

Report to the General Board of Health on the state of the burial grounds in the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme / by William Lee, Superintending Inspector.

Contributors

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PUBLIC HEALTH ACT

(11 & 12 Vict., Cap. 63.)

*another copy
in Vol. 15*

REPORT

TO THE

GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH

ON THE

STATE OF THE BURIAL-GROUNDS

IN THE BOROUGH OF

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME.

By **WILLIAM LEE, Esq.**

SUPERINTENDING INSPECTOR.



LONDON:

PRINTED BY W. CLOWES & SONS, STAMFORD STREET,

FOR HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE.

1851.

PUBLIC HEALTH ACT

(11 & 12 Vict. Cap. 63)

REPORT

TO THE

GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH

NOTIFICATION.

THE General Board of Health hereby give notice, in terms of section 9th of the Public Health Act, that on or before the 30th August next, being a period of not less than one month from the date of the publication and deposit hereof, written statements may be forwarded to the Board with respect to any matter contained in or omitted from the accompanying Report on the State of the Burial Grounds in the Borough of NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME; or with respect to any amendment to be proposed therein.

By order of the Board,

HENRY AUSTIN, *Secretary.*

Whitehall, 14th July, 1851.

BY WILLIAM LEE, Esq.

PRINTED BY W. GOWER & SONS, STAMFORD STREET,



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FOR THE GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH.

1851.

PUBLIC HEALTH ACT (11 and 12 Vict., cap. 63.)

Report to the General Board of Health on the State of the Burial-grounds in the Borough of NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME. By WILLIAM LEE, Superintending Inspector.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

Whitehall, 29th May, 1851.

THE Report which I have the honour of presenting is based on a communication, of which the following is a copy:—

*“ Newcastle-under-Lyme, Local Board of Health,
“ (Clerk’s Department), 21st April, 1851.*

“ GENTLEMEN,

“ I AM instructed to inform you that this Board, at a meeting held on the 17th instant to consider the present state of the grave-yards within their jurisdiction, agreed on the propriety of forthwith closing the same, and resolved that an application be made to your Board for a Superintending Inspector to be sent down for the purpose of examining into the same, and reporting thereon. Should any further official notice be required, you will be good enough to let me hear.

“ I have the honour to be, Gentlemen,

Your obedient Servant,

(Signed) THOMAS FENTON,
Clerk to the said Board.”

“ *The General Board of Health,*”

&c.

&c.

This being such a representation as was required by the 82nd section of the Public Health Act, you were pleased to direct that I should make an inquiry and report, as to

I. Whether any burial-ground within the district is in such a state as to be dangerous to the health of persons living in the neighbourhood thereof.

II. Whether any church or other place of public worship within the district is dangerous to the health of persons frequenting the same, by reason of the surcharged state of the vaults or graves within the walls or underneath the same.

III. Whether sufficient means of interment exist within a convenient distance from such burial-ground, church, or place of public worship.

In pursuance of such directions I gave notice to the following effect:—

Public Health Act, 1848, 11 and 12 Vict., cap. 63.

NOTICE.

WHEREAS in pursuance of the Public Health Act, 1848, upon the representation of the Local Board of Health for the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme in the county of Stafford, that the burial-grounds within the said borough are in such a state as to be dangerous to the health of persons living in the neighbourhood thereof, the General Board of Health have directed me, William Lee, one of the Superintending Inspectors appointed for the purposes of the said Act, to visit the said borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, and there to make public inquiry, and examine witnesses with respect to the state of the said burial-grounds:

Now, therefore, I, the said William Lee, do hereby give notice, that on the twenty-third day of May now next, at 10 o'clock in the forenoon, at the Town Hall, I will proceed upon the said inquiry, and that I shall then and there be prepared to hear all persons desirous of being heard before me upon the subject of the said inquiry.

Dated this thirtieth day of April, 1851.

WILLIAM LEE.

The inquiry was opened at the time and place above mentioned. John Smith, the town crier, proved that copies of the above notice had been duly affixed as required by the Act, and the newspapers usually circulated in the district, containing a similar notice, were put in.

