

## Local history notes

### Mortlake in a time of cholera by Peter Dobbie.



*Mortlake Riverside with horses towing a barge, print by C. King c 1825 LCP 2248*

On a July morning in the year 1832 Mortlake awoke to news that many already knew. Posters had been placed across the parish listing hygiene measures that might mitigate the effects of a rampant plague that had cost thousands of lives and had travelled downriver to the parish community.

At this time Mortlake was clustered around the parish church of St Mary, the Virgin and was expanding, much of this due to an influx of Irish immigrants, fleeing the famine to work the commercial growing fields bordering the west of London. Asparagus, peas and carrots were produced in huge amounts and carried overnight to the markets in London. In return night soil, street sweepings and dung from the capital would be transported on barges to the draw dock on Ship Lane where it was collected by cart and taken to the fields for manure.

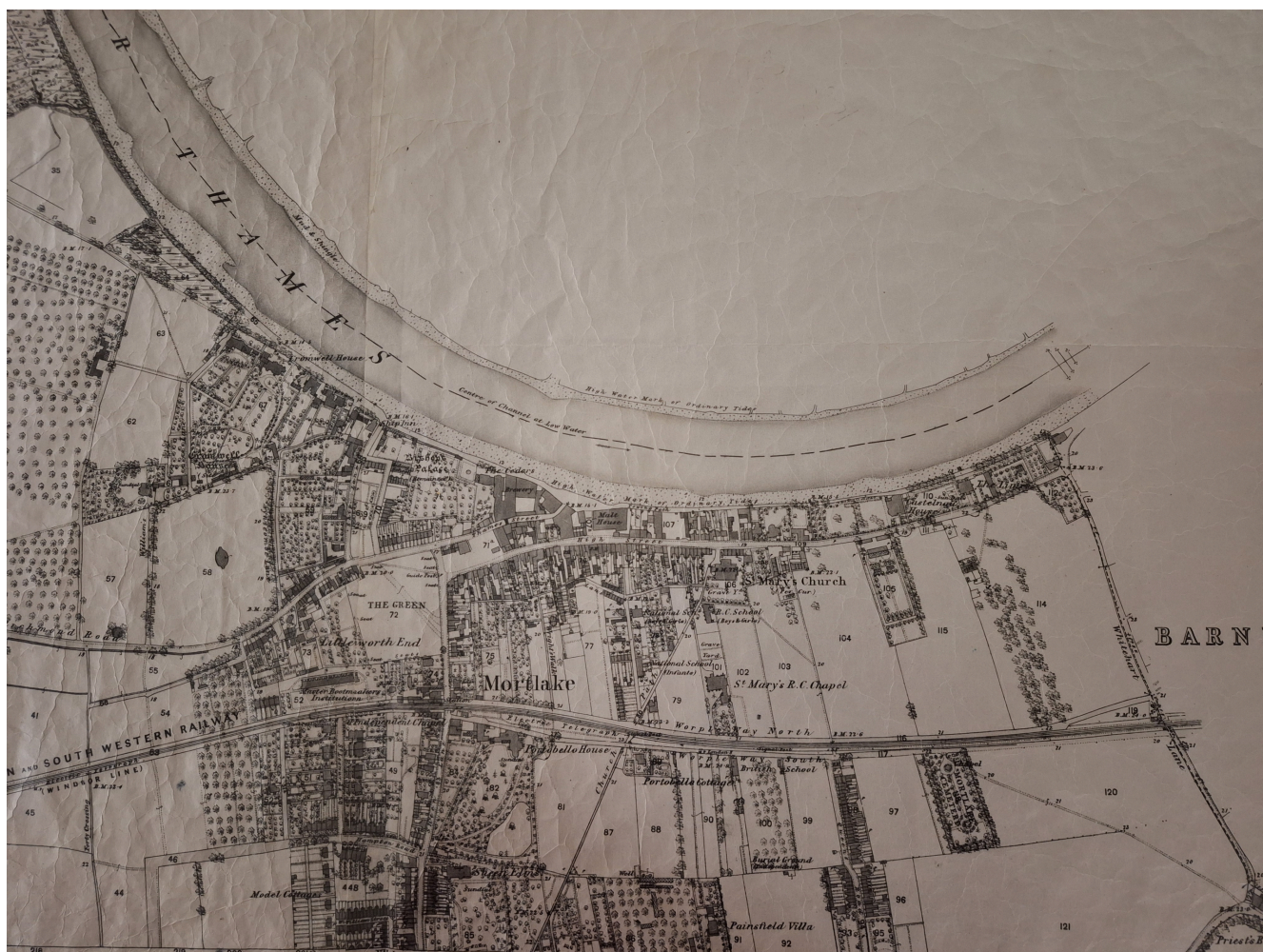
The parish had a number of grand residences housing scholars and peers but also hosted the poverty and filth that provided a host to the rampant cholera and inevitably claimed the poorest as the disease spread throughout the community during the first outbreak in 1831. The country itself was in the throes of Industrialization and the small parish west of London was no exception. On the route from Richmond to



