

## **Overcrowding and typhus / by Conway Evans.**

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### **Publication/Creation**

London : Bradbury, Evans, 1865.

### **Persistent URL**

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3

# OVERCROWDING

AND

# TYPHUS.

BY

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[*Reprinted from* THE STANDARD.]



LONDON:  
BRADBURY, EVANS, & CO., 11, BOUVERIE STREET.

1865.

ORGANIZATION

TABLE

1

2

CONTENTS

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20



# O V E R C R O W D I N G

AND

## T Y P H U S.

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TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STANDARD."

SIR: Public attention has lately been prominently directed by one of your contemporaries to the recent prevalence of FEVER in London, mainly in consequence of a communication addressed to the *Times* by the resident medical officer of the London Fever Hospital, who, from an examination of the records of that institution, was enabled to enumerate certain localities in various parts of the metropolis in which cases of this malady are of such common occurrence that they have earned for themselves the undesirable appellation *fever-nests*.

As at the present moment there appears to exist on all sides a gradually increasing tendency to the belief that some, at least, of the metropolitan local authorities are altogether neglectful of the duties for the discharge of which they have been called into existence by Act of Parliament, and as several of these so-called fever-nests happen to be situate in the district with the public health of which it has been my privilege to be officially connected for the last ten years, I venture to request a portion of your space for the purpose of examining this important question; endeavouring, on the one hand, to explain why it is that the localities which have been thus prominently alluded to are so frequently generating disease or fostering its spread, and, at the same time,



indicating the measures which have been, and still are being, adopted with the view of rendering these neighbourhoods more healthful; and, on the other hand, while carefully pointing out the great practical difficulties by which, in the existing state of the law and in the very nature of the circumstances themselves which have to be dealt with, all attempts earnestly to grapple with this subject are of necessity beset, to offer such suggestions as an official experience of upwards of ten years, both as health officer and physician, in the most densely peopled district of London enables me to make, in the hope that by the publicity thus obtained these suggestions, or such modifications of them as may be deemed expedient, may during the next session of Parliament be duly incorporated into law.

Limiting the inquiry for the moment to that portion of London, the state of the public health of which is my official concern, the following numbers indicate at a glance the main facts in regard of the prevalence of fever during the last fourteen years. From an examination of these numbers it will be seen that, so far as relates to this district, a marked increase has unquestionably taken place in the occurrence and spread of this disease during the past three years.

	Cases of Fever admitted out of the Strand District, into King's College Hospital and the London Fever Hospital.	Deaths from Fever in the Strand District.
Annual average of the five years, 1851-56 . . . . .	72	
Year ending Lady-day, 1857 . . . . .	85	48
"    "    1858 . . . . .	59	37
"    "    1859 . . . . .	27	33
"    "    1860 . . . . .	32	31
"    "    1861 . . . . .	19	17
"    "    1862 . . . . .	45	28
"    "    1863 . . . . .	88	59
"    "    1864 . . . . .	71	46
"    "    1865 . . . . .	178	57

Among the so-termed fever-nests, to the existence of which



the attention of the public has been directed as such constant sources of supply to the wards of the London Fever Hospital, special mention has been made of Ship Yard, Newcastle Court, Middle Serle's Place, and Clement's Lane, all of which are situate in the parish of St. Clement Danes, in close proximity to the Strand, a little westward of Temple Bar. In the months of June and July last every house in each of these streets or courts was inspected by my direction, and it is consequently in my power to afford tolerably accurate information in respect of their then condition. In 123 houses, situate in these four localities, there were at the time referred to 869 inhabited rooms, which were peopled by 653 separate families, numbering in all 2050 persons. But, inasmuch as the last-named total is that admitted by the residents themselves, the actual number of inhabitants must probably be estimated as decidedly in excess of this; for it by no means uncommonly happens that lodgers are taken in during the night by persons occupying houses of this class. In no instance, so far as could be ascertained, was any room occupied by more than a single family.