Edward Wilson, Esq., M.D., mayor of the borough, and senior physician to the North Staffordshire Infirmary; George John Wood, Esq., M.D., officer of health; the Rev. Samuel Broad, Incumbent of St. George's chapelry district; Mr. Robert Chapman, surveyor to the Local Board, and one of the parish churchwardens; Thomas Fenton, Esq., solicitor, clerk to the Local Board; and Mr. John Thomas Blood, inspector of nuisances, were in attendance; as well as those of the inhabitants who felt an interest in the inquiry.

I briefly explained that the Public Health Act would not authorise any scheme for the formation and management of a new parochial cemetery under the jurisdiction of the Local Board, and that the more extensive powers of the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Amendment Act were not applicable to any district in which the Public Health Act is in operation.

The present condition of three out of the four burial-grounds in the borough, and certain recent events to which I shall have to allude hereafter, have strongly impressed the local authorities with the importance of a more comprehensive measure for the extramural interment of the dead, and I was requested to urge as strongly as possible upon your honourable Board, the necessity for an Act of Parliament to prohibit future in-

terments in towns, and that, if possible, such Act should be passed during the present session of parliament.

It is unnecessary that I should quote here the evidence contained in my Report on the sanitary condition of Newcastle in 1849. Much of that was reprinted under your direction, in the summary of my experience as to town interments, presented early in the present year, and has since been incorporated with the Report on "Extra-mural Sepulture in Country Towns," presented by your Honourable Board to Her Majesty.

At the recent inquiry, however, I thought proper to direct the attention of the medical witnesses to the evidence given in 1849,* in order to ascertain how far such evidence was applicable to the same burial-grounds now.

George John Wood, Esq., M.D., Officer of Health for the borough, said :—

"I was present at nearly the whole of the preliminary inquiry into the sanitary condition of Newcastle, held by you in 1849. I heard the evidence of Dr. Wilson, Dr. Gooday, and of Mr. Hallam, Mr. Spark, and Mr. Dudley, surgeons. I generally coincide with that evidence. I have had frequent opportunities of assuring myself of its correctness. I have looked at the burial-grounds within the last week. They are not in any better condition than they were in in November, 1849. I am now only referring to the old church, and the Wesleyan chapel yard. The interments in the old church yard have not been so numerous since the preliminary inquiry, but they still bury the dead there. I am not aware that any actual restriction has been made, but one cause of the diminution has been the lower rate of mortality during the last year. As to the other burial-grounds, I know of no alteration. I should say that the additional interments have made them all generally worse. I think the Wesleyan burial-ground is very objectionable. It is above the level of the street. It is situated in Lower Street. I have known epidemic disease in that street, and also in the street running alongside of the burial ground. Cholera and typhus fever have been in the vicinity of that burial-ground. Of course there were cholera and typhus fever cases in other parts not contiguous to the chapel and churchyards, but I should say, that a crowded burial-ground would be very likely to aggravate cholera and typhus fever in its vicinity. Beside those of the two churches and the Wesleyan, the only other burial-ground is the Roman Catholic chapel ground. I do not know the condition of that, it is the most recent one, very small, and with houses close to it, but not contiguous. The interments have not been very numerous. I should say that many interments could not take place there with safety to the inhabitants of the immediate neighbourhood. I disagree with what Mr. Spark said as to the drainage from St. George's churchyard, towards the row of houses in which he then lived. He had a fatal case of cholera in his house at that time, and probably that would make him more sensitive, but the distance from the churchyard is considerable. I think, that if the other burial-grounds were closed, St. George's might remain open for a while with safety to the inhabitants; at any rate, so

* See Report on Newcastle-under-Lyme, pp. 14 and 32.

long as might be necessary with respect to any contemplated general Act of Parliament, for the prohibition of town interments, and further until such Act of Parliament could be brought into operation here; but I would advise that the graves should be kept as far from the houses as possible. I have not thought on the subject of whether the graves should ever be allowed to be re-opened."

Edward Wilson, Esq., M.D., said:—

"I am mayor of Newcastle, at present. I have examined what I said as to the burial-grounds at the preliminary inquiry, and I adhere to what I then stated. Interments have continued from that time to the present in all of them. Any alteration in their condition will therefore be for the worse. I have nothing further to add, except that I have been at a funeral since you visited this town, where the body was not inclosed in lead, the coffin was certainly within a foot, I should think within nine inches of the surface. That was in the parish churchyard, in March last. It is the only parochial burial-ground. Generally, in my opinion, all the burial grounds in the town ought to be closed, on the principle that all grave-yards should be extra-mural; and, because the parish churchyard is already surcharged with decaying animal matter, and the grave-yard attached to St. George's, though not at the present moment overcrowded, would soon become so, if it was the only place of interment in the borough."