London it was vulnerable to various improvements, but the villagers and their representatives on the local vestry committee, were instinctively hostile to change. Back then the vestry was a significant administrative body of men, a committee for the local secular and ecclesiastical government of a parish. At their height, the vestries were the only form of local government in many places and spent nearly one-fifth of the budget of the British government. But whereas it relied on central government funding, the body itself fiercely resisted any interference and instinctively opposed the will of Westminster.

Nationally the first case of Cholera to was reported in Sunderland in October 1831 when a ship, whose crew had been infected, docked at the port in defiance of government instructions to quarantine. But long before this the insanitary conditions that would allow cholera to incubate had been brewing. In 1828 William Heath drew the cartoon [Monster Soup](#). It depicts a woman who has looked through a microscope at a sample of Thames Water and recoils in horror. The caption beneath reads: 'Monster Soup, commonly called Thames Water being a correct representation of that stuff being doled out to us' – a direct jibe at the water companies.

Today it is hard to comprehend that human waste was considered suitable as compost. At Dung Wharf near Blackfriars it was mixed with animal manure, loaded on to barges and taken to the market gardens in the riverside parishes of Fulham, Chiswick, Battersea and Mortlake. The Thames stank from pollution by industrial waste and human excrement and became a natural host for the spread of cholera. Fear was the main reaction to the arrival of the disease, not helped by the fact that opinion was divided as to the causes of the outbreak and how to avoid catching it. Special clothing, masks and devices to purify the air were touted. Recipes were devised including one which suggested a combination of castor oil, brine, brandy and laudanum.



Locally, even before the first cholera outbreak, much of the village of Mortlake lived in conditions of squalor and filth. The aptly named Black Ditch, an open sewer 'flowing' from Manor Lane to the river, flanked by poor overcrowded houses, is frequently mentioned in the vestry record along with a filthy duct near Ship Lane. But it was not until November 22, 1831, with news of cholera sweeping London, that the Mortlake vestry met and instructed that lime - a measure then commonly used to prevent contagions - should be spread around the local almshouse where the transients who were reluctantly sheltered at local expense were particularly vulnerable.

Their notes record that 'enquiries be made of a Dr Pinchney asking on what terms he would let his house in Mortlake to the parish for a cholera hospital at a guinea a week. Two magistrates were requested to enforce measures to counter the spread of the infection and three medical men were asked to submit tenders to treat the poor for one year 'to commence on Lady Day' - a religious festival marked on March 25. Why this three-month delay was necessary is not clear for the parish provided ideal conditions for the spread of the disease.

The poor of Mortlake both drank from and bathed in the Thames. Piecemeal regard for hygiene, the disposal of sewage into the river and poor medical provision made the locals vulnerable while slum landlords, those dumping the effluent from barges and the indifference of the water companies, ensured that cholera would thrive. Medical assistance was piecemeal, often prohibitively expensive and dependent on the judgement of non-qualified local officials. Sir Henry Burdett, general superintendent of the Queen's Hospital Birmingham remarked: 'The only points to be settled on engaging a nurse were that she was not Irish and not a confirmed drunkard.'

