

Document 24–III (Online Companion)

Metropolitan Commission of Sewers Chairman Jebb’s commentary on the Cooper report¹

A special court of this Commission was held yesterday at the Court House, 1 Greek Street, Soho. Mr. R. **Jebb** (chairman), Mr. T. Hawes, and Mr. J. **Hawkshaw**, were the Commissioners present....

The secretary (Mr. **Woolrych**) read [Edmund Cooper’s] “Report on an enquiry and examination into the state of the drainage of the houses situate in that part of the parish of St. James’, Westminster, in which deaths have occurred from cholera to so great an extent.” ...

[Afterwards,] the chairman said that no sooner did the outbreak to which the report referred occur than the commissioners put their officers in communication with the parochial authorities. After a good deal of discussion, Mr. Cooper, the engineer of the district, with his assistants, examined minutely the whole state of the district to ascertain the real cause of the fearful outbreak of the cholera in that locality. The total number of deaths, it appeared, was 347. Mr. Cooper had prepared a plan which accompanied his report, and on the plan a distinguishing mark was affixed showing the houses in which death had occurred.... The district, the scene of this calamity was about a quarter of a mile in diameter.

The plague field, of which they had heard so much, was almost beyond the district itself. At least, it was at one corner of it The area of that particular spot was a circle of about 160 feet in diameter. There had been three deaths within the limits of that circle, but it appeared that the visitation of the cholera was less severe on the supposed site of the plague field than on any part of that district. It was very important that Mr. Cooper’s report should be made as extensively public as possible. It detailed nothing but facts, showing what was the probable cause of the severity with which the cholera had prevailed in this particular district. The outbreak was, in the first instance, attributed to the opening of the plague pit. But it should be remembered that the bodies were thrown into that pit ... at least 190 years ago. The new works at that spot were commenced in September 1853, when the ground which formed the supposed plague field was first opened. Those works were finished in February, and the ground had been closed ever since. The workmen employed in opening the ground had no idea that it was the locality of the plague pit, and as Mr. Bazalgette had stated in his report,

¹ “Metropolitan Commission of Sewers,” *Times* (27 September 1854): 12, e–f.

² Document 24–II in the book; see also Metropolitan Commission of Sewers [1854–09 – 22]—Edmund Cooper, ..., in References (Online Companion).

Richard Jebb: A barrister.

John Hawkshaw: A civil engineer and commissioner.

H. William Woolrych: A barrister.

none of them were in the least affected.

However, it was important to examine all the surrounding circumstances and [the chairman] thought that an impartial perusal of the report and a careful inspection of the plan would show that the disease was totally unconnected with the plague field. By a reference to the plan, it would be seen that there were two systems of sewers in that locality. If a diagonal line were drawn from the northwest to the southeast, they would find that the sewers on the western portion of the line were drained into the main sewer, constructed in 1851, and that the rest of the sewers were drained by the old district sewers. In fact, the two sets of sewers were on totally distinct sites, and yet there were as many deaths on the east as on the west. It was to be observed, too, that the drainage through the supposed plague field did not run into either of those district sewers, but into the Regent Street sewer, and he had not heard of any deaths occurring in that part of Regent Street through which the plague field drainage ran. It was extremely important that the public should be disabused with regard to some particular circumstances which appeared to have created an unnecessary degree of alarm.

Complaints had poured in to the commissioners from all quarters, and the wholesale demands had been made that the gullies should be trapped. They had even been asked to trap every gully in the district and to stop up every ventilation shaft. God forbid that the commission should ever be guilty of such an act as that. He did not deny that the escape of these noxious gases might not be an annoyance, or that they might not affect persons in a weak state of health and even sometimes persons in good health, who might have incautiously exposed themselves to their influence.³ But he believed that the amount of injury had been very greatly exaggerated.

It was, however, after all nothing but a choice of evils, and he would say that it was much better to have these gases escape into the street than into the houses. They had heard reports of the state of a certain town, which he need not name, which had many miles of sewers constructed, throughout the whole extent of which the gullies were in every instance trapped. No free egress [was] allowed for the gases from the sewers. What was the consequence? Those gases were thrown back into the houses, even through the water traps, and fevers of a most malignant character were generated in the houses. His belief was that if the commissioners had acceded to the indiscriminate demands made for closing all the gullies, they would have inflicted an amount of mortality on this metropolis unparalleled by

³ The Medical Officer of Health for St. Anne, Soho wrote in a letter to the editor that whereas "untrapped gull[ies] . . . have to answer partly for this outbreak, . . . it is not to the emanations of decaying animal and vegetable matter that one must alone look. Deficient ventilation, the depressing passions of the mind, and bad food and water in choleraic conditions of the atmosphere will expose the person so situated to an attack, that attack varying in intensity according to the impressibility of the patient. J. Rogers, "Deficient sewerage and its connexion with cholera." *Times* (18 September 1854): 9, b.

anything since the great plague of 1664. He believed that the mortality by the cholera would have been by far exceeded if the commissioners had complied with these demands. The position of the gullies had been found fault with, and he admitted that by their being placed at the sides of the footway they might cause a little annoyance to those who passed by. But some persons had thought fit to make complaints in the newspapers of their having experienced an annoyance from the gullyholes when standing unconsciously near them while conversing with their friends. Now, he must say that the best course such persons could pursue was to hasten away from such a spot.

