

# **A letter to the Right Hon. Robert Peel ... on the supply of water to the Metropolis.**

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LETTER



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# LETTER

TO

THE RIGHT HON. ROBERT PEEL,

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE

HOME DEPARTMENT,

ON THE

## SUPPLY OF WATER

TO

THE METROPOLIS.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY W. NICOL, CLEVELAND ROW.

1828.



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## LETTER, &c.

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London, 19th May, 1828.

SIR,

VITALLY alive to the value of your time, —*cum tot sustineas*—I should be the last man in the world to waste a moment of it; on the contrary, being in consequence of my great age, my constant residence, and close attention to every branch of the Police of the Metropolis, (as a housekeeper for near 50 years) it is my earnest wish to avail myself of these advantages, by saving you the time and trouble of looking into the various, and complicated documents which bear upon the supply of water to the town, a question now so much agitated, and also to make some remarks on the Report, lately delivered on that subject.

The town about this time last year was taken by surprise, and the minds of the

inhabitants greatly inflamed by the appearance of a pamphlet, called *The Dolphin*, stating the very bad quality of the water with which we were supplied; but I, who have kept house so long, could not assent to the correctness of this, and I remain so confirmed in this opinion, that I should willingly rest it on the report, which every Member of either House of Parliament should at the moment make, after calling for a glass of water from his own cistern, instead of suffering himself to be led away by loose assertions of Pamphlets and Newspapers. There have certainly been additional causes of impurity, particularly from the gas, for the last ten years, of which there is no better proof, than the effect on the fish; but this seems completely rectified, by the establishment of reservoirs; for, I can say of my own supply, and that of almost every house I enter, that it is as good, nay, better than at any time since I began to keep house, and that, the water which I received for thirty years from the New River, held more impurities than that of the Thames,

with which I have been supplied of late years.

As I have thought the Directors of the Water Companies, particularly those of the Grand Junction, more slack and tardy than they ought to be in answering the heavy charges brought against them; whatever they may say of their having been for several years prevented from constructing a reservoir, in consequence of the exorbitant demands of Lord Grosvenor's agents, but that his Lordship had a few months ago very liberally conveyed a spot for this purpose, which they were beginning to avail themselves of when interrupted by the clamors of April 1827, I shall shortly notice some of the passages in the Report, and its Appendix, which have struck me as most objectionable.

In the Appendix, Dr. Paris is made to say, that though the water may appear pure to the eye, it may be far from being so, for that there are certain impurities so soluble as not to affect its transparency. Now, in the first place, nothing can be more certain (I speak from my very long

experience) than that all running water is more or less muddy, particularly in floods, and must ever, in the course of nature, be so. And as the New River is a volume of water, not the hundredth part of the Thames, the proportional impurities from its banks, must be greater. And with regard to the quality of the present supply compared to the former, it is in the opinion of nine tenths of the housekeepers equally good, some say superior to what it was, so that the reservoirs\* seem to have done away with the additional cause of impurity. And the Directors complain with some reason, that if they had not been interrupted last year in the completion of their works, the water would have been in a state of perfection far greater than ever has been known. Nothing can be more beau-

\* The benefit of reservoirs has been disputed in the Appendix, as if they only gave occasion to the creation of fresh impurity by stagnation. Were the water really stagnant, this might be the case; but, in what sense can that pool be called stagnant, from which there is a daily issue of two millions, eight hundred thousand gallons, as there is from that of the Grand Junction, and still more from the others. Report, p. 5.

tiful than the application of scientific and philosophical mechanism to the advancement of the useful arts!

And with regard to the noxious and invisible substances held in solution, they, according to the elaborate and ingenious analyses, so minutely detailed in the Appendix, turn out to be as follow. In a hundred grains of water there is about a grain and a half of carbonate of lime, *that is chalk or marble*, 12-hundredth parts of a grain of sulphate of lime, *that is plaster of Paris*, and not quite a quarter of a grain of muriate of soda, *that is kitchen salt*. Now such is the bugbear with which Dr. Paris has shaken the nerves of the timid, hysterical and hypochondriacal subjects of this Metropolis, already by the nature of their maladies too prone to give way to their imagination! It is impossible not to be painfully grieved at seeing a gentleman of his character so far forget what was due to himself. Surely the fable of the Mountain and the Mouse, was never so appropriately exemplified.

With regard to the other foreign and

foul contents of the Thames water, which are *visible*, consisting of the decayed organic substances which mingle with it, it cannot be denied that they are offensive and noxious. But it has been a matter of unaccountable wonder to myself and others, who have given their minds to these subjects, how it comes, that the Thames in its passage through London, should have for a period further back than history goes, furnished water to the population on both sides without being objected to, although the receptacle of all the sewers that fall into it: and further, that even those ships which go on long voyages should not only not object to it, but prefer it to all other water, though taken from the Pool, that is that part of the river which skirts the Tower and Wapping. Nay, in the late examination before the Commission, when the Steward of St. Thomas's Hospital, adjacent to London Bridge, was asked whether their water was filtered, he answered, "no, we trust to subsidence; and I conceive when it is settled that it is pure and good water." This was disputed in another part of the

