

Document 30-I (Online Companion)

St. James, Westminster Parish: Records of this local authority's responses to the cholera epidemics of 1853–54¹

In the summer of 1986, Howard Brody, MD (then in the Department of Family Practice, Michigan State University) and I (PVJ) reviewed parish records housed at a library in Marylebone, London. We transcribed some material from the vestry records for use in a John Snow Day exercise for students in an exchange program we were co-teaching at St. Bartholomew's Medical School and, subsequently, as part of a course pack for a history workshop course at Michigan State. In 2001, I made several visits to the City of Westminster Archives Centre, to which the records had been transferred in the meantime, during research for the John Snow biography.

Thereafter, the late David Zuck (retired anaesthesiologist but active historian of medicine), who lived in North London, searched the parish records during joint research and writing projects with me. We shared our findings with Marshall Hayes (Cornell University) for use in a classroom re-inactment of Snow's meeting with the parish Sanitary Committee on 7 September 1854 when the decision was made to remove the handle of the Broad Street pump. Then Marshall made a trip of his own to the Archives Centre and found additional material.

Collections of the City of Westminster Archives Centre may be searched online at <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/search-archives>.

D 1777 / 865²: "Vestry Minute Book," New Series, vol. 6 (4 December 1851 to 1 November 1855)

- [2 Nov 1854 meeting:] Dr. **Lankester** [a member] gave notice of the following motion for the next Vestry, viz. That a committee of this Vestry be appointed for [390/391] the purpose of investigating the causes arising out of the present sanitary condition of the Parish of the late outbreak of cholera in the Districts of Golden Square and Berwick Street.

- [23 Nov 1854 meeting:] Pursuant to Notice given at the last Vestry. It was moved by Dr. Lankester and seconded by Mr. Brown that a committee be appointed for the purpose of investigating the causes, arising out of the present sanitary condition of the parish, of the late outbreak of cholera in the Districts of Golden Square and Berwick Street.—

And the subject having been discussed, the Motion was put and

Edwin Lankester: Physician, 22 Old Burlington Road.

¹ City of Westminster Archive Centre, United Parish Records/D—St. James, Piccadilly.

² **D xxxx** = file; **xxx(x)** = the microfilm box #.

agreed to.—.

Also resolved that the following gentlemen be the committee with power to add to their number from the parishioners generally, to appoint a Secretary, and to call for books, papers, and persons.”

[Then follows a list of initial committee:

Dr. Lankester

Mr. [Joseph] Brown

Mr. [William] Geesin

Mr. [Thomas] Watkins

Mr. **Bidgood**

Mr. Donald **Nicoll**

Mr. [Charles] Harrison, and the

Churchwardens ([T. H.] Rice and [F.] Crane)] [393]

• [14 December 1854 meeting:] A communication having been read from the Governors and Directors of the Poor respecting the appointment by Vestry on the 23rd ulto [November] of a committee of enquiry into the causes of the late cholera outbreak, it was moved by Mr. Smith seconded by Mr. Pugh and after some discussion resolved that the same be entered into the minutes: “It was unanimously resolved . . . [to] convey to Vestry their regret that such a proceeding should have been adopted, not only by reason of the expense that it is likely to entail upon the year’s Poor Rate, already wholly unequal to meet the ordinary expenditure, but in a greater degree on account of the mischievous effects which a renewed investigation of the [399/400] subject so recently made by the Government officers is, in the opinion of this Board, and calculated to inflict on the Householders and Inhabitants of the locality now but slowly recovering from the serious depression of their Trade and employment and by whom the enquiry instituted by Vestry is consequently viewed with feelings of dissatisfaction and alarm.”

Whereupon, it was moved by Mr. Smith and seconded by Mr. Atkins that the resolution of the Governors of the Poor be transmitted to the committee appointed by the Vestry, and that the said committee be requested to discontinue their enquiry.

To which an amendment was Moved by Mr. Chiswick [?], and seconded by Mr. Lambert that the communication from the Poor Board relating to the committee appointed to inquire into the causes of the late epidemic be referred to that committee.—

And after considerable discussion the amendment being put was Negatived.—And the original Motion being then put was also Negatived. [400]

• [9 August 1855 meeting: Lankester] brought up a report thereof at considerable [479/480] length and read a portion as well as stated the general character and contents of the same.— ...

