

# VICTORIAN BRITAIN

## A Healthy Nation?

Were the rich just as likely to catch diseases as the poor?



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**Source 1:**  
**Cholera**  
**hospital,**  
**1832**

Prince Albert married Queen Victoria in 1840 and they had nine children, but in December 1861 he fell ill and died. Prince Albert had caught TYPHOID, a disease that is caused by drinking either dirty water or milk, or eating dirty food. The usual cause of typhoid was allowing drinking water to be polluted by sewage.



**Source 2:**  
**Meeting about**  
**cholera, 1832**

The death of her husband was a great shock to Queen Victoria. How could one of the most important people in Britain die from a disease like this? Was this common? Were rich and poor just as likely to die from diseases like this at the time of the Great Exhibition?



**Source 3:**  
**Poster on**  
**cholera, 1848**

The big killer disease of the mid-nineteenth century was CHOLERA which was caused in a similar way to the disease Prince Albert had died of. Cholera had arrived in Britain for the first time in 1831, probably arriving on ships bringing imports from China.



**Source 4:**  
**Cholera epidemic**

Doctors had little idea about the causes of cholera. Most accepted the miasmatic (read on!) theory of disease. They believed that diseases were caused by the air somehow being polluted by waste. This came about because severe outbreaks of disease often happened in hot summers when there was a great deal of rubbish lying in the streets. As the rubbish rotted, it gave off a stronger and stronger smell. This, many doctors believed, caused disease.

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**Source 5:**  
**Health of the**  
**town of**  
**Ormskirk**

Cholera was most dangerous in the new industrial towns of the north or in the centre of big cities like London. Here people lived in crowded housing. Most people got their water from a tap in the street and often the supply was pumped out of a nearby river. This river could easily be used for sewage disposal at the same time. In London, one water company drew water out of the River Thames from a point right next to the outlet of the Great Ranelagh Sewer.



**Source 6:**  
**Public health**  
**poster, Ormskirk**



**Source 7:**  
**Petition from**  
**Ormskirk**

In the new industrial towns, cholera was even more dangerous because many of the houses had been built quickly with no attempts at planning. Often there was no sanitation and no fresh water. In one street in Bolton the people used a trench at the back of the houses as a toilet, which was cleared out and the mess stacked up against the end wall of the last house. The mess was taken away every six months.



**Source 8:**  
**Cholera outbreak,**  
**1853**

There was a second big outbreak of cholera in 1848, a third in 1853 and a fourth in 1866. Each time thousands of people died swiftly and in terrible pain. They suffered violent vomiting and diarrhoea, coupled with very bad stomach pains. The actual cause of death was often dehydration (not enough water).



### Edwin Chadwick

In 1842 Edwin Chadwick published his 'Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain'. He had surveyed different areas around the country and calculated the average life expectancy of people from different classes and areas. The results were startling to say the least.

Chadwick claimed that people living in the countryside lived far longer than people in towns. He compared Rutland, a rural county with no large towns, with the new industrial cities of the north.

<i>Average life expectancy</i>	<i>professional trades</i>	<i>tradesmen</i>	<i>labourers</i>
<i>Rutland</i>	52	41	38
<i>Leeds</i>	44	27	19
<i>Liverpool</i>	35	22	15
<i>Manchester</i>	38	20	17
<i>Bolton</i>	34	23	18





Chadwick's report led to the setting up of a Royal Commission and then to the Public Health Act of 1848. He became one of the Commissioners.

Unfortunately many people found Chadwick rather rude and he often provoked opposition. In 1854 he was forced to retire. This letter was sent to 'The Times' to explain why he was unpopular.

' We prefer to take our chance with cholera than be bullied into health. There is nothing a man hates so much as being cleansed against his will or having his floor swept, his hall whitewashed, his dung heaps cleared away and his thatch forced to give way to slate. It is a fact that many people have died from a good washing.'

### **John Snow (1813-1858)**

John Snow was the eldest son of a farmer and born at York on 15th March 1813. He was educated at a private school in York until the age of fourteen, when he was apprenticed to a surgeon living at Newcastle-on-Tyne. He worked as surgeon in the mines and later as unqualified assistant during the cholera epidemic of 1831-2. Snow continued his medical training in London. In October 1838 he became a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries, having been admitted a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in May 1838. He graduated as an M.D. of the University of London on 20 December 1844, and in 1850 he was admitted a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.