In times not very remote most of these houses were the residence of a separate family; but, as the tide of fashion and wealth has surged westward, they have progressively fallen in the social scale until the present day, when the number of families occupying every house is but too frequently coincident with that of the rooms of which it consists. The chief exception to this—and it is one which exercises a not unimportant influence upon the state of houses of this class—has reference to the underground rooms or cellars. In former days, when each of these houses was the residence of a single family, the one or two rooms in the basement of every house constituted the ordinary kitchen of the dwelling; but, as the families residing in each house have gradually become more and more numerous, these



underground rooms have for the most part ceased to be inhabited at all, their occupation as separate tenancies having been rendered illegal by the Metropolis Local Management Act (sect. ciii.); and as in not a few of these dwellings there is no kind of open space at the rear, or at most but a small back yard, these underground rooms or cellars have become fixed upon as the site of the water-closet, common to all the families occupying the house, and in some instances also as the position in which the dust-bin and water-receptacle are placed. The result of these arrangements is not difficult to conceive, though their effects in some cases are almost too disgusting to describe. The dust-bin, instead of being restricted to its intended and legitimate purpose, becomes the general receiver of vegetable and other refuse; the water-closet speedily assumes so filthy a condition that the object for which it was designed is rendered impossible of accomplishment, and it becomes converted into a kind of receptacle for human excreta; while the noxious gases emanating from one or both these sources are but too frequently absorbed by the water in the butt or cistern close at hand, from which the daily supply of the inmates is often derived. In extreme cases, indeed, the condition of things is even worse than this; for instances have come under my cognizance in which some of the inmates would do no more than advance to the top of the cellar or kitchen staircase, and, utterly regardless of consequences, throw everything down into the regions below. Is it to be wondered at if, under such circumstances as these, the number of families resident in each house being borne in mind, cases of fever should arise, or if, this disease being imported into these localities, it should rapidly spread; or is it not rather matter of surprise that the prevalence of this and kindred disorders is not greater and more constant? For it cannot be too generally known that fever must be regarded as the type of



a class of maladies, more or less destructive to life, which originate in the exposure of human beings to organic matter in a certain condition of change, and which, though each endowed with its own special peculiarities, spread with greater or less rapidity and certainty. The conditions which appear to be necessary to the origination of these diseases may be briefly summed up in the word *dirt*—dirty atmosphere, dirty raiment, dirty skin, dirty drink, dirty food. The circumstances which favour their spread, in addition to those above enumerated, and to infectious emanations from persons labouring under these disorders, may be succinctly described as anything which tends to depress or lower the action of that force, or combination of forces, which are peculiar to living creatures, commonly termed *vital power*, such as deficient food, over-work, exposure to wet and cold, intemperance, anxiety, &c. To what extent these conditions are sometimes fulfilled in certain of the houses which have been designated fever-nests, it is unnecessary in this place to determine.

But how does it happen that circumstances such as those which have been described can now-a-days occur? Are the local authorities ignorant of their existence; or, acquainted with it, do they remain perfectly passive and put forth no effort towards remedying such evils? Are the Metropolis Local Management Acts, the Nuisances Removal Acts, and others allied to them which have of late years been passed, altogether useless? The local authorities, as will presently appear, are not by any means in all instances inactive; but the law is inadequate to meet the exigencies of the case. To this must be added two other important influences, viz., the effects induced by non-residence on the part of the landlords, and, but too often, the habits of the people themselves. These habits, it must be remarked, are not, as might be expected, exclusively confined to the un-