Appendix; but what was this, but theory against practice? Is it through mere dilution that water, seemingly so full of offensive matter, becomes innocuous, or is there some mysterious chemical process by which it is neutralised or dissipated? The effect of dilution, as a means of producing decomposition, is a doctrine first broached by Dr. George Fordyce, and seemed to be accounted for by the ultimate particles becoming thereby so distant as to be beyond the sphere of attraction. The same idea has been followed up by a still more eminent chemical philosopher, now alive, who refers it to a principle which he terms the *attraction of mass*. There seems something extremely analogous to it in the great laboratory of nature. For in the economy of this globe, it is so arranged by the Almighty Creator, that though the perishing remains of animated beings have apparently been accumulating in the atmosphere and the ocean since the creation, yet is there no perceptible traces of these decayed substances, the constituent elements of which, namely, azote, hydrogen,

oxygen and carbon, must have separated and returned into the great storehouses of nature, from whence they had been drawn by the operations of life.

The next circumstance that struck me in the Report was, that there was not a sufficient appeal made to the *general health* of the town, as a criterion of the quality of the water. Enquiry with regard to this, is not only the most material, but, though the only one deserving of serious consideration, has been studiously avoided. Three Physicians indeed, all Fellows of the College of Physicians, Doctors Bree, Halford, and Turner, decline giving an opinion on the subject, but say that, though there be no present affection of the general health, it may take effect in time. To a man of common understanding, it would appear that eight years is a sufficient period for the experiment, and that, if it had any serious influence on health, there would, before now, have been a prevailing epidemic.

Dr. Paris, however, ventures to go a step further, for, he alleges that the general health *is* affected by the water. But what

proof does he adduce?—Perhaps, that there is some new malady broken out,—or, that there is some increase in the mortality, as evinced by the bills of mortality. No such thing: all these demonstrate a continued improvement of general health. The case of a single family, who, being ill, did not readily recover their health, but soon did so upon going into the country, is all the proof alleged! It must surely have occurred to the intelligent and cultivated mind of Dr. Paris, had he allowed himself a moment's reflection, that no argument can lie on this subject, but from the general state of health of the district which uses the water. The only other reference made to health as the criterion of the quality of the water, is by a tradesman who employed a number of young women, whose ill health he imputed to the insalubrity of the water. Such an error in a tradesman, unversed in medical science, may well be expected; but what are we to say for Dr. Paris?

It is not a little remarkable that, except medical men, there is not to be found

among the witnesses the name of one person belonging to the liberal and educated classes of society, from a jury of whom, one of the Chairmen says, they would have nothing to fear, nor indeed from any other class, if taken indiscriminately. May it not be affirmed with truth, that the two parishes of St. James and St. George, contain more inhabitants of liberal enlightened minds, than any two other parishes in christendom? Yet, none of these were called upon for their evidence!

On the subject of health, it seems not out of place here to state the progressive improvement of it in this Metropolis. As a branch of general knowledge, it is as interesting to a private gentleman, like myself, as to a practitioner of physick, and here the history of it is so favourable, as to form a grateful theme for the human heart to dwell upon. I have been in the habit of ransacking the bills of mortality, and the censuses, of which three have appeared since the beginning of this century. From these, and other documents bearing on the same subject, it appears that the great

improvement in health in this metropolis began in the latter half of the 17th century. There has been no plague since the year 1665, that is 163 years ago. Towards the end of the same century, three diseases began to disappear, at least in their epidemic form, namely, bloody flux, ague, and sea scurvy, (for sea scurvy prevailed anciently every winter in London, as well as at sea) as we learn from a Tract of Dr. Heberden. It appears from some observations appended to the population abstracts, that the mortality of London was that of one in twenty-three in 1750; one in thirty, in 1800; and, one in forty-seven in 1820. So that, in the course of seventy years, the mortality had diminished from one in twenty-three, to one in forty-seven, and there is every reason to believe that this improvement of health, and prolongation of life continues to this time; for it appears from the bills of mortality, that, until the beginning of this century, the number of burials considerably exceeded the births: and, that since that time, the births have every year progressively exceeded the

burials. The christenings were last year, (1827) 29,925 ; the burials, 22,292. In the last year of the last century, the burials were 23,068 ; the christenings, 19,176 : so that, while mortality has been diminishing, procreation has been encreasing in a still higher ratio. What a serious cause of alarm to the disciples of Malthus !

My next remark is, that in appreciating the comparative merits of the old and new Companies, there seems to have been a forgetfulness of the vast improvement in the extinction of fires. Before the establishment of the new Companies, there had, for a few years immediately preceding, occurred conflagrations of the most extensive and calamitous description—the two Theatres, the Opera House, St. James's Palace, about thirty houses in four different streets, in one of them as many as eighteen, with great loss of lives and property, insomuch that, a number of the Insurance Companies urged the Government to make a better provision of water for the town, as the extent of these calamities was owing to the want of water. The old Companies

about this time even refused to find water for the new streets then projected in the N. W. districts. So much has the case been different since that time, that it does not occur to me that there has been any fire for the last fifteen years, which has extended beyond the single house in which it broke out: or, if there have been difficulties in the way of supply, it has been imputable to the parish officers; and such are the present arrangements, that no very destructive fire can befall the town in time to come. This advantage is so inestimable, that there seems a sort of ingratitude in overlooking it, particularly as (what is perhaps not generally known) the water for this purpose is furnished *gratuitously*.