[Watkins and Downey moved to adopt the report.] And after some discussion, the question being put and the number for and against, found to be equal, the Chairman [Geesin] gave the casting vote in favor thereof.

[The CIC was then requested to arrange for the printing of 500 copies] “for the use of the members of the several parochial and for other public purposes. [480]

• [30 August 1855 meeting:] [Motion to reconsider the portion of the minutes from the last meeting dealing with the CIC Report. Discussion, but motion rejected, and minutes approved.

Letter from Mr. York, Secretary to the Special Enquiry Committee, that £20 was inadequate for printing, requesting approval of an additional £50. Vestry approved and directed that] Governors and Directors of the Poor be requested and authorized to pay the sum out of the Poor Rate. [481-82]

D 1810 / 876: “Rough Minutes of Vestry” (5 December 1830 to 24 January 1856)

• [Minutes for meeting of 11 August 1854. No mention of cholera.]

• [Minutes of meetings held on 14 and 21 September 1854, but which PVJ could not find in the clean copy, D 1777. No mention of cholera at either meeting.]

• [Minutes for meeting of 2 November 1854.]

D 1828 / 881: “Vestry Clerk’s Letter Book” (9 March 1852 to 8 May 1856)³

• [There are several letters written during August and September 1854, appointing doctors and medical students to visit cholera patients, and one arranging for the Royal Free Hospital to admit such patients.

• On 12 August 1854, George Buzzard wrote letters to Mr. James (49 Princes Street), Mr. Wilson (16 Great Ryder Street) and Mr. Davies (25 Brewer Street), asking them to] dispense medicines and attend upon poor

³ David Zuck contributed the first entry, Marshall Hall the next two.

Henry Bidgood: Lace-trimming shopkeeper, 6 Vigo Street.

Nicoll: Nicoll is not among the members listed in the committee’s final report; see Document 30-IV (Online Companion), iii.

persons resident in the parish affected with diarrhoea and to register the cases in the same manner [as they had in 1853. It appears that James and Davies replied in the affirmative by the due date, 24 August.

For this work, Buzzard originally proposed that the doctors would be remunerated at a rate of £2.2.0 per week. In follow-up correspondence this fee was increased by the Parish to £3.3.0 per week.]

- [On 12 August 1854, the General Board of Health offered all local authorities assistance if they had a visitation of epidemic cholera. George Buzzard responded on 24 August, writing that] the Governors and Directors, as a Sanitary Board are adopting, and will continue to adopt, all necessary measures within this parish for preventing the spread of disease and that in the event of any emergency arising with which they are unable to deal, they will not fail to avail themselves of this offer of assistance and advice—contained in your communication.

D 1907 / 902: “Agendas, Board of Commissioners for Paving and Improving the Parish (1 November 1848 to 17 December 1856)⁴

[The Commissioners met fortnightly on Wednesdays, in the St. James Vestry room. The agenda started routinely with three items: Appointment of a chairman (usually the same person), reading and signing of minutes of last meeting, and enquiring whether any persons (usually contractors) were waiting to be heard. The meeting always finished with the signing of checks for services rendered.

- No meetings between 30 Aug and 20 September 1854.
- 11 October 1854. Read resolution of the Poor Board thanking the Surveyor and Inspector for their services during the cholera outbreak.
- 22 November 1854. Read letter from Dr. Lankester, complaining of the unsatisfactory state of pump water in the parish.
- 6 December 1854. Read Dr. Lankester’s report upon the “Well Water of the District.”
- 20 June 1855 meeting: Mr. French’s letter to the Board of Governors and Directors of the Poor read into the record; see D 2152.]

⁴ David Zuck contributed the entries for this record.

D 1941 / 916: “Rough Minutes, Commissioners for Paving (12 May 1852 to 8 November 1854)⁵

- [On 20 September 1854 it was resolved] That the Inspector be allowed a fortnight’s leave of absence to renovate his health after his arduous duties consequent upon the severe visitation of the Cholera.