Snow's great breakthrough theory was that cholera spreads through means of an impure water supply. He outlined his ideas in an essay about the communication of cholera which was published in 1849, and awarded a prize by the Institute of France. In 1855 a second edition was published, with a much more detailed investigation into the water supply in certain districts of South London during in the epidemic of 1854.

Snow was also interested in the properties of ether, then newly adopted in America as an anaesthetic. He made great improvements in the method of giving patients the drug. He obtained permission to demonstrate his results in the dental out-patient room at St. George's Hospital surgery which was highly successful. Nevertheless, Snow appreciated the value of other anaesthetizing drugs, notably chloroform. He gave this to Queen Victoria on 7 April 1853, during the birth of Prince Leopold, and again on 14 April 1857 at the birth of Princess Beatrice. Snow died unmarried on 16 June 1858, and was buried in the Brompton cemetery.



## Source 1

## Task

**1a** Why has the letter been written?

**1b** What had happened in the hospital?

**1c** Would the treatment received in the hospital have helped to stop cholera spreading?

## Source 1

This is a letter written on 5th January 1832. It was sent from the Board of Health to the Newcastle Board. The writer is talking about conditions in Gateshead hospital.

5<sup>th</sup> Jan<sup>y</sup> 1832.

Sir

The highly inadequate and improper state of the temporary hospital appropriated for the relief of Cholera Patients in the Township of Gateshead, having been reported to the B<sup>d</sup> of Health with an assertion that five children were actually placed in one bed, and three in another bed in that hospital, I am directed by the B<sup>d</sup> to require that you will state with as little delay as possible every circumstance connected with such a want of humanity, which if founded in truth must prove highly disgraceful to the Members of that B<sup>d</sup>.

I am  
Y<sup>rs</sup> &c  
W Meeklen

(PRO ref: PC 1/93)



## Source 2

## Task

- 2a** How many new cases were reported?
- 2b** How many of the deaths were reported?
- 2c** How many cases of cholera were there altogether?
- 2d** How many people had died?
- 2e** Approximately what percentage of people who caught cholera actually died from the disease?





## Source 2

These are the minutes of a meeting of the Board of Health held on 13th January 1832. It includes a report of the numbers of cases of cholera in Sunderland, Newcastle and Gateshead.

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1832

Present.

Honble E. Stewart	Mr W. Pym
Mr J. Marshall	Dr Russell
Dr Barry	Major Macdonald
	Mr Maclean
	Secy

Received the following Reports

*Cholera Cases viz*

11 <sup>th</sup> San Andreas Newcastle Gateshead		
Remained at last Report 1	90	36
New cases	20	1
Dead	7	1
Recovered	16	0
Remain	87	20
Total Cases	533	367
Total Deaths	201	124

Whithby & Easingwold North Yorkshire		
Remained at last Report 12		
Increases	2	3
Dead	1	..
Recovered	..	3
Remain	13	4
Total Cases	49	43
Total Deaths	20	16

Read Letter from the Secretary

2<sup>nd</sup> Board of Health at Gateshead dated 11<sup>th</sup> Jan

(PRO ref: PC 1/105)

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/healthy/source2.htm>



### Source 3

### Task

**3a** What is the poster saying it can help prevent?

**3b** The poster gives advice on how to avoid getting cholera. Some advice is good, some is bad.

i) Write down three good pieces of advice.

ii) Write down three bad pieces of advice (choose the worst!).

**3c** What else is the poster offering apart from advice?

**3d** The poster suggests two things that can be bought for protection against cholera. What were they? Would either of these have been of any use?





## Source 3

This is a poster that was put up in London in 1848, during the second outbreak of cholera.

