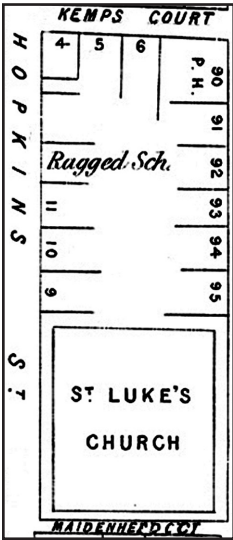


**Document 15 (Online Companion)**

**An experiment in historiography: Reverend Whitehead’s visit with the Plynn family**

In his account of the cholera outbreak that occurred within St. Luke’s ecclesiastical district of St. James, Westminster, Henry Whitehead wrote that on the morning of Friday 1 September 1854, “The first intimation which the writer received of the ... [outbreak] came in the form of a summons to the death-bed of one with whom he had cheerfully conversed at a late hour on the preceding evening.”<sup>1</sup>

This document contains a narrative scenario of what might have happened during Whitehead’s visit that evening and an overview of my research into the identity of this “patient, gentle widow.”



9 Hopkins Street  
Parish of St. Luke’s, Berwick Street

Thursday evening, 31 August 1854

A visit with the senior curate merits a spot of tea. Enough remaining in the tin for a small pot. Fresh Broad Street water, fetched by Thomas after supper, boiling in the kettle on the fireplace grate. The children’s bedrolls from the floor tidily stored in a corner. Floor washed this morning. Sprigs of mugwort, beaten free of insects, re-hung above the mattress and near the tiny window opening onto the back courtyard. A second chair, borrowed from Mrs. Wall, properly positioned

for easy conversation. Bedsheet-curtains drawn to hide the portion of the room taken up by rent-paying tenants, after reading Miss O’Byran and Mr. Plumb the riot act about the consequences of an

<sup>1</sup> Henry Whitehead, *Cholera in Berwick Street* (London: Hope, 1854), 3.

intemperate remark whilst the reverend is present.

Three children greeted him at the door, barely containing their anticipation.

Everything's as it should be, he assured them. Preparations for the outing are well in hand. The dry, warm weather seems likely to continue through the weekend, and that's all to the good. Unlike the cloudy afternoon today, there should be plenty of sun all day tomorrow. Won't let on where we're heading, but it's into the countryside. A meadow for games, a wood for a picnic lunch in the shade. The wagons will assemble outside the church at the church's Maidenhead entrance. Departure set for 9:00. Twilight comes early now, so the wagons will return to the church by supper-time. Fun for all, eh?

The three smiling young'uns—Mary Ann, Charles, and James—will be there for sure, said their mother. James should be, as well, unless some unexpected errands crop up. Elizabeth cannot be released from her duties, unfortunately. Now let the reverend have his tea, children. Pop into the Walls'; they're expecting you. I'll fetch you in a spell.

\* \* \*

Henry Whitehead said good-bye to Mrs. Plynn. He popped into the Walls for a quick hello, to remind the pensioners that their granddaughter was welcome to join the Sunday School excursion, and to say good-bye to the three Plynn children.

He stood for a few seconds on the bottom landing as he gathered his thoughts, opened the front door, and stepped into Hopkins Street.

One more parishioner to visit. Home late, again.

## Unpacking my narrative of Whitehead and the Hopkins Street Widow

Whitehead did not identify the person or the precise location he was summoned to see early on the morning of Friday 1 September 1854. But he did write that she was a widow, with dependent children, who resided in a "small house" in which eight people had died by 4 September, including the widow and some of her children.<sup>2</sup>

First I had to find the actual address of this small house. Three houses in Whitehead's street-by-street accounting listed eight cholera deaths; but only Hopkins Street contained a helpful description: "only 3 small houses; population, about 70; deaths, 13, of which 8 were in one house."<sup>3</sup> I then checked the **frontage plan** (map) produced by the parish Cholera Inquiry Committee and the special inspectors appointed by the General Board of Health and found eight deaths recorded at 9 Hopkins Street. An enumerator for the 1851 census listed a Mary Ann Plynn, widow, with five children at 9 Hopkins Street.<sup>4</sup> I confirmed the spelling of her name by a search of the census data base, which brought me to the same page of the census. The General Register Office's *Weekly Return* for the week ending 2 September 1854 included the deaths of three residents of 9 Hopkins Street—a mother and two of her sons.<sup>5</sup> The census enumeration also gave me names and vital data on other occupants at this address. I made the assumption that all of them were still living there in the summer of 1854, although that's clearly a stretch and, at best, historical possibility.

### The narrative form

Whitehead wrote that he spent part of the evening with "a patient, gentle widow"; my description of the room at 9 Hopkins Street for which the 1851 census listed her as head conveys what I imagine such a person would do to make it livable for herself, five

<sup>1</sup> Whitehead, *Berwick Street*, 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> UK, 1851 Census, HO 107/1483/132. Online: Middlesex>Westminster, St. James>Berwick Street>District 3/21.

<sup>5</sup> GRO, Appendix to *Weekly Return* (9 September), 337, 339.

**frontage plan:** See 1855–07 in Supplementary Figures (Online Companion).

children, and four lodgers. I decided to have mugwort hanging in the room to reflect the widow's interest in cleanliness, regardless of the family's poverty. Mugwort (from *muggia*, meaning midge) is an old Saxon word and common name for *Artemisia vulgaris*, a widespread plant attractive to some insects. Bunches of the plant were hung for a period of time, then taken down and placed in a bag, which was beaten, thereby killing the insects trapped inside.<sup>6</sup> Sprigs might be used again, or discarded, depending on their condition and one's financial circumstances.

I constructed the purpose of Whitehead's visit to be discussing arrangements for a parish Sunday School outing that was initially scheduled to occur two days hence.<sup>7</sup> My reading of his published writings, especially the sermons that he delivered at St. Luke's, suggest he had excellent rapport with his parishioners.

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<sup>6</sup> Andy MacKinnon, Jim Pojar, and Roy Coupé, eds., *Plants of Northern British Columbia*. (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Lone Star, 1992), 105.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead, *he Church and the People: twelve sermons preached at St. Luke's Church, Berwick Street* (London: Skeffington, 1856), 58.