- On 27 September 1854 it was resolved] That a delegation wait upon the Prime Minister as to the state of the District of St James with reference to the late awful visitation of the Cholera, and that the Commissioners present form a Committee to make the necessary arrangements for the Deputation.

- [On 11 October 1854 it was resolved] that the wells of the district affected by Cholera be examined as to their cleanly condition before the pump is opened for public use. That an analysis of the water therefrom be effected by a practical chemist. [The motion of Mr. Clark and Mr. Abbott that a chemical analysis be obtained from Dr Letheby was lost by 3 votes to 8, and the motion of Mr. Watkins and Mr. Christmas that Dr. Lankester be engaged was carried by 8 to 3.]

- [On December 6 1854, the report of Dr. Lankester upon the well water of the district having been read, and the same having been considered, it was moved that 1000 copies of such report be printed together with Everett’s analysis of the water from the Piccadilly artesian well.]

D 1942 / 916: “Rough Minutes, Commissioners for Paving (? to Dec 1856)

- 26 September 1855, by a vote of 7 in favor, 2 opposed, it was decided to reopen for public use the pump in Broad Street that was closed for repairs on 15 August 1855.

D 1947 / 917: “Ledger, Commissioners for Paving (1836 to 1855)⁶

- 11 October 1854 Mr. Fowler Pump Maker (paid) £74-1-8
- 26 December Dr. Lankester Analysing of Water £15-15-0
- 28 January 1855 Mr. Fowler Pump Maker £26-18-6
- 19 October 1855 Mr. Fowler £44-8-3

⁵ David Zuck contributed the entries for this record.

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D 1960 / 920: “Committee of General Purposes (15 September 1851 to 12 November 1855)⁷

- [On 28 February 1853, the committee consulted Mr. Fowler, pump maker, who offered a maintenance contract for street pumps in the parish. It is evident that the Committee’s main concern was that the pump water was needed for street cleaning, domestic use coming second.]

- [No meeting is recorded between Aug 14 and Oct 16 1854, and no reference was found to cholera or, specifically, to the Broad Street pump.]

D 2151/2119: “Minutes of the Governors and Directors of the Poor,” vol. 37 (22 April 1853 to 19 October 1854)

- [3 October 1853, first report of Sanitary Committee appointed by the Board on 8 April 1853], with a view to the prevention or mitigation of cholera and other diseases in this parish.] [151] [Committee established to comply with an order from the General Board of Health for putting into force the provisions of the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Act. Committee recommended the temporary appointment of a Sanitary Inspector to visit] houses in the crowded portions of the parish enquiring into all nuisances and matters therein prejudicial to health. [Recommendation adopted. Members of the special Sanitary Committee, to meet at the Workhouse, were: Peter Duff (chairman); David North; William A. Fleming; Thomas Stephens; Benjamin Cox; Robert Drake; Frederick Sasse. [152]

- [At the 8 August 1854 meeting,] several poor persons being chiefly widows with young families were ordered weekly relief in money or in kind for limited periods (upon a satisfactory report being made of their characters and necessities) to prevent their becoming wholly chargeable to the parish

Mr. French, Medical Officer, reported that he had been called upon last evening to attend to a poor woman in Marshall Street whose complaint he found to be that of Asiatic cholera, and no arrangements having yet been made in the Workhouse for such cases, he had deemed it advisable to have the patient at once removed to Middlesex Hospital where he understood accommodation had been made there for reception—Ordered that the

⁷ David Zuck contributed the entries for this record.

Wards over the chapel be forthwith fitted up for cholera cases, and that the Master be instructed to appoint Nurses for the same, and to carry out the like arrangements made on the last visitation of the disease.⁸

- [11 August 1854 meeting. Attending: Mr. Crane (Church Warden and chairman); Pugh; Geesin; Smith; Drake; Cox; Abbott; Gordon; Stephens; Shipway; Waggett; Downes; Rice (Church Warden); Phillips (Overseer); Peter Duff (who wrote these minutes). Various matters discussed. Then,] The Clerk having reported that he had some communications to make on the subject of an apprehended visitation of Asiatic cholera, — It was Moved by Mr. Smith Seconded by Mr. Pugh and Resolved that this Board do at the termination of the present business form itself into a general Sanitary Committee with power to make such arrangements as they may deem necessary for future meetings, keeping a separate Minute Book of their proceedings, and that the attendance of five Members at any Meeting be held sufficient for the transaction of business. [455]