**Prevention of Cholera.**  
 REMEDIES RECOMMENDED BY GOVERNMENT.

1. We would urge the necessity, in all cases of Cholera, of an instant recourse to medical aid, and also under every form and variety of indisposition; for, during the prevalence of this epidemic all disorders are found to merge in the dominant disease.
2. Let immediate relief be sought under disorder of the bowels especially, however slight. The invasion of Cholera may thus be readily and at once prevented.
3. Let every impurity, animal and vegetable, be quickly removed to a distance from the habitations; such as slaughter-houses, pig-sties, cesspools, necessaries, and all other domestic nuisances.
4. Let all uncovered drains be carefully and frequently cleansed.
5. Let the grounds in and around the habitations be drained, so as effectually to carry off moisture of every kind.
6. Let all partitions be removed from within and without habitations, which unnecessarily impede ventilation.
7. Let every room be daily thrown open for the admission of fresh air; and this should be done about noon, when the atmosphere is most likely to be dry.
8. Let dry scrubbing be used in domestic cleansing, in place of water cleansing.
9. Let excessive fatigue and exposure to damp and cold, especially during the night, be avoided.
10. Let the use of cold drinks, and acid liquors, especially under fatigue, be avoided, or when the body is heated.
11. Let the use of cold acid fruits and vegetables be avoided.
12. Let excess in the use of ardent and fermented liquors and tobacco be avoided.
13. Let a poor diet, and the use of impure water in cooking, or for drink, be avoided.
14. Let the wearing of wet and insufficient clothing be avoided.
15. Let a flannel or woollen belt be worn round the belly.

This has been found serviceable in checking the tendency to bowel complaint so common during the prevalence of Cholera. The disease has, in this country, been always found to commence with looseness in the bowels, and in this stage is very tractable. It should, however, be noticed, that the looseness is frequently unattended by pain or uneasiness, and fatal delay has often occurred from the notion that cholera must be attended with cramps. In the earlier stage here referred to, there is often no gripping or cramp, and it is at this period that the disease can be most easily arrested. (In all such cases let from twenty to forty drops of Dr. J. Lenax's Cholera Tincture be administered in half a glass of brandy, and the symptoms will abate immediately.)

16. Let personal cleanliness be carefully observed.
17. Let every cause tending to depress the moral and physical energies be carefully avoided.
18. Let crowding of persons within houses and apartments be avoided.
19. Let sleeping in low and damp rooms be avoided.
20. Let fires be kept up during the night in sleeping or adjoining apartments, the night being the period of most danger from attack, especially under exposure to cold or damp.
21. Let all bedding and clothing be daily exposed during winter and spring to the fire, and in the summer to the heat of the sun.
22. Let the dead be buried in places remote from the habitation of the living.

*By the timely adoption of simple means such as these, Cholera, or any other epidemic, will be made to lose its venom; so true is it that "internal sanitary arrangements, and not quarantine and sanitary lines, are the safeguard of nations."*

Every one should provide themselves with the ASIATIC CHOLERA TINCTURE, as the most ready and effectual Remedy in Cholera, Diarrhoea, Flatulency, Cholic, and Bowel Complaints.

In Bottles at 2s. 9d.—4s. 6d.—11s. and 21s. Duty included.

THE ANTI-CHOLERA FUMIGATORS, for purifying the Air of Dwellings, and destroying the Contagious influence of CHOLERA, TYPHUS FEVER, and other INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

They are particularly recommended for the Sick Chambers, Hospitals, Churches, Chapels, Literary Institutions, Theatres, Assembly Rooms, Counting Houses, Taverns, the Cabins and Holds of Vessels, &c.

In Boxes, at 6d.—1s. and 2s. 6d. each, or Carriage free, at 1s.—1s. 8d. and 3s.

Packages for Extensive Buildings, at 10s.—20s.—40s. and 45s.

**ANTI-CHOLERA TINCTURE DEPOT,**  
 44, COLEMAN STREET, CITY, LONDON.

N.B. Money Orders must be made payable to Dr. Jacques Lenax.

(PRO ref: MH 13/245)



## Source 4

### Task

- 4a** Where does he say the worst outbreaks of cholera took place?
- 4b** Where were there not many, if any, cases of cholera?
- 4c** How does he explain the differences?
- 4d** What does he believe were the causes of cholera?
- 4e** Do you think that people in 1848 had any better idea of the ways to treat cholera than they had had in 1832? (Source 1)
- 4f** If all the suggestions made in source 3 and 4 had been followed, would this have prevented an outbreak of cholera?

## Source 4

In October 1848 this letter was written to the General Board of Health (set up by the Public Health Act 1848). The writer is describing the cholera epidemic of 1832 which he had witnessed.





I am obliged by his  
 command, which I will  
 obey, when the order  
 of my associates.  
 25<sup>th</sup> Oct. 48. C.  
 Forwarded to Mr  
 Austin

Cholera - influenced by bad and  
 stagnant water which absorbs the poison.