educated; but instances have come under my notice in which persons, reduced by reverse of circumstances from a higher position in the social scale so as at length to be compelled to reside in these houses, have become, apparently from apathy or disregard of all around them, among the most prominent in rendering their homes sources of disease. Immediately such conditions as those above narrated are known, they are, so far as the law permits, vigorously dealt with: in this respect, indeed, a point is strained, and houses of this class are regularly and systematically inspected, without any formal complaint being made as to their state or condition. After report to the local authority, orders are duly served upon the landlords, and the requisite cleansing, lime-washing, draining, ventilating, water-closet restoring, and other similar matters are enforced, if need be, under order of the magistrates. But with what result? For a little while—often a very little while—the general condition of things is decidedly ameliorated; but the interval which elapses is rarely long before the premises so improved revert to their former condition. To so great a degree, indeed, is this the case, that a stranger, in going over a house of this class, would sometimes have difficulty in believing that any such works as those indicated had been carried out, although the builder's men have completed their operations scarcely a fortnight or three weeks previously. Hence it is that these localities obtain such unenviable notoriety as nests of disease. And now it will be understood how really difficult is the task to suggest any practical remedy for the alleviation of their condition. In illustration of this it needs only to be remarked that in no fewer than 74 of the 123 houses in the streets already alluded to were works of sanitary improvement ordered by the local authority in July last; and that, although in 64 of these such works have been completed, leaving 10 only undone, and in which the usual legal formulæ



are being complied with, yet many of these are already falling back into their former state.

Are the evils now described in these densely crowded districts inevitable? Can nothing be done to relieve them? To answer this question, a brief survey must be taken of the state of the law, and its mode of administration, in relation to this subject. In 1855 London, mapped out into a number of districts, was by the Metropolis Local Management Act placed for purposes of local self-government under the control of a corresponding number of responsible bodies elected annually from among the householders of the respective districts; and upon these bodies, termed local authorities, certain powers were conferred, with the view of enabling them to carry into effect the provisions of several Acts of Parliament (to which additions have since been made), which it is unnecessary here to enumerate. Some of the duties devolving on the local authority under these Acts are made *compulsory*, and these, it is believed, are very generally carried out; others, however, are merely *permissive*, and these are by no means so constantly acted upon, it being a natural consequence that among many independent authorities—amounting in all to nearly forty—considerable differences of opinion should obtain as to the expediency or otherwise of many of them. A somewhat anomalous condition of things is the result; for it sometimes happens that measures which are rigidly enforced in one locality are almost entirely disregarded in an adjoining district. For example: in one district the use of certain underground rooms as separate tenancies is strictly prevented, while in a neighbouring one such illegal occupation is but little interfered with. Again, in one parish, cow-houses are not suffered to exist; while in an adjacent, and perhaps more thickly-peopled one, not only are cow-houses allowed to be licensed, but unlicensed ones also are per-



mitted to be maintained in defiance of the law. It cannot be questioned that this unequal state of things ought not to exist; the law, whether it be just or whether it be unjust, should be the same, and should be administered alike throughout the whole metropolis. But, in addition to this, the law itself is defective, not conferring sufficient powers upon the local authorities, as will presently be shown, to enable them satisfactorily to deal with such localities as those now under consideration.

Among the most striking features of the present century is the tendency of the people to aggregate together in towns, and nowhere is this feature more strongly marked than in London. When this tendency is considered in relation to the increase of population on the one hand, and, more especially in the central metropolitan districts, in connection with the diminution which is taking place in the number of houses (for railways, public buildings, printing offices, and similar establishments) on the other, it must be evident that such localities must annually become more and more densely peopled, and that therefore the conditions favourable to the development and spread of fever and allied diseases must of necessity be undergoing increase. In 1841 the Strand district contained 4511 houses and a population of 43,566; ten years later the number of houses had fallen to 4189, but the population had increased to 44,417; while in 1861 the number of houses had undergone a further diminution to 4074, but the population, as then returned, had also apparently decreased (42,938), though there are good reasons for believing that it was then likewise nearly equal to that of 1851. In other words, the number of houses diminished during this period by about a tenth, while the population (on the last-named assumption) practically remained stationary. More than this, places in which people work or carry on business are in these dis-



tricts continually increasing, while houses in which they can reside are at the same time becoming fewer. Experience shows that great metropolitan improvements, whereby houses in poorer neighbourhoods are demolished, by no means disperse the resident population in the manner which might be anticipated; but they tend rather to prove that no inconsiderable proportion of the families so displaced merely migrate to the nearest courts and streets, and there provide themselves with homes by converting the house, up to this time occupied by a single family, into one tenanted by nearly as many families as the rooms which it contains.