- [Meeting in the Vestry Room at 6 p.m. on Friday 25 August 1854. The Clerk reported that four cases of cholera had terminated fatally at 18 Marshall Street, one of the houses that belonged to the parish.]⁹

- [Tuesday 5 September 1854, a committee meeting at the Workhouse at 10:00 a.m. All inmates admitted since last meeting were paraded before the Board, unless too ill to appear, and asked to explain why they should remain.] [467]

- [8 September 1854, a full Board meeting at 6:00 p.m., held in the Vestry rooms. Attending: Misters Rice (Church Warden and vice-chairman); Pugh; Geesin; Smith; Duff; Cox; Stephens; Waggett; Fleming; Matthews; Miles (Overseer); Phillips (Overseer). Minutes of last full Board meeting and of the Workhouse committee meeting from the 5th read and confirmed. Report on [smallpox] vaccinations performed by parish vaccinators in last fortnight. Workhouse report and outdoor relief report read. Fortnightly report of medical officer at St. James’ Infirmary, J. G. French, which included a list of the twenty-two inmates inmates who had died in the past fortnight, including sixteen from cholera and several from “natural decay.” [469–75] No mention of Snow having met with the Sanitary Committee the previous evening.]

⁸ Marshall Hall contributed this entry.

⁹ David Zuck contributed this entry.

- [22 September 1854 committee meeting. Eleven deaths from cholera at the Workhouse.]

D 2152 / 2120: “Minutes of the Governors and Directors of the Poor,“ vol. 38 (20 October 1854 to 21 April 1856)

- [Friday 27 October 1854 meeting at 10:00 a.m. in the Vestry. Resolved to request permission to form a local Committee of Health and Sanitary Board, which shall elect a paid Secretary and Clerk, a Medical Advisor, and levy a rate, subject to confirmation of the Vestry, and all books, papers relating to Sanitary Business be transferred into the custody of the new Board, so that communication can be made without loss of time, and enable the Board to act with efficiency and purpose.¹⁰

- [1 December 1854. Full meeting of Board. Unanimous opposition to the Vestry’s decision to set up a Cholera Inquiry Committee. Sent a donation of £50 to the Middlesex Hospital in appreciation of help provided gratis during the cholera outbreak.] [67].

- [23 February 1855 voted gratuity of 10 guineas to the Workhouse Master for his services during the period of the last cholera.]

- [15 June 1855, at 10:00 in the Vestry]: A special report from Mr. French was . . . read, as follows:— “The Medical Officer desires to call attention to the fact that, some cases of diarrhea have [228/229] occurred sufficiently frequent, so to be regarded as somewhat epidemic.

“The Medical Officer thinks that it is very desirable that the parishioners should be informed that there is some danger in the use of water supplied by surface drainages, as by the pumps, in various parts of the parish. This objection applied with less force to the artesian well in Piccadilly, but the other pumps are liable to the percolation of deleterious matter. It is from this source, there is the strongest reason to believe, that the serious outbreak of cholera in a portion of the parish during the last autumn, was owing.—

“P.S. The most effective way of conveying this information is by closing the pumps —JGF—”

Resolved that a copy of French’s report be sent to the Commissioners for Paving, as the Board possessing control over the Street Pumps, and to

look into it.

- [3 April 1856, meeting of full Bd at Vestry. Report from Mr. York, Secretary of the Cholera Inquiry Committee that total costs of conducting the inquiry and publishing report was £ 170, 12, 7, covering the period November 1854 to October 1855. Approved that this amount should be paid from the Poor Fund, with a request that Churchill send the Poor Fund any moneys received from sales.] [463-64]

¹⁰ I have been unable to find any records for a committee with this name. The closest is D2032, the Committee of Health and Sanitary Improvement Measures, but it contained no records kept by the Sanitary Committee established during the cholera outbreak—which noone to my knowledge has been able to locate, including the archivists at the City of Westminster Archive Centre.