202  
 48.

24 High Street, Marylebone  
 19<sup>th</sup> October 1848

My Lord,

When I did myself the honor to address a  
 letter to Your Lordship bearing date the 29<sup>th</sup> August I adverted  
 to the attention I had paid to the Cholera during the year 1832,  
 and I now crave the indulgence of offering an opinion founded  
 upon the observations I then made, which may in some measure  
 serve to carry out the views of the Legislature.

Sea Port and other Towns in the immediate  
 vicinity of Rivers and Canals, built on marshy ground, were  
 principally visited by the Cholera, and it was remarkable  
 that the supply of water at these places was obtained from  
 ponds or sluggish streams, and of a very impure quality,  
 whilst those on the adjacent hills or mountainous Country  
 escaped its ravages. I noticed this fact more  
 particularly in France, as the mortality was very great at

Calais



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Cafais, St Pierre, Guines and St. Omer, but in the intermediate Country, being a succession of hills well populated and forming a circumference of many miles, there was not a death arising from Cholera. At the City of Bristol a fourth of which is built on the marshes through which the River Avon and the floating docks pass the cases of Cholera were very numerous, whilst the other parts rising to very high ground, and well supplied with spring water were very free from it.

It is now generally admitted by the Medical profession, and by other Scientific bodies that the Cholera is not contagious, but that the Atmosphere travels in a poisoned state, the inhaling of which does not produce Cholera, and my impression is, that it chemically infects exposed water in a quiescent state, and the poorer classes using such water as a beverage and partaking of it in their food are consequently the greatest sufferers.

The





The same places as in 1832 <sup>the</sup> no doubt will be revisited by the cholera if there should not have been any improvement in the supply of water.

Stenches and noxious vapours will generate Typhus and putrid Fevers, but those caused I am emboldened to state will not predispose to the disease of Sporadic Cholera.

With the highest respect,  
I have the honor to be,  
My Lord,  
Your Lordship's most obedient  
and very humble servant,  
A. Perkins.

The Right Honble  
The Earl of Portland

(PRO ref: MH 13/245)



