

Report to the General Board of Health on an inquiry as to the advisability of the application of the Public Health Act to the town of Bromyard, in the county of Hereford / by Henry Austin, Superintending Inspector.

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PUBLIC HEALTH ACT

(11 & 12 Vict. cap. 63.)

R E P O R T

TO THE

GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH

ON AN INQUIRY

**AS TO THE ADVISABILITY OF THE APPLICATION OF
THE PUBLIC HEALTH ACT**

TO THE TOWN OF

B R O M Y A R D,

IN THE COUNTY OF HEREFORD.

By HENRY AUSTIN, Esq.,



LONDON:

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PUBLIC HEALTH ACT (11 & 12 Vict. c. 63.)

Report on an Inquiry as to the advisability of the application of the Public Health Act to the Town of BROMYARD, in the County of Hereford.

TO THE GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

IN pursuance of your instructions that I should visit the town of Bromyard with the view to ascertain whether it would now be advisable to take further proceedings for applying the Public Health Act to that district, I proceeded to the spot on the 8th of last month ; and I have now the honour to lay before you the following report on this inquiry.

The Board will be aware that the preliminary inquiry in this town took place more than two years ago ; but considerable opposition having manifested itself, and numerous signed memorials having been received praying that the Act might not be applied to the town, the Board determined to delay for a time any further proceedings, until a better appreciation of the advantages to be derived from the application of the Act should arise among the inhabitants.

The opposition appeared to arise from two sources ; first, from the landowners and occupiers of the neighbourhood, whose property would be included within the boundary proposed by the Superintending Inspector as the district to which the Act should be applied ; and secondly, from certain inhabitants of the town who, apparently apprehensive of greatly-increased burdens, passed the following resolutions at a meeting held on the 15th August 1850 :—

First. “That in the opinion of this meeting it is inexpedient and unnecessary to put the town of Bromyard under the Public Health Act.”

Second. “That the sewerage of the town may be improved, and the nuisances therein removed, under the existing law, and particularly under the 50th section of the Public Health Act, without the ruinous expense which will be incurred if the Act be carried out according to the recommendation of the Superintending Inspector,—expenses which

many of the inhabitants cannot pay without great distress and privation."

Although other reasons than the bad sanitary condition of the town were set forth by the opponents to explain the high mortality of the district, the inhabitants, being well aware of its terribly bad state, then appear to have tried what could be done to improve it under the existing law. Application was made to the Board by the chief opponent, Mr. Badham, an attorney, to know if they "can take up through the Board sufficient money to carry out the wishes of the town in effecting such sewerage and other sanitary measures as may be deemed necessary and requisite, in the same way as if the works had been done under the immediate superintendence of the Board." An advertisement was subsequently issued with the view to the construction of sewers, the sinking of wells, and the putting up of pumps under the 50th section of the Public Health Act. After some time an offensive ditch appears to have been covered in; but, as might be expected, nothing whatever of an effectual nature was accomplished towards any general improvement of the town.

Urgent representations were then again made to the Board of the serious evils from which the town was still suffering; and that a considerable change of feeling had taken place with reference to the application of the Public Health Act: and I was directed, therefore, on visiting the spot to make such further inquiry as would satisfy the Board on these points, and would also remove the doubts which had been expressed as to the validity of the original petition to the Board.

Although the Public Health Act has been applied to districts of smaller population than Bromyard, in some of which it is working satisfactorily, the extent of this place, having only a population of about 1,200, is certainly less than would be usually desirable for its application, unless for most urgent reasons. The Board are aware of the great necessity that exists for amended powers of the Act applicable to small districts; but I cannot believe that a stronger case could be brought before them of the necessity of immediate measures than that of Bromyard. On consideration of the following facts, I feel assured that the Board will arrive at no other conclusion; and as I have reason to believe that a very effective Local Board may be established there, I do not hesitate in recommending the immediate application of the Act to this district.

As the general want of drainage and supply of water, and the bad sanitary condition of the town, had been explicitly

set forth in Mr. Babbage's report, and were not denied by the opponents, I turned my attention more especially to the conveniences and pecuniary considerations of the subject, as the dread of increased burdens appeared to have been the sole motive of the opposition.

I have met with no case in which the inhabitants were put to so much trouble and expense for want of water. A fire occurred not long since in the outskirts of the town, and so utterly deficient was the supply of water, that small beer and hog-wash were stated to have been thrown upon the flames. I found that the utmost alarm and dread existed for the safety of the town in the event of any outbreak of fire in the midst.