The only legal means at present existing for dealing with overcrowding are those comprised in sect. xxix. of the Nuisances Removal Act, by which it is enacted that whenever a house, occupied by more than one family, is so overcrowded as to be dangerous or prejudicial to the health of the inhabitants, the local authority shall, upon the certificate of the officer of health, cause proceedings for the abatement of such overcrowding to be taken before the justices, who are empowered to make such order as they may think fit, and to inflict a penalty not exceeding forty shillings upon the person permitting such overcrowding; and in several instances the overcrowding here defined has been decided by the magistrates to exist when the amount of space to each inmate has fallen short of 400 cubic feet. But the case of many a family in the central districts of London is this:—a small room is the home of a man, who, compelled to reside within a certain distance (or rather time) of his work, and earning from seventeen to twenty shillings weekly, has to maintain a wife and four or five—perhaps, indeed, six or seven—children. The three shillings, or three and sixpence, a week which he pays by way of rent are the utmost which his means will afford; and yet this is quite insufficient to provide the needful amount of space for his family,



who, in point of fact, become under such circumstances so closely packed together as necessarily to tend to the induction of disease. Here lies the real difficulty: for what, under such circumstances, is a man to do? Two rooms are to him unattainable, for his rental already amounts to about a sixth of his income, and farther from his work-place he cannot go. This difficulty, too, becomes further enhanced by the absence of all influence for good on the part of the landlords, who, being almost invariably non-resident, content themselves with merely protecting their own interests in having the rent collected by an agent every week, and but too frequently pay little regard to anything else, so long as this is regularly forthcoming. The increased rental, also, which these houses command when let out to a number of families, as compared with one or two, affords a still further inducement towards augmenting these evils.

This state of overcrowding, unless put a stop to by legislative enactment, must of necessity go on increasing; in the district referred to, indeed, the demolition of a large number of houses for the site of the New Law Courts will ere long take place, and then it will be found that here, as elsewhere, many of those who now inhabit them will continue to reside in the immediate neighbourhood, to which further inducements are offered by the local charities peculiar to that parish.

The practical measures for remedying this overcrowding and its attendant evils are comprised in the following recommendations,\* several of which it was my duty to urge upon the local authority upwards of seven years ago, but which involve, for their due carrying into effect, an Act of Parliament:—

I.—It should be rendered compulsory that every house,

\* Second Annual Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Strand District, London, pp. 76, 77.



the rooms of which are let out as separate tenancies, should be duly *registered* by the local authority of the district in which it is situate; and a *register* should be kept in the office of the local authority for public inspection, within reasonable hours, specifying the number of persons permitted to occupy each room of such house, this number being based upon actual examination by, and certificate of the proper officer to the local authority.

II.—Whenever fever, or other infectious disease, exists in a house occupied by more than one family, and there are good reasons for believing that other inmates of the house or room will take the disease, the justices should be empowered, upon the certificate of the officer of health, to order the removal of such sick person (provided there be no medical objection to such removal) to a public hospital or other institution for the treatment of the sick, or, failing this, to the infirmary of the workhouse appertaining to the district; and the local authority should be authorized forthwith to cause the premises from which the person afflicted with infectious disease has been so removed to be cleansed, limewashed, and purified (in the manner directed in the Nuisances Removal Act), and also to effect the removal therefrom of the other inmates of the room (except in so far as these, or any of them, may be necessary for the care of the sick), and, if need be, temporarily to provide them with a suitable lodging at the public expense.