## Source 5

## Task

**5a** How many people had signed the petition in Ormskirk?

**5b** What are the reasons for sending the letter?

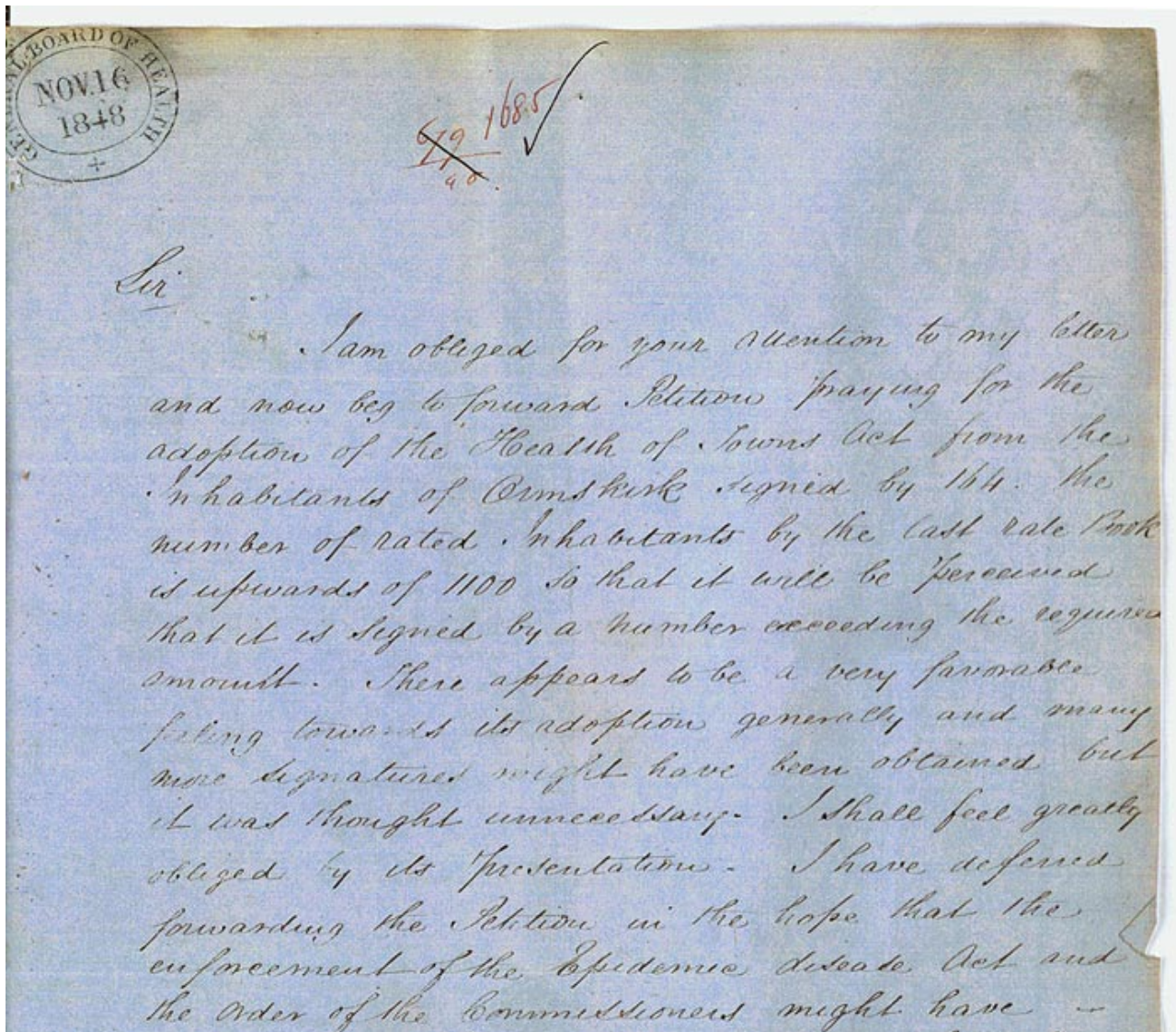
**5c** Which of the reasons would help prevent cholera? Which would not?





## Source 5

This is a letter written by the Chairman of the Sanitary Committee of Ormskirk to the General Board of Health in 1848. Towns could ask the General Board to set up a Local Board, but at least ten percent of the ratepayers had to sign a petition. The General Board would then send an inspector to town to inspect the sanitary state of the town.







answered our purpose but perceiving that there is  
 no apparent available power of dealing summarily  
 with Irish Lodging Houses which have become from  
 our proximity to Liverpool quite a pest to the Town  
 it will avail little as a permanent remedy. The  
 Town wants sewerage too and an ample supply of  
 water without which no efficient Sanatory measure  
 can be carried out. The attendance of an Officer  
 as early as practicable is earnestly requested in  
 the meantime. I will as Chairman of the Sanatory  
 Committee under the directions of the Guardians work  
 out the order of the Commissioners as far as practicable.  
 I shall be glad to give all publicity to the intention  
 of the officers attendance, to make the necessary enquiry  
 and shall be glad of any information to enable me to assist  
 him in his enquiries. Perhaps you will intimate whether  
 the Surveying Officer will make the necessary enquiry  
 for himself or he will expect the Inhabitants to be prepared  
 with evidence for his consideration.

I am, Sir, Yours most obediently  
 Wm. H. H. H.

Brinsford  
 15<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1848

(PRO ref: MH13/138)



