ELIZA REID
27 June 1841 to 16 September 1854

Eliza Reid was the thirteen year old daughter of William Reid, a tobacconist in Golden Square, St James. She died of cholera on 16 September 1854.

William Reid was the great, great, great, grandfather of the author, Richard Streeter BA, MSc, FCIWEM, CEnv

Acknowledgements

Peter Vinten-Johansen PhD, Associate Professor of History at Michigan State University for his critical review, research and guidance; the staff of the John Snow Society for their assistance and others whose text may have been included in this note and is not specifically referenced. Any mistakes and inaccuracies that may remain are the author’s.

Preface

The outbreak of cholera in Broad Street, St James, Westminster, London, in 1854 was one of the most severe to have affected any part of the country. Dr John Snow the physician who eventually linked the outbreak to contaminated water, later called it “the most terrible outbreak of cholera which ever occurred in this kingdom” and held that “the mortality in this limited area probably equals any that was ever caused in this country, even by the plague.”

Much has been written about the science relating to this outbreak and the general living conditions of the community in this part of London, but little is known about the lives of the individuals lost in this epidemic. It was, after all, these lives which collectively made possible Dr John Snow’s statistical

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clear the heavy odour that hung in the air from the human and animal wastes from the surrounding workshops and abattoirs. Even the newly built sewer gave off a new stench from the open ventilating grills. It was the London of Charles Dickens, one of the most densely populated and busy parts of the city. Despite these extremely crowded conditions, the overwhelming majority of the citizens in this neighbourhood were people of good character, employed on fair wages.

At the centre of this district known as Golden Square ran Silver Street (now Beak Street), one of the wider thoroughfares with its coffee houses, confectioners, bakers and other trades. At 2 Silver Street stood a tobacconist shop in a tall, early eighteenth-century, Georgian terraced house. Large sash windows flooded the south-facing rooms on the three floors above the shop with light. To the left of the main front door, another doorway opened onto a dark passageway to the back of the house and rear courtyard. This door had to be kept firmly locked each night to stop people passing through the district, from sheltering in the covered walkway and sleeping on the back staircase. The shop was set between two other businesses, a wine and brandy merchant to the left and on the other side, a stationer’s shop.

This was the home of Eliza Reid, born in St. James, Westminster on 27 June 1841 and baptised at the St. James church on Piccadilly the following month. She was the youngest child of William Reid, the proprietor of the tobacconist shop, and

Eliza Reid (1841–54)

“History is . . . what’s left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it—a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth . . . It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It is no more than the best we can do, and often it falls short of that”.

Hilary Mantel, “The Day is for the Living.”

The Reith Lectures, 13 June 2017

St James, Westminster, London, 31 August 1854. For most of August the weather had been pleasantly warm and dry, but by now the hot, still days and the lack of rain made the atmosphere suffocating. The short, narrow streets and courts, irregular and intricate in their layout, prevented any movement of air through the district and apart from St James’ and Golden Squares, part of the Church Yard and the Workhouse Green, almost every part of the Parish was either covered by buildings or completely paved, adding to the build up of heat. As August wore on, the temperature climbed steadily to thirty degrees centigrade in the shade and forty-six degrees in the sun. What little rain had fallen, just a few millimetres over the previous weeks, had done little to clean the streets and help

3 After the Great Fire of London in 1666, an act of parliament was passed to ensure new homes were made from fire resistant materials, such as bricks and slate. See “An Act for rebuilding the City of London” (1667), Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1666/18&19C2n14.
per James Street, a location referred to in Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* where Newman Noggs slept rough: “If ever you want a [free] shelter in London . . . I live at the sign of the Crown. . . at the corner of Silver Street and James Street, with a bar door both ways. You can come at night.”

Having drawn water from the cistern in the basement yard, Eliza would have washed and dressed to get ready for school that day. The household’s piped water was supplied by the Grand Junction Water Company which drew its supply from the tidal River Thames at Kew. Grand Junction water underwent minimal purification via settling tanks and filtration through wire meshes. Household supply was limited to a single pipe to a cistern in the basement yard. Water dribbled from the pipe only for thirty minutes to an hour, six days a week—just long enough to fill the cistern—but not at all on Sundays. These cisterns were rarely cleaned, which only added to the pollution, though they did act as secondary settling tanks, for fine river silt which accumulated at the bottom of the tank.