An improvement had been made in the construction of the gullies. For the purpose of ventilating the sewers, the gratings or gullies had been placed in the centre of the road. It was true they were more in the way of the horses, but at least they were less in the way of the passengers; and the annoyance was in that respect diminished. Still, even that was by no means a perfect system. The commissioners had therefore . . . taken measures to try an experiment by which the foul gases that emanated from the sewers would be burnt, and a current of fresh air be thrown through the gullies by a ventilating process. It must, however, be remembered that the commissioners had 1200 miles of sewers under their management and control and that it behooved them to look well to the expense that such a plan would incur. . . .

Some rather angry letters had been addressed to the commissioners because they had not at once applied traps to the gullies. . . . With all respect to the members of the medical profession, he might confidently say that the commissioners must be more fully aware of all those circumstances which were necessary to the formation of a correct judgment as to the course to be pursued than any medical gentleman could be. A medical man might feel the ill effects of one particular gully, but before it could be known whether that gully should be trapped or not, it must be known what other mode of escape there was for the gas, whether the trapping could be done with safety, or whether it was not possible that persons would be more seriously affected by the escape of the gases in[to] the houses than if they were allowed to escape into the streets.

Before he concluded, he would advert to the demands which had been made on the commissioners to suspend their works during the hot weather. . . . Now, many of their works were by no means of a dangerous character. When they had to open new ground for the construction of a new sewer, it was a mere matter of excavation and no possible danger could be incurred in carrying on such work. When they were obliged to break up old ground [or] opening into old sewers, then the case was different. But in those instances, the invariable practice was to use disinfectants. . . . They had to a great extent suspended works, which, in their judgment, was not necessary, deferring to that panic which had prevailed, and which in itself

was calculated to promote the danger and spread of cholera, feeling that they ought to adopt every mode, to a reasonable extent, that was calculated to allay public alarm. He made these observations with a view that people should not be unnecessarily apprehensive of evil when they saw the streets broken up and men employed in erecting or repairing sewers. Because it did not follow that in such cases any old sewers had been opened or any other step taken calculated to spread disease.

He might just observe that, although these sewers were, according to Mr. Cooper's report, completed as long ago as last February, still but few houses in their line were drained into them. It was a fact that the law as at present framed had rendered it difficult for the commissioners to enforce house drainage where the inhabitants were not willing to do it themselves. In some particular cases, the commissioners could not move unless a regular and formal complaint were made in writing, pointing out the particular house where the nuisance existed... [But inhabitants all too often reply,] "We don't wish to acquire the ill will of the landlord," and therefore decline making any written complaint.... In the particular locality [containing the cholera field], the commissioners had been very much hampered. They had given notice to all the householders of the formation of the sewers and had invited them to drain their houses into those sewers. But all of them had shown a great unwillingness to do so....

In adverting once more to the supposed cause of the prevalence of cholera in that district, while speaking with great respect for the medical officers who had been engaged in investigating the cause, he thought they were altogether mistaken in attributing it either to the construction of the sewers or to their present impure state.... Mr. Cooper, the engineer, said that the sewers were properly made and were in a clean state, though that statement had been contradicted. But he certainly preferred giving credit to the official report of their own engineer than to the unsupported statement of a writer in the newspapers. He understood, indeed, that all the medical officers of the district were invited to go into the sewers themselves, but they declined. He was not surprised at it. For his part, he had never been into any one of them.... They had the authority of Mr. Cooper for saying that the sewers were in a clean state. . . .

In conclusion, therefore, he would repeat that the sewers were not the cause of the cholera. They were not in any way connected with the disease. The real cause of the calamitous occurrences in the locality to which Mr. Cooper's report referred was the filthy and undrained state of the houses....

The plan and report of Mr. Cooper were approved and accepted. Mr. Hawkshaw strongly recommended the inspection of the map, which would enable persons to form an accurate judgment as to the real cause of

the great calamity that had visited that particular district.... [It was] suggested that a copy of the report and of the plan should be forwarded to the Board of Health for the use of the medical council, which was approved.