Hospital care was equally unpredictable. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the parish had no hospital or infirmary and was reliant on the big London general hospitals. Many of the smaller hospitals serving Mortlake did not come into being until mid-century. Even then they were cottage hospitals ill-equipped to deal with a highly infectious disease. It was not until 1889 that a hospital for infectious diseases was opened locally – well after cholera had twice run through the community.

That said by the time the first cholera outbreak took hold there were three doctors practicing in the Mortlake village as partners, named as Drs King, Scott and Palmer. A third medic, a Dr Scott paid £1,000 for his share in the partnership, a considerable sum today, and perhaps an indication of how lucrative private practice could be. But a full four months on from that November 1831 emergency meeting – when the March deadline of Ladies Day had been set – little seems to have been done by the vestry. The need to find a suitable place in which to isolate and treat patients had not been resolved. The earlier approach to Dr Pinchney to let his house to accommodate cholera victims had not been successful. Whatever his commitment to the sick it did not include letting his house to the community. Forced to look elsewhere the vestry sought to purchase the Pest House and its ground as well as a cottage at the top of Benham Alley for a 'period not exceeding three months at a rental of two shillings and three pence a week.' Pest Houses, as the name suggests, were commonly built on the fringes of villages, where those struck down with infectious ailments could be re-housed until the illness took its course and they either recovered or died.





*The Pest House, Mortlake 1826 LCF 47689*

Much of the discussion concerns money and is recorded in detail. There is the matter of the cost of distributing flannel for the prevention of cholera 'but which remains unpaid.' Poor relief should be spent on coals, blankets and other necessities such as 'nourishing soup', though the recipients would have to pay an amount 'no less than the cost price' for a bowl. Another suggestion was the establishing of a 'large floating bath in the river,' though there is no indication as to whether the idea came to fruition. Medical provision was therefore haphazard. But while the Mortlake vestrymen were clearly extremely worried about the arrival of the onset of cholera they never lost sight of a single penny of what was spent and to whom it was given.

They acknowledge the parlous state of the dwellings of the poorer inhabitants of Mortlake and there is talk of installing a main drain along High Street to improve conditions. But there is little mention of those who owned the slum properties where the disease found a host, and who were not prompt in carrying out the sanitary improvements ordered by local inspectors. Reading how the plague arrived in the village and the response of the vestry it is tempting to see them as slow or negligent. It took months from that original meeting to effect measures deemed vital to local health needs. But it has to be remembered that both central government and the medical profession were not trusted by many at this time. Mortlake, in its resistance to change, typified a vestry that opposed just about anything that was not their idea and reflected a community mind set in which the first response was resistance.

So it was that the issuing of detailed sanitary precautions did not occur until the summer of 1832 – some six months after that initial meeting alerted the village to the imminent danger. It followed an application to



Whitehall to appoint a Board of Health for Mortlake, a rare instance of the vestry asking for government to interfere with its own sovereignty, and perhaps a realization that it needed an authority and powers beyond their own to deal with the disease. Permission to appoint a Board was given within days of this application, reflecting the government's own fear that the outbreak was running out of control. And so it was not until July 17, 1832, that posters appeared across the village warning that vigorous precautions needed to be taken. It was a summer that had enjoyed a good harvest, the pickers and landlords had reason to be content. Nevertheless, the message to the village that was posted by the vestry is stark. There is dietary advice to avoid 'stale fish, sour milk and new bread.' And in a village which boasted a brewery and many public houses, it urges villagers 'to be strictly Sober and particularly to abstain from drinking Spirituous Liquors.'

1837  
 Aug<sup>10</sup> The Surveyors of the Parish  
 of Mortlake Highway D<sup>r</sup>  
 To June Roman & Son Brick<sup>rs</sup>  
 to digging out and putting in drain  
 across the path in upper Richmond  
 Wood Bricklayer Lab<sup>r</sup> 1/2 day 4  
 6 hods of Mortar 50 Stocks 12 p<sup>ts</sup> tiles 5.9  
 August to Repairing of drain by Brewhouse  
 17<sup>th</sup> Bricklayer Lab<sup>r</sup> 1/2 day 4  
 4 hods of Mortar 30 Stocks 3.9  
 19<sup>th</sup> to Refixing Kirk stone over Grating  
 by Brewhouse Mason & Labourer  
 1/2 day 8.4 of 3 inch York for drain  
 2 hods of Mortar 14.2  
 £ 1. 11. 8  
 Received the above  
 June Roman  
 Feby 21/38