The smell and colour of the water in the cistern made it self-evidently unfit for human consumption, unless it was boiled for cooking and making tea. Piped water was generally used for washing, however.

The household shared one watercloset (typical for the area). It was manually flushed with water, carried indoors from the cistern, into a cesspool that was rarely emptied. Overflow from the cesspool passed through brick drains to the neighboring house, 1 Silver Street, the drainage from which entered a sewer completed earlier in the year. Despite this sanitary

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5 Johan Hulstrum was born in Copenhagen in 1822 and came to England after the first Schleswig war, fought in southern Denmark (1848-51). He would later be employed as an engineer in a firm of cutlers at 29 Great Windmill Street, London.

6 “William Reid,” 1851 Census return for 2 Silver Street, St James, Westminster, Middlesex. Registration District, St James Westminster; subregistration district, Golden Square, Ed 07. Public Record Office, HO107; Piece: 1485; Folio: 287; Page: 2; GSU roll: 87810, www.ancestry.co.uk.

7 First floors of houses in this district were generally less densely occupied than second floors; see Cholera Inquiry Committee (CIC), *Report on the Cholera Outbreak in the Parish of St. James, Westminster, during the Autumn of 1854* (London: Churchill, July 1855), 53.

8 Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), chapter 7, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/967/967-h/967-h.htm#link2HCH0004.


improvement, residents of 2 Silver Street complained that there were “very bad smells since [construction of the] new sewer,” probably from nearby sewer grates which ventilated to the open air.\(^\text{12}\)

For fresh drinking water, Eliza and others in the family would take a jug or bucket to one of the many long handled, public pumps in the surrounding streets. The nearest pump to her home was that in Broad Street, which was considered by many to provide the freshest water in the district. It was so sweet that a widow in Hampstead West End, a former resident of Broad Street, continued to have a large bottle of the water sent to her daily by cart. But Ann Boucher, the widow residing at 2 Silver Street, favoured water from the pump in Bridle Lane, near the intersection with Brewer Street.\(^\text{13}\)

Now ready for school, Eliza Reid set out down the stairs to the private door at the back of the shop which opened onto a large cast iron fireplace set across the opposite corner of the room. Stepping across the rich brown parlour, Eliza would have passed the glass fronted cupboards displaying ornate jars of tobacco, decorated with motifs in deep reds, black and gold, and shelves filled with humidors, pipes and cigars. On the counter, two-foot high wooden statues advertised the different brands of tobacco and snuff which were for sale—the tartan-kilted ‘Highlander’ for the Scottish snuff, and the ‘Blackamoor’, a beaded and grass skirted ebony black figure, for the Caribbean tobacco.\(^\text{14}\)

Taking in the familiar heady aroma that filled the room, Eliza left her father’s shop. It was exactly one hundred paces from the tobacco shop to the Broad Street pump—past the stationers’ to the corner of Silver and Cambridge Streets, north on Cambridge (now Lexington) Street, then left into Broad Street (now Broadwick) and a few paces to the pump. From there, it was a short walk to Dufour’s Place School. The school was one of a number of National Schools which provided teaching approved by the Church of England.\(^\text{15}\)

On this stiflingly hot August day, Eliza, like other children from the school, may well have stopped on her way home to quench her thirst at the Broad Street pump.\(^\text{16}\) Or perhaps

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\(^{12}\) “House-to-house visitation, Silver Street” (11 September 1854), in General Board of Health, Medical Council, Appendix to the Report of the Committee for Scientific Inquiries (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1855), 335 (“Watercloset; drains into No. 1; very bad smells since new sewer”); http://johnsnow.matrix.msu.edu/broadstpump/documents/775-2/; Metropolitan Commission of Sewers, Edmund Cooper’s “Report . . . into the state of drainage” (22 September 1854), 3 (“number of houses inspected has been 207, in which are situate 218 waterclosets”); “Schedule,” in Ibid., 10 (2 Silver Street, “Brick drains in good order; no knowledge of cesspool being destroyed”).