## Source 6

## Task

**6a** What was the inspector going to look into?

**6b** Would his enquiries have helped to identify possible causes of cholera outbreaks in the town?

**Look back at source 5**

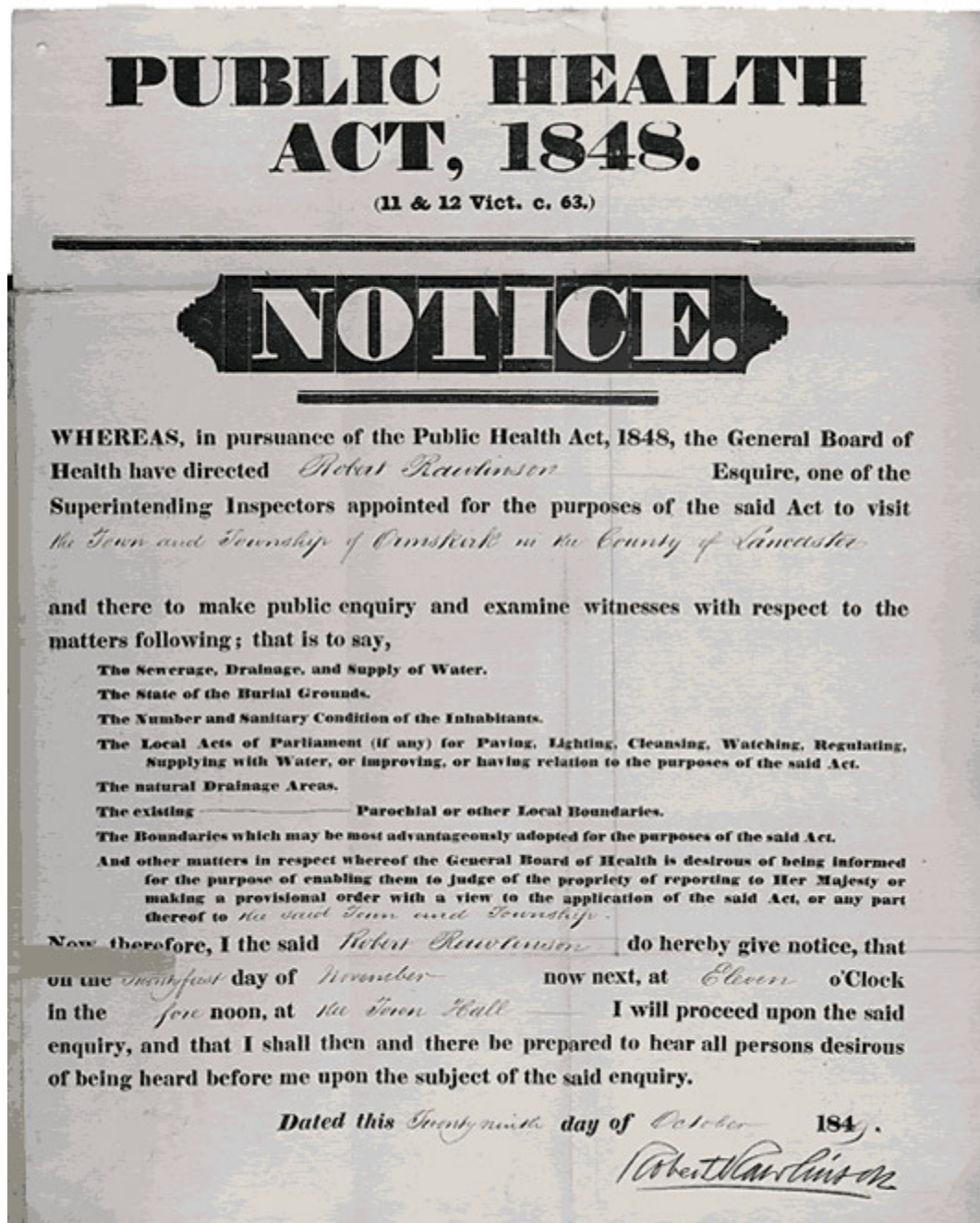
**6c** In what ways do these sources suggest that cholera was being taken more seriously in Britain?





## Source 6

This poster appeared in the town of Ormskirk in Lancashire in October 1848. It was signed by the inspector appointed for Ormskirk.



(PRO ref: MH 13/138)





## Source 7

## Task

**7a.** Why was this petition sent? What were the people objecting to?

**7b.** Why do they believe that a Local Board of Health is not needed?

## Source 7

**A petition sent by people in Ormskirk to the General Board of Health.**

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/healthy/source7.htm>



1927  
 To the Honourable  
 The General Board of Health.

The humble petition of the owners of property and rate payers of the Township of Omskirk in the County of Lancashire.

That your Petitioners strongly object to the introduction of the public health Act into Omskirk inasmuch as the following grounds, i.e.

Inasmuch as the very great expense and burden it will be to the Omskirk ratepayers generally, and which they are unable to bear.

That there is a sufficient supply of good and pure water in the town, inasmuch that some of the Omskirk pumps and wells have been repaired and rendered useless.

That your Petitioners are fully convinced that the avarice, poverty, and disease of the Omskirk Poor are quite sufficient without the introduction of the public health Act. If the local board will appoint a job and prefer Omskirk to inspect Omskirk, all nuisances in the town will immediately disappear.