Bill paid to Mr Holman by the Mortlake Churchwardens for drain repairs in 1837 D 0749 10

That said Mortlake appears to have got off lightly in this first visitation of cholera. The three Mortlake doctors who tended the largely impoverished victims reported that 1832 saw 35 cases which exhibited some symptoms



of Asiatic cholera. Nine were males, 18 females and eight children. The number of deaths were five – one man, two women and two children while the following year, 1833, there were several cases of severe cholera, but none was fatal.

The vestry had been slow to act while local landlords, barge owners and the water companies ignored requests to desist from polluting a river that provided bathing and drinking water to Mortlake's poorest. But the shortcomings of the vestrymen in their response and the consequences of this inaction would only truly be felt when Mortlake was visited by the second outbreak of cholera in 1849.

The Surveyors of the Highways

1837. To Geo. & My Goodale

May 15 To repair two drains by M. Grovers  
 B<sup>d</sup> Lab<sup>r</sup> 2<sup>d</sup> day 1<sup>st</sup> day of Mort<sup>r</sup> 125- Sticks 13-10

Dec<sup>r</sup> 20 To opening and cleaning a drain  
 by Barnes Corner B<sup>d</sup> Lab<sup>r</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> day  
 1<sup>st</sup> day of Mort<sup>r</sup> 8-7

Mar 4, 30. Settled. £ 1-2-5

Geo. Goodale

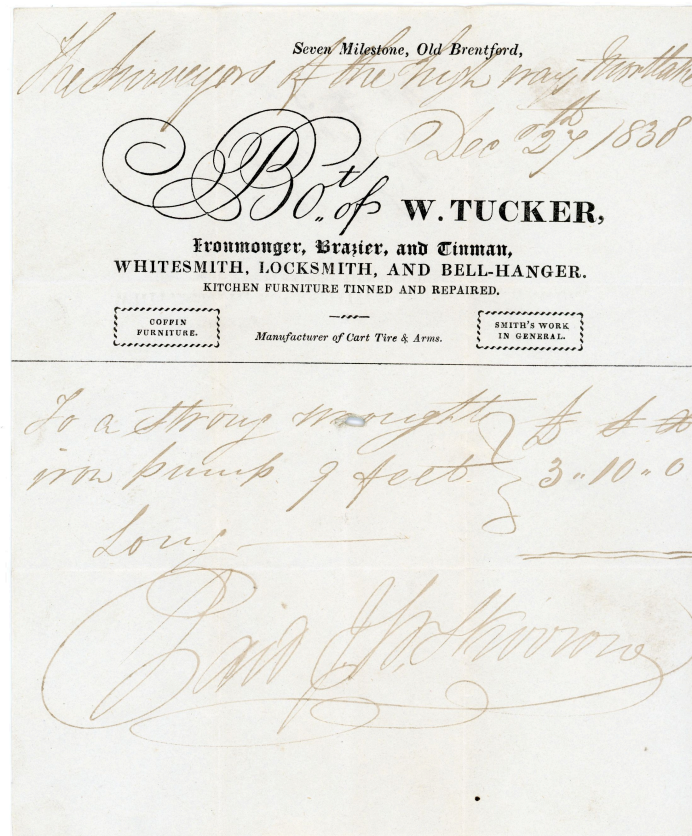
Bill paid to Mr Goodale by the Mortlake Churchwardens for drain repairs in 1837 D 0749 11

### The Second Outbreak

Two decades after that first outbreak of cholera Arthur Hill Hassall, the physician, chemist and microscopist, primarily known for his work in public health and food safety, produced a report that said water companies serving London still produced poor quality water. His summary was succinct: 'A portion of the inhabitants of the metropolis are made to consume, in one form or another, a portion of their own excrement, and moreover to pay for the privilege.' Quite why the water companies had been allowed to profit while polluting the population is not hard to understand. The climate was one of industrial expansion in which Government was reluctant to curb private enterprise and the polluter were not made to pay. As such it was an uphill battle for those who monitored the health of the Mortlake community. The problems evident during the first outbreak had not been remedied. The infamous Black Ditch remained a threat to the slum housing on either side, while the river ran polluted by negligent water companies and barges dumping untreated filth.