Mr. Robert Chapman examined, said—

"I am surveyor to the Local Board of Health, and I am also the rector's warden of the parish church. I know that the parish churchyard is in such a state that it ought not to receive any more bodies, as far as I am able to judge.

"Some time ago it was discovered that there had been a practice of burning the old coffins to get rid of them. I believe it prevailed to a considerable extent, and the late beadle said that it had been practised for many years. The burning was done underneath the church to light the fires that warmed the church. His salary included the finding of firewood. There was an investigation into the circumstances by a vestry meeting. I was churchwarden then. The beadle said in his defence that during the seven or eight years he had been beadle he had spent a shilling or two in firewood. We did not ascertain how he got the timber; he was not the sexton. He was discharged from his office.

"The grave-digger pleaded that these coffins were disinterred in consequence of the surcharged state of the burial ground. We could not bring home to either him or the sexton any *arrangement* as to the use of the wood. The sexton resigned his office, and that precluded any inquiry as to him. The gravedigger was the servant of the sexton, and of course ceased to hold office when the sexton resigned. He has not been employed since. It is three or four months since the investigation took place.

"I went to look at the first grave dug by the newly appointed sexton, and I saw it was dug from north to south, contrary to the usual direction, which is from east to west. That was in consequence of their being unable to get down in any other place. There were three coffins visible and yet the grave was certainly not a yard deep. That grave was also sunk within a foot of a stone, covering a man who died of cholera. I

noticed the funeral alluded to by the mayor. *The greater part of the coffin was most certainly above the surface of the ground.* It is covered by a table tomb.

"The clerk tells me that there is room for many interments, but my opinion is that if many more be allowed we shall have to go down stairs into the church.

"I have frequently observed the percolations through the churchyard wall into Church-street. Upwards of thirty years ago I used to attend a school that stood in the churchyard. The wall of that school was then always in a damp state, and had a peculiarly offensive odour. The school has been pulled down many years, but I mention the fact to show that at that time the ground was crowded with bodies.

"I believe the boring rod is regularly used. I saw it in operation about six weeks ago, and observed that it was very bright.

"I live very near the Wesleyan burial ground, and I think it highly objectionable that any interments should take place there. The surface of the ground is considerably elevated above the street, and passages and places; and at the time of the cholera there was scarcely a house in which there was not a death, and in some more than one. Several of those houses have never been occupied since the cholera until recently; and one, the closest to the chapel yard is still empty. The burials in this ground are now few.

"The Roman Catholic burial-ground is a very small space, and I understand that nearly the whole of the low Irish who die in the town are interred there. I think it is quite unfit to be retained as a grave-yard. The priest said the annual average number of interments was fifty, but the sexton gives only thirty. I think it has been used about five years. The ground is surrounded by a rather high wall and the chapel, and there is very little access of free air."

Mr. John Thomas Blood, Inspector of Nuisances, put in the dimensions of the Wesleyan burial ground; 89 feet by 80 feet; and of the Roman Catholic ground, 70 feet by 22 feet.

Mr. William Barratt, examined, said—

"I am grave-digger at the parish church, employed by the new sexton. I was also employed for six or seven years by the late sexton. I was not the grave-digger at the time when those bad proceedings took place of which the churchwarden has spoken. About August 11th, 1849, I was employed to dig a grave for Mr. John Brown a town-councillor who had died of cholera, and during the digging we had to take his wife out of the grave. *I believe she had only been buried one year*, we were going to dig twelve feet deep. When we were about ten feet deep a mass of earth fell upon me, and brought down some human remains, and coffins, decayed, and one whole coffin of a child. I was buried up to the breast in it. I extricated myself, and went down to Mr. Brown's house, and told them they must put the funeral off until six o'clock at night, and they did so. We got the grave ready, and they brought the corpse, when we lowered the coffin the grave was found not to be wide enough. They raised the head of the coffin and I went down to widen the bottom, and during the time I was doing so I was taken ill. I had struck a coffin, and a quantity of corruption came out, and the stench overpowered me. I was pulled out with a rope. I then walked a short

distance and fell. The people did what they could to restore me by friction, and giving me brandy, and I was taken home, and the police cleared the churchyard. A great crowd had assembled, for it was reported that I had died in the grave. I was taken ill of the cholera the same day, and was not able to work again until the latter end of October. I was on the sick club all the time. I had a wife and six children then.