That Omskirk is only 13 miles from Liverpool and a great number of poor Omskirk have come from there into Omskirk in a day's stage, and this accounts for the great number of deaths.

That your Petitioners are prepared to prove that the town of Omskirk is one of the cleanest towns in Lancashire, and also one of the most healthy.

That the evidence taken by Mr. Hamilton, who reports the insufficient supply of water is wholly false, and which your Petitioners are prepared to prove.



That the evidence taken by Mr. Howland with respect to the insufficient supply of notes is totally false, and that your Estimates are prepared to serve.

That the evidence taken by Mr. Howland as to the falling state of the Banks and for aught he is also false and which can be proved by any number of witnesses.

That your Estimates are generally of figures, that certain banks have received the Relation to introduce the Bank of America into the town, who are not Notes payers, and which may be easily proved by referring to the Anti Bank.

That a number of Notes payers who signed the said Relation are induced to do so in consequence of the misrepresentation of certain parties, that they (Notes payers) are now induced to withdraw their signatures and a number of them have actually done so by signing the present Relation.

[illegible]

and 139 other signatures



## Source 8

## Task

- 8a.** What is the main reason for the outbreak of cholera suggested in this source?
- 8b.** What conditions in Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead caused cholera to spread so easily?
- 8c.** The end of the source says that some men are against efforts to improve living conditions in the worst parts of the city. Can you explain this?





## Source 8

This is part of newspaper report from October 1853; this was at the time of the third outbreak of cholera.

### PRECAUTIONS AGAINST CHOLERA.

The advanced scientific information of the day shows that Cholera and Fever are as capable of being prevented as that once fatal malady the Small-pox. By the introduction of Vaccination, the latter complaint has been driven from amongst the higher and more intelligent classes of the community. Cholera (that new plague) can also be prevented by proper sanitary arrangements. This dreadful pestilence has for the third time visited our shores; on two former occasions, it has gone nearly over the same ground; it then seized on those places remarkable for their ill-judged position, or from the great neglect of means of cleanliness, adequate to extent and progress of the population.

Since the last visitation of Cholera, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Gateshead have made but little improvement in their condition, the numbers of persons have increased, particularly amongst the poor. The houses in many instances are so peculiarly placed that the one catches the refuse of the other. The river Tyne is even polluted with filth; and, without entering into distressing particulars, these towns were in 1853 the ready vehicle to convey this scourge once more to England. The pestilence has passed over its regular course. Who can say if Newcastle had been put into a proper state of defence to meet the enemy which will sweep away many thousands, this island might not have altogether escaped the visitation. The Plague, before the Fire of 1666, found constant harbour in London, and spread itself in different directions. After the Fire it only slightly attacked the metropolis and was speedily banished from the country.

We do not mean to state that the disease so fearfully known by the

them and their families in a wholesome manner, at a small yet remunerating cost.

A worse sanitary state of things could not well be than that in the neighbourhood of the Coal-yard, Drury-lane. Here are from sixteen to eighteen large families living in small, inconvenient apartments, above cow-sheds, donkey and horse stables, &c. Sometimes many cartloads of refuse are allowed to remain in the yard: the pavement is uneven, and filled here and there with stagnant water. It is shocking to see the squalid children attempting to play in such a place; and yet this place is within a stone's throw of the spot on which the Great Plague broke out, as may be seen by reference to the Parish-clerk's Reports, the Diaries of Evelyn and Pepys, and De Foe's Account of the Plague.

To the miserable condition of this filthy place, called "King's Arms-yard," attention has been lately called. The residences, in a sort of gallery, are ranged about what has been one immense retting dung-heap. Some efforts have been made to improve its condition; and there has been carted out of it a mass of decomposed filth, the stench of which was scarcely endurable. Close to this spot, the approach to which from Drury-lane has now, appropriately enough, a coffin-maker's shop on each side, the Great Plague of 1665 broke out; and here neglect, ignorance, and *laissez faire* prepare the way for a fresh pestilence. Most deeply is it to be regretted that at such a time as the present men should be found to lend the weight of an official position to obstruct endeavours to obtain improvement in the neglected portions of this two-sided metropolis, instead of giving their earnest aid, as they should do, in furtherance of them.