III.—The local authority should be empowered, by the proper officer, to have free entry into every house in the occupation of more than a single family, for the purpose of giving due effect to the provisions



of the several Acts already in operation in connection with this subject.

IV.—Legal provision should be made, under proper checks and limitations, for the due removal of the dead from the habitations of the living within a reasonable time of the decease; particularly in crowded dwellings, and especially when death has resulted from fever or other infectious disease.

If the first of these provisions were in force, it would not be very difficult to keep overcrowding within a given limit, and this too without any such apparent injustice as that of punishing a man who is really doing the best he can for his family, though that best is not enough to furnish them with sufficient living room to be clean and healthy; while, on the other hand, by keeping the state of these dwellings constantly under the attention of the local authority, it would also operate as a wholesome check upon the avaricious neglect with which this class of property is regarded by non-resident landlords. The second provision above given, or some modification of it, is absolutely essential for the due prevention of the spread of infectious disease; for it often happens that persuasion and warning alike fail in inducing an inmate, prostrated by illness, to allow himself to be removed to a public hospital from his wretched room, by remaining in which not only are his chances of recovery materially lessened, but the probabilities also are greatly heightened that other inmates will take the disorder. In this, as in other matters of daily life, individual advantage (here it is really disadvantage) must give way to the general weal. Without the third provision named above, or some other of a similar character, it is impossible satisfactorily to protect the health of the poor. The absence of any power to compel the removal of a putrifying corpse from overcrowded



dwelling-rooms, within a reasonable period, is a scandal to the age and country in which we live.

There are yet other measures besides these, and by which they must either be accompanied or speedily followed, before these localities will cease to deserve the appellation which has been applied to them. The dust-receptacle and the water-receptacle—both at present religiously guarded by Act of Parliament—must be abolished. The dust of every household and family must be removed daily, and no receptacle at all be permitted. The dust-bin, even in the houses of the wealthy, is oftentimes a source of nuisance, if not of disease: how much more does it become so, when situated within a dwelling (there being no space externally for it), tenanted by many families, and with no one responsible either for its condition or for its contents. The argument which holds good, in regard of the dust-bin, applies with still greater force in the case of the water-receptacle, whether it be the more costly cistern or the dilapidated water-butt. Without doing more than referring to the high solvent power possessed by water for certain gases, it is only necessary to observe that in this, as in too many other matters at the present day, the continuance of the water-receptacle with an intermittent supply, as compared with its complete abolition with a constant supply from the main, has come to be regarded as a mere question of money. The state of things prevailing in these densely crowded neighbourhoods is unquestionably exceptional and artificial. The houses of which they are composed were originally constructed as the residences of single families; and, under the altered circumstances of the case, it is now found almost impossible satisfactorily to adapt them to the wants and requirements of inhabitants so numerous that the population of a confined and narrow court almost approximates that of a workhouse or barracks, in which, however, the health of



the inmates is carefully guarded by constant attention to needful sanitary appliances, the use and efficiency of which are in turn still further promoted by the enforcement of well-considered regulations and strict discipline.

Were, however, the law, thus amended, in daily operation, it must be admitted by all who possess a practical acquaintance with the subject, that there would still remain one obstacle at least in the way, which seems almost insurmountable, viz., the absence of a due regard for cleanliness on the part of the people themselves. Considerable experience renders me, it must be confessed, far less sanguine upon this point than ten years ago; nevertheless, the work must not be abandoned, but renewed efforts must be made in this direction. The entire subject demands thorough examination and free discussion; for it is by these means alone that a more enlightened state of public opinion will gradually lead to beneficial legislative enactments, and the great contemplated changes in the thoroughfares and buildings of the metropolis will really acquire for themselves the character of improvements in the fullest sense of the term, and will cease to be, what they are now threatening to become, sources of illness and death among the poorer classes of the community.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient humble servant,

CONWAY EVANS, M.D.,

*Medical Officer of Health.*

56, RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON.

*Sept. 27th, 1865.*





