglecting to report several of his cases to the local board. His defence was that he thought that other doctors had previously reported the cases and that he wished to avoid overreporting.

The question of whether or not cholera was contagious was revisited in an article marked “The Cholera and the Contagionists” on 24 August. The article asked how it could be that doctors and nurses working with cholera patients got the disease so rarely themselves. The article reported a case from Russia where villagers quarantined after an outbreak seized the doctors who had diagnosed the ‘contagion’, tied them to corpses and threw them into a pit with other bodies. They were rescued after two days and did not become infected.

By the beginning of September the tone of the reports in the *Mercury* became more optimistic and self congratulatory. On 14 September, the paper praised the fortitude of the city and announced that the Board of Health would meet weekly instead of daily. Total figures, the last ones given, were 4,977 cases and 1,023 deaths.

In the same issue the paper ran a story entitled “Cholera, the Destroyer of Mad Dogs”, saying that during the epidemic there had not been one case of ‘hydrophobia’ (presumably rabies) reported in the city. Things were not so optimistic elsewhere. There was a report about a cholera outbreak in Sligo.

On 28 September the closure of the Cholera Hospital was reported.