So generally inefficient are the wells and pumps in the town, that a large portion of the present supply is hauled in water-carts from the river. It appears from the estimates, and I can vouch for their sufficiency, that an unlimited supply of pure soft water would be obtained by means of new and complete works, at an average total expense under 2*d.* per week per house. The charge for water hauled from the river is 9*d.* per hogshead; and several parties informed me that they were frequently put to an expense of from 2*s.* to 4*s.* 6*d.* per week in the purchase of this water. Mr. Shelton, a surgeon, stated that he had hauled for his own use 140 hogsheads in nine months, making a constant charge of 2*s.* 8*d.* per week, for 33 gallons per day, whereas he would obtain, under the Act, an unlimited supply for about one tenth of this payment. Among the richest and poorest this heavy tax appeared to be alike shared. A labouring man working in the road, of whom the inquiry was casually made, informed me that while his rent was 1*s.* 2*d.* per week, the cost to which he was put for water was most frequently 7*d.* per week; and that he would gladly pay 3*d.* per week for a constancy for a good supply. This man's contribution towards the complete expense of works of drainage and water supply, and the whole current expenses of the working of the Public Health Act, would be under 1½*d.* per week.

The Vicar of Bromyard, the Rev. William Cooke, states in a letter of the 12th December last, "such is the scarcity of water that I think about 40 barrels are *daily* brought into the town from Petty bridge." And he adds, "If a fire should break out, what a situation to contemplate!"

The cost of this service alone would amount to an average of nearly 6*d.* per house per week over the whole town, a sum of itself considerably exceeding the whole cost of drainage and water supply and current expenses of the Public

Health Act, irrespective of the other annual savings enumerated by Mr. Babbage, and which he estimates also exceeding the amount required for complete works.

This expense, however, of haulage of water furnishes only a supply of about 1,700 gallons per day, concluding that the barrel means 42 gallons, whereas the quantity required for the town for unrestricted use would be nearly 30,000 gallons per day, being more than 17 times the quantity hauled, which would be supplied at less than one-third of the mere cost of haulage. Notwithstanding these facts I found that the only objection which the opponents to the Act could urge (beyond the selfish objection of the few who candidly admitted that they opposed because they had a good pump and well of their own) was the heavy expense to which the town would be subjected. As the vicar appeared to have taken some part in opposition evidently under great misapprehension on the question of expense, and had stated that he had never entertained an opinion that such a measure was expedient for the town of Bromyard, I endeavoured to explain to that gentleman that the arguments which were used in opposition to the Public Health Act were precisely those which should be employed on the contrary, against any delay in its application; thus leaving out of consideration the health and comfort of the inhabitants, and the general improvement of the town, and viewing it only as a question of direct expenditure, that instead of increased burdens a large annual saving of money would actually result from the application of the Act. While, on the other hand, although the existing law would not enable them to effect the required improvements or remove the evils from which the town was so greatly suffering, it necessitated that the whole burden of the expense of whatever was attempted to be carried out should wholly and immediately fall upon the present ratepayers.

Supposing that the existing law did afford powers for carrying out these works as stated, and supposing that in order to lighten the burden their execution was extended over four years, the proposition might be put to the ratepayers thus:—you have now an annual tax upon you of about 1*l.* 16*s.* per house per annum for sundry things which will be saved when these works are executed. The cost of the works over four years will be about 2*l.* 4*s.* per house per annum; would you rather continue to pay this total of 4*l.* per annum for four years before you get the benefit of the works, or pay 10*s.* per annum, the amount of the necessary charge distributed over 30 years, and obtain the advantage of the works and the removal of present burdens immediately?

The original petition for the application of the Public Health Act proceeded from the "Town of Bromyard," and I have ascertained beyond a doubt that it has a known and defined boundary. Mr. Babbage proposed a new and somewhat extended boundary for the application of the Act; but I am not prepared, under the circumstances, to recommend its adoption. The existing boundary may not be precisely the best, but as any alteration now would involve considerable delay in the application of the Act, and any desired change in this respect may be accomplished without difficulty at a future period, I would beg to recommend the application of the Act at once by Order in Council to the place from which the petition emanated.

I am happy to say that the Vicar of Bromyard expressed himself anxious only to promote the welfare of the town; and I have reason to hope that upon the explanations afforded, he will with this view zealously aid in carrying out the provisions of the Act.

To Mr. Howey and several other gentlemen whom I had the pleasure of meeting, the gratitude of the inhabitants will be due for the steady and persevering manner in which they have promoted the interests of the town in this important question.

I have the honour to be,

My Lords and Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

HENRY AUSTIN.

Whitehall,
11th May 1852.

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