“My knowledge as grave-digger extends over about seven years, and *if I come to a place that I know has not been opened within that time I do not use the rod.* I use it however frequently. I could get five feet deep with a few graves, but I won't say with many, without disturbing bodies or coffins. *I will not say that I could find twenty such.*”

On returning to my rooms after receiving the above evidence, I found a printed hand-bill, enclosed in an envelope without any note. It appears to be an address from the lately discharged beadle of the parish church to his fellow townsmen in self justification, and is written throughout in such a flip-pant and egotistical style, interlarded with passages of Scripture, that I should not have noticed it here, but for one passage, which reveals the ordinary motives that actuate the officials to whose responsibility and humanity, if such terms are applicable, is committed the future charge of the remains of the deceased. The observations of this man imply more than is apparent on a cursory reading; and they would be equally applicable to the “Desecrators” in most other towns, as to those of Newcastle. He says:—

“But, by-the-by, *we* may remark that it is curious to observe how exceedingly culpable I must be, and yet no one seemed disposed to drag forward the sexton, and yet it was *he*, whose iron instrument, the spade, had been forced into the coffins, and thus brought about something more like desecration. We cannot accuse the poor fellow, who was generally employed by him, as he had but the paltry pittance of a *shilling* for digging a grave *six* feet deep! we cannot expect him to give way to an obstruction, throw in the soil again, and break up ground elsewhere, as by doing so he would subject himself to a greater amount of labour, with the certainty of not being able to obtain one farthing more.”

Thus the man who lights the church fires with coffin-wood, to save his own pocket, justifies himself by implicating the sexton in having previously desecrated the grave, and produced him the materials; and shows further that self interest is a sufficient motive with both sexton and grave-digger, for practices that would be considered crimes against the laws of nature, even amongst savages.

Those awful words, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” however reverently spoken over the grave, and with whatever emotion heard by weeping survivors of the dead, must appear to the “Desecrators” merely as one of the mysteries of their craft, or at the best a solemn mockery. The

present grave-digger, evidently a humane man naturally, but with feelings blunted by the present system of town interments, does not think it necessary even to use the searcher, when he knows that any grave has not been opened for seven years;—less than one-third of the time required for the decomposition of a human body in such a soil.

The returns furnished to me at the inquiry in 1849, show that the parish churchyard affords room for 1,757 graves, each seven feet long, and three feet wide; that during twenty years preceding, the interments had been 3,838, and that consequently the whole of the ground would be turned over within the short space of nine years.

Since that time above 160 human bodies have been interred in the same ground, although the grave-digger in his evidence doubts whether he could find 20 graves five feet deep, without coffins or bones.

I was unable to obtain the number of interments in the Wesleyan chapel ground, because no register has been kept, but I cannot doubt after the evidence of Dr. Wood, the officer of Health, and Mr. Chapman, the Local Surveyor, that this, as well as the parish burial-ground, ought to be closed immediately.

The Roman Catholic burial-ground is equal to 73 graves, and though the priest states the annual interments at 50, yet if we only take them at the number given by the sexton, namely 30, we shall obtain in 5 years 150 burials. There cannot be a doubt therefore that future interments should be prohibited.

I have deferred until now the consideration of the burial-ground attached to St. George's church. It is extensive, and farther from the dense part of the town than any of the other burial-grounds. The part above the church, and for a short distance below, has been much used for interments, but, the greater part of an acre, though consecrated in 1829, has not been at all used. This is the lower part of the ground, approaching the houses, and some doubt has been expressed that water would be found in the graves, unless artificially drained. The aspect of the land is southerly and the drainage would be towards the town. The soil is not unsuitable for interments, though a better might be found, if this were not already provided for the purpose.

The following return was put in by the incumbent, showing the annual interments in this ground from the opening in 1829.

FUNERALS in each Year at St. George's, Newcastle-under-Lyme, from Consecration to May 21, 1851.