In April 1847, two years before the second epidemic appeared, the district surveyor was authorized to spend 'no more than £75' towards building a drain from Industry Place towards the river, with the adjoining landowner's contribution to the expense. One of these, a Mr. Grayson, refused and was threatened with a summons. He was one of several who declined to take responsibility for repairing the Black Ditch which, some 17 years earlier years after the first visitation of cholera, was still a notorious untreated health hazard. It was recorded that Grayson himself paid a heavy price for his neglect of the problem. The story goes that on returning home one night and without street lighting or fencing, Grayson fell into the ditch and died.



*Bill paid to W. Tucker by the Mortlake Churchwardens for an iron pump in 1838 D 0758 3*

Cholera duly returned to the village in 1849 and those who had witnessed the 1832 contagion must have heard the news with dread. Mortlake had expanded and the population more than doubled to over 6,000, making the challenge of combating the disease even more problematic. The limited powers granted by Whitehall to the vestry during that first cholera outbreak remained in place but it could not begin to finance the considerable public works needed to change the way the village lived. This was not a time when men of influence emoted in their public pronouncements. But there is a note of fear in the language of the vestry members as they confronted the second outbreak, with talk of 'strong convictions' and the 'experience of these last few weeks' as cholera spread. 'Cholera has severely afflicted this village,' read the vestry minutes, 'especially Carpenter's Yard, Queen's Head Alley, Princes Court, Little Sheen and three contiguous houses in Sheen Lane.' One of these was a pork butchers and the other a slaughterhouse. 'In all cases the sewage is most repugnant and cesspools appalling,' the report states. 'Overflowing privies must be poisoning the air while the supply of drinking water is altogether defective. Two deaths from cholera have taken place in the neighborhood of the Black Ditch.'

Little had changed as virtually nothing had been done in the wake of the 1832 infection. The causes were all too familiar. 'That the prevalence of sickness especially in the frightful form of Asiatic cholera, is attributed to the atmosphere being charged with a deadly exhalation from various deposits of filth in populous districts.' The vestry men blamed surface water being carried off by the common sewers giving off offensive smells 'indicating an escape of gases highly injurious to health' They cite sewers emptying their filthy contents into the river 'poisoning the water used by a great part of the local inhabitants for both washing and drinking.' The blame is laid squarely at the failure of drainage. What was needed was two separate sets of drains, one for surface water and land springs, discharging itself into the river, the other for sewage to be discharged into some reservoir, covered in, at a considerable depth below the surface of the ground. There is no mention here of the water companies nor the good folk of Mortlake and their habit of dumping excrement and waste in the street and river, nor the landlords who neglected to provide basic sanitation.

Seven deaths had been recorded locally from cholera of people of varying ages. Their dwellings were variously described as destitute and overcrowded, 'exceedingly filthy, dirty in the extreme and carelessly treated.' One casualty had this footnote appended to her case sheet: 'It is reported that upward of 20 persons used to sleep in this house, though consisting of only two small rooms.' The vestry announced that it would remain in 'almost continuous session' while reassuring the population that the Metropolitan Commissioners of Sewers had appointed a surveyor to report on the extent of the problem. Mortlake obtained from St John's House, Fitzroy Square, a nurse for the sick and another from the matron of Middlesex Hospital. This helped and the Committee duly agreed to the appointment of a third nurse. But it was an uphill battle as illustrated by a report from the medical officer which stated that illness occurred in Princes Court, largely due to residents drinking water from the Thames. This water was 'highly impregnated with the contents of the sewers from Princes Court' and contaminated by manure barges unloading close to the spot. The medical officer ordered that a pump be installed for use by residents and that barge owners be ordered to cease their dumping of waste. Reporting two deaths from cholera in the neighbourhood of the Black Ditch, the committee contended that they were due to 'deathly exhalations from various deposits of filth in populous districts.