\(^{13}\) Ibid.; for the Hampstead widow, see Whitehead, in CIC, Report, 139.

\(^{14}\) Interior shop description based on the “Museum of London’s General View of a Victorian Tobacconist”; https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=Based+on+the+Museum+of+London%E2%80%99s+General+View+of+a+Victorian+Tobacconist&tbm=isch&source=hp&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihsdzd6MjjAhVil3KWKe_sCElQTAReBAgEAE&biw=1366&bih=625#imgrc=cccZv9AY1X1iuM.

\(^{15}\) As the nearest school to Eliza Reid’s home, Dufour’s Place School is probably the one she attended. It was built in 1833 and survived until 1923. See City of Westminster Archives, Historical Notes on Westminster Schools, 35.

\(^{16}\) “A girl, aged 5 years, died at 42, Ham Yard, on the 8th of September, having been attacked with Cholera on the September the 2nd. Deceased went to
she visited one of the various little shops nearby and bought a refreshing sherbet drink, made using Broad Street pump-water.17 Sometime after returning home that day, Eliza started to feel unwell. This feeling soon gave way to dizziness, faintness, and a feeling of sinking, and by the following morning she would be suffering from extreme diarrhoea, vomiting and a rapid heartbeat.18 Eliza had cholera. She quickly entered a state of collapse, with violent diarrhoea known as ‘rice water’ discharges made up from the lining of the intestines. By this time the bed linen was wetted by the cholera evacuations, devoid of the usual colour and odour. Many cholera victims also suffered in agony from cramps of the legs, feet and muscles of the abdomen. On Sunday, 3 September, after three days of this wretched condition, Eliza was brought down even further by a fever and extreme thirst; she lay limply on her bed on the first floor. The cholera epidemic overwhelming the district had already claimed another resident of 2 Silver Street. Ann Bouscer, the tenant also living on the first floor, died just six hours after her symptoms began on Saturday, 2 September.19

For the next eight days, Eliza Reid’s parents did their best to nurse her, not knowing how she had caught the disease. Some locals ascribed the cause to a miasma generated in the hot, stale summer air. Others wondered if it was divine intervention, sewer smells, or odours from bones in an ancient plague pit (a nearby mass burial ground used during the seventeenth-century bubonic plague), unearthed during sewer construction. In search of medical advice, William and Maria might have remembered the handbills distributed around the parish the previous autumn. These had offered advice during the preceding metropolitan outbreak on how to look after those showing symptoms of cholera. In the Soho area, five ‘Medical Gentlemen’ had offered their services, the nearest being a surgeon, Mr. Hounsley, of 28 Broad Street.20 Though the severity of the cholera epidemic would only become clear to William and Maria Reid some weeks later, they would have been aware of many of the five hundred fatal attacks which took place within two hundred and fifty metres of their house in the ten days since the outbreak began on 31 August.

On Monday 11 September, Dr. Donald Fraser and the barrister, John Ludlow, visited William and Maria Reid’s house. Fraser and Ludlow were two of the inspectors appointed five days earlier by the General Board of Health to undertake investigations of the sanitary state of the streets most severely visited by cholera during the outbreak in a search for clues as to the cause of the epidemic. The inspectors completed a table for most houses in each street, recording details about water supply, “necessaries” (waterclosets and privies), household ventilation, the location of their dustbins, total number of inhabitants and the occupations of the proprietors, cases of cholera and diarrhea, and general observations.21 The inspectors listed three cases of cholera, but no diarrhea, among the twelve inhabitants of the Reid’s house the day they visited: One death, the widow (Ann Bouscer) on the first floor; and two ongoing cholera cases, one of which must have been Eliza. In all, the inspectors concluded that the general state of the house was

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17 Ibid., 104.
19 General Register Office, Weekly Return of Births and Deaths in London 15 (9 September 1854), 341.
21 “House-to-house visitation, Silver Street” (11 September 1854), in General Board of Health, Medical Council, Appendix to the Report of the Committee for Scientific Inquiries, 335.
Eliza Reid's death

("Certified copy of an entry of death given at the General Register Office")

Since Eliza Reid died on 16 September after suffering cholera for three days, followed by a consecutive fever lasting fourteen days (which may or may not have been a continuation of cholera), earliest cholera symptoms appeared on 31 August.