Year.	Burials.	Year.	Burials.
1829	7	Brought up	640
1830	18	1841	66
1831	38	1842	107
1832*	89	1843	72
1833	39	1844	64
1834	58	1845	55
1835	50	1846	87
1836	70	1847	134
1837	61	1848	100
1838	80	1849†	268
1839	58	1850	103
1840	72	1851 (to May 21)	42
Carried up	640	Total	1,738

Rev. Samuel Broad examined, said—

“ I am incumbent of St. George's Chapelry District, constituted by the Church Building Commissioners, and consequently a parish for ecclesiastical purposes. The district was constituted in 1844. The church was erected under the Million Act, and consecrated in 1828. I have been incumbent since 1840. The first funeral took place in April 1829. The gross amount of interments from the commencement to the 21st of this month, is 1,738. Until the last visitation of cholera, the upper part of the ground above the church only was used. At the time of the cholera, and since, a portion of the ground next below the church has been used. In round numbers one-third only of the ground has been used for interments. The whole of the ground is consecrated, and the remaining two-thirds is let for grazing. It was so when I took the incumbency, and has remained so. The rental was up to 1849, 7*l.* 7*s.*, it is now, 4*l.* 4*s.* The reason why it was let, was that it was not then wanted for interments. I understand that there is an agreement that the tenant shall give up possession at any time when the land may be required. I do not know of any obstacle to its being used for interments if necessary, even to-morrow. The upper burial-ground has been mostly used, but as far as I have had anything to do with it, great care has been taken to prevent its being overcrowded. I should not object to the closing of the upper part, with the exception of acquired rights of interment.”

Mr. George Cooper examined—

“ At the time when St. George's church was erected, I was churchwarden of the parish, and when that church was opened, I became churchwarden of both, being re-elected and serving office two years. As such, I was privy to the purchase of the land, being a party concerned. The purchase money was upwards of 1,600*l.*, borrowed under the authority of the Act, and now nearly repaid out of the church rates levied on the parish. The rent of the land has always been paid to the

* 57 cholera interments included.

† 172 cholera interments included.

incumbent for the time being. I believe the time has now arrived when the land should be devoted to burial purposes, and cease to be let for grazing, and if it be applied to its legitimate purpose, the town would be sufficiently supplied with burial-ground for 30 years to come."

I must say that I disagree with Mr. Cooper as to the adequacy of St. George's churchyard, as a permanent burial-ground for the borough, but I think it may be used with safety until more comprehensive arrangements can be brought into operation.

The Town Council, as the Local Board of Health, had very properly turned their attention to several plots of land at convenient distances from the town, and suitable for the formation of a suburban parochial cemetery.

During the inspection of the existing burial-grounds, I examined several of these sites, but in the present state of the law, no utility would result from any consideration of the subject.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

I. That the condition of the burial-ground connected with the parish church of Newcastle-under-Lyme, is such as to endanger the health of persons living in the neighbourhood thereof, and is proved by the testimony of local medical practitioners to have been productive of much disease and death.

II. That the burial-ground in front of the Wesleyan chapel, in the same town, is in such a state as to be dangerous to the health of persons living in the neighbourhood thereof, and is stated to have aggravated the symptoms of diseases existing in its vicinity.

III. That the burial-ground behind the Roman Catholic chapel is very limited in extent, and though only opened about five years since, has already received two layers of human bodies, and is therefore already in a state dangerous to the health of persons living in the neighbourhood thereof.

IV. That, saving the rights of the owners of existing vaults and graves, no further interments should take place in that portion of St. George's burial-ground above the church.

V. That the lower part, consisting of more than half of the whole area of St. George's burial-ground, has not, though consecrated, been hitherto used for interments; and that, therefore, sufficient means of interment exist within a convenient distance from the three previously mentioned burial-grounds.

WHEREUPON I RECOMMEND :

I. That your Honourable Board should certify the above facts, and take such other steps as may be neces-

sary for closing the burial-ground connected with the parish church of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the burial-ground connected with the Wesleyan chapel in the same town, and also, the burial-ground connected with the Roman Catholic chapel in the same town, and for preventing all future interments therein.

II. That your Honourable Board should press upon Her Majesty's Government, the urgent necessity existing for a general and comprehensive legislative enactment to provide for extra-mural sepulture in country towns.

I have the honour to be,

My Lords and Gentlemen,

Your obedient Servant,

WILLIAM LEE.

The General Board of Health

§c. §c. §c.