*Mortlake Hight Street showing the communal iron pump c 1865*



Late in October of 1849 the cholera outbreak abated. Locals gathered to hear from the vestry that the special committee that had been set up for the emergency was to be adjourned. The mood reflects a self-congratulatory tone of how well the parish had conducted itself during this second cholera crisis. The medical team led by Dr Palmer are mentioned, as is the Medical Officer himself. He had shown untiring energy, ready self-denial and watchful attendance to the poor of the parish and was asked to accept 10 guineas. This apparently did not go well with some members of the vestry committee objected to the gift. There was £101, 7s 2d. left over in a fund for the relief of the sick. This would be used to provide nurses for the poor 'but not to be applied for nursing paupers.' Police officers Finlayson and Ellain were to be each paid 10 shillings for their 'kind exertions' during the prevalence of the disease.

But the reality of what had happened was far grimmer and emerges from figures published by the Registrar General in 1852. He writes that the first death from cholera occurred on July 15, 1849. In Princes Court and a second at Barnes 12 days later. In August alone 16 persons died including a carpenter and his three children in Sheen Lane. During the summer of that year of 1849 the Mortlake death toll is given as 'approximately 50'. Shockingly this was 'more than treble the average' for a rural population of this size,' according to the Registrar General. And while there is little or no verbal record of the heartache and misery this caused families already living a hand to mouth existence, the devastation can be imagined. The causes of the fatalities that provided an environment for cholera to spread were by now familiar. Defective drains, deficient ventilation, over-crowding and intemperance is cited in the official report, along with 'intemperance', presumably referring to the copious drinking of beer and gin by the locals.

The government passed the Metropolis Water Act of 1852 which prohibited the extraction of water for household purposes from the Thames below Teddington Lock. It was this year also that we see evidence that the Mortlake vestry now understood that it needed to take a more aggressive and preventative approach to the cholera problem. There was no ignoring the poor sanitary conditions that were providing a ready home to a killer plague and the medical response needed a plan. It was essential therefore to identify the 'hotspots' before and not after the event. It thus devised a plan, dividing the parish into districts to be examined by sub-committees of volunteers. These in turn would report to overseers to be known rather grandly as the 'Guardians in Charge'. They included local doctors and medical officials as well as eminent figures such as Lord William Fitzroy, whose had been court marshalled and dismissed from the royal navy for theft and unlawfully sentencing a seaman to 48 lashes for drunkenness, something that does not seem to have precluded him a role in determining the parish's welfare. Their report of October 1853 runs to an impressive 50 pages and shows the fruits of its investigation, not least that the conditions that allowed cholera to take such a heavy toll locally had not disappeared. 'Nuisances' as the record describes them, persisted and were not confined to previous cholera hotspots such as Mortlake High Street with its notorious lack of proper drainage. Several were blamed on the keeping of pigs. A house in the High Street, owned by a local doctor, was 'occupied by 20 persons, chiefly Irish. It was found to be dirty and offensive'. In Benham's Alley, the complaint was of a pigsty and a drain overflowing with only one privy for five houses in which 37 people lived. There are many such instances in a similar vein with both the Roman Catholic and the National Schools reported to be in an insanitary condition. The records however do not reveal whether the vestry were successful in turning these findings into concrete action. Perhaps it was constrained by limitations on its powers to act or the lack of funds to pursue large scale modernization of the village sanitary works.

In the first outbreak the vestry showed reluctance to accept powers imposed by Whitehall until the epidemic had already claimed lives. Its failure to clean up Mortlake village undoubtedly led to further unnecessary loss of life in the second outbreak. But even after the visitation was brought under control the vestry continued to oppose changes to health care provision. There was an outcry when, in 1888, it was learned of a plan to build

a hospital for infectious diseases in South Worple Way. The vestry protested that it was too close to a populated area and 'most injurious to local interests and should be opposed to the uttermost'. But the new isolation hospital duly opened and within a short space of time proved a boon to local health needs.



*On the opening of the Barnes Council Works Depot, the workforce with horse and carts gathered in front with small group seated 'dignitaries' in the middle. Mortlake High Street, c 1890 LCF 13121*