“good” and that the inhabitants had not experienced an increase in illness since construction of the sewer, despite having “seen bones taken away, quite black and very offensive.”

Eliza Reid could perhaps have been taken to the nearby Middlesex Hospital, where Florence Nightingale was helping during the epidemic. Certainly the Middlesex was known for maintaining high standards of cleanliness and ventilation, but it would have been dreadful for their young daughter to be surrounded by so much suffering, screaming, moaning, and constant deaths on wards that held a dozen or more patients at a time—probably scores during the worst of the outbreak.

By Friday, 15 September, Eliza’s extreme dehydration caused her body to turn cold and her skin dry, bluish and wrinkled, indicating the draining away of bodily fluids. She struggled on a little longer, but by the following day all life was gone and she finally passed away with her elder sister, Mary Ann, at her bedside. Eliza had fought this horrific disease for seventeen days after showing the first symptoms of cholera. A medical man came to the house and certified her death, listing the cause as “cholera three days, consecutive fever fourteen days.” On 18 September 1854, Mary Ann Reid informed the subdistrict registrar for Golden Square of her sister’s death and handed him the medical certificate.22

Inner London’s graveyards were now full to overflowing and no longer accepting further burials.23 So Eliza was finally laid to rest on 19 September at the Brompton Cemetery in an extra

22 “Golden Square.—At 2 Silver-street, on 16th September, a daughter,

23 London’s population had more than doubled since 1800 (from 1 to 2.3 million) and by the 1850s inner London graveyards were overfull. This resulted in a series of laws known as the Burials Acts prohibiting the majority (with exceptions including royalty) of further burials. As a result, Eliza Reid was buried further afield, some 3.5 miles distant, in Brompton cemetery (along with Highgate and others, one of the ‘Magnificent Seven’ cemeteries), opened in June 1840 and now within the limits of modern London. It is the only cemetery owned by the Crown and managed by the Royal Parks on behalf of the nation. See “The Royal Parks, About Brompton Cemetery,” www.royalparks.org.uk/parks/brompton-cemetery/about-brompton-cemetery.
deep, twelve-foot, private grave, next to her parents. John Snow would be buried in the same cemetery, just four years later.

Dr Snow, a local physician, considered the cholera outbreak near Golden Square the most intense ever to have affected England. He undertook investigations into the cause of the epidemic as an act of public service. His work led him to conclude that the source of the outbreak was contamination of the Broad Street pump. On the evening of Thursday 7 September, he met with the St James, Westminster Sanitary Committee and recommended the removal of the pump handle. Even though the number of fatalities had already begun to decline, the committee accepted his recommendation, whether or not they agreed with his theory, which was derided by many of his contemporaries. The pump handle was removed the following day. The number of cases of cholera continued to fall, consistent with Snow’s theory that cholera was primarily spread by contaminated water.

At a meeting of the London Epidemiological Society on 4 December 1854, Dr. Snow exhibited a copy of what was to become his famous map depicting the local cholera outbreak. This map contained 618 deaths from cholera, registered in the six weeks from 19 August to 30 September 1854, marked by black lines at the approximate location of the houses in which deaths or fatal attacks had occurred. Eliza Reid, the thirteen year-old daughter of a tobacconist who fought this disease for seventeen days, is one of the two lines (near the center of the circle) west of the intersection of Cambridge and Silver Streets. She died not knowing the contribution her death, along with those others who sadly died in this epidemic, made to Snow’s map which was to become the foundation of the science of epidemiology and future, worldwide improvements to public health.

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24 For burial record, see the Royal Parks Database, record 9416, https://portal.royalparks.org.uk/LANSA/TRP/TRPw0005.html.