In reviewing the conduct of the Commissioners, it is with no small surprise and pain that we see them admitting into their Appendix, the whole of the pamphlet published last year, under the title of the Dolphin, with a great deal of additional matter from the same hand, and to the same effect; consisting of a mass of loose, gratuitous and prolix declamation, interlarded

with sallies of wit, gaiety, and personal sarcasm, quite unusual, I believe, in Parliamentary Appendixes, which generally consist of dry facts, with their accompanying evidence, suitable to the gravity of the subject, and the reverence due to national representatives. The nation would not grudge to pay for their thirty-three folio pages, besides an elegant print, if they were not full of the most gross misrepresentations. Is there in the annals of Parliament any example of the like? But our wonder is increased tenfold, when we find that while they have admitted this voluminous document, they have denied admittance to a very satisfactory answer that was made to it, of about the tenth part of its bulk. How is it to be accounted for, that men of character could venture upon this? Surely they could not flatter themselves that it would escape observation and detection.

There appears indeed through the whole of this Report, and still more in its Appendix, a glaring *ex parte* feeling. This appears most in the selection of the witnesses. These surely should have been

taken indiscriminately from the population ; or if one party was allowed to select, the same advantage should have been conceded to the other. No such thing ; the whole of them have been taken from one class of inhabitants ; for we do not perceive one name belonging to the liberal and educated class of society, and they every one betray the greatest prejudice and hostility to the Companies. The Commissioners set out very candidly, as far as words go, by the following profession. “ This being a question in which “ the interests of a great number of in- “ dividuals and publick bodies are deeply “ involved, and which has been the sub- “ ject of an acrimonious controversy, and “ also, respecting which a variety of repre- “ sentations had gone forth to the publick, “ we perceive it would embrace considera- “ tions of a delicate and complicated nature. “ *We felt it to be our duty, therefore, to “ begin by dismissing from our minds, what- “ ever previous impressions might have been “ received from the reports and statements “ which have been circulated, and to be*

*“guided in our judgment solely by the  
 “evidence we should be enabled to obtain  
 “in the execution of our Commission.”*  
 Report, p. 7.

Notwithstanding this, what do they do? Instead of *beginning*, as they here say they would, by *dismissing*, &c. we find them *beginning*, by one of them writing in the name of the Commission, in the following words to Mr. Wright, the Author of the *Dolphin*, above mentioned:—“ We  
 “ shall be much obliged by your favoring  
 “ us as soon as convenient, with the state-  
 “ ment you were so good as to offer of the  
 “ alleged grievances, and *by your pointing*  
 “ *out to us the best mode of obtaining in-*  
 “ *formation, as to the truth of those allega-*  
 “ *tions, and the PERSONS WHOSE EVIDENCE*  
 “ ON THESE POINTS IT WILL BE PROPER  
 “ TO COLLECT.” I aver, that had a fair and indiscriminate summons been issued to householders as witnesses, ten to one would have testified in favor of the present quality of the water; and in speaking of *acrimonious controversy*, is not this the same Mr. Wright, who has himself published the

largest mass of *acrimonious controversy*? I have not indeed seen or heard of any other publication on the subject to which these words can be with propriety applied, and this is the man to whom they lend their exclusive confidence. Had they been intent on gathering information from every legitimate source, would they have thus studiously avoided to apply to any but those already known through their emissary\* to be hostile to the Companies. They would also have learnt that the source from which the Grand Junction takes its supply, is the highest in the river of all the others, except the West Middlesex, and therefore not exposed, like those that lie lower, to the drainings of more than 130 sewers, but the one of all others least liable to contamination; and the Ranelagh is also the smallest and least foul of all the sewers.

\* Far be it from me to insinuate that the Commissioners, so well known as men of honour in their general dealings, are themselves capable of making unfair selection of witnesses: far less, of tampering with, I will not say suborning them.

In looking deeper into this subject, it naturally occurs to those who witness the conduct of the Commissioners to enquire what could be their motive for such an extraordinary departure from candor. Some strong motive there must be; whether it is to be found in the sore feeling they betray, at having had the scope of their enquiry narrowed, and the wish of having duties of a more extensive and permanent nature prescribed to them, it would not become me to pronounce. After having said so much in their inculpation, it is but fair to express my feelings and opinions concerning the conduct of the Directors of the Companies, particularly those of the Grand Junction Works, against which the greater part of the invectives are levelled; of their conduct I am so far from approving, that I cannot but think that they have been more tardy than was due to the public in redressing the wrongs complained of. Why did they not immediately remove the obnoxious Dolphin, which should have been done in point of decency, however groundless the accusation might have been. They

might allege that this was the work of former Directors, or rather of their Chairman Mr. Robson,\* a man so imperious and overbearing, that he could not brook contradiction.

But what have they been about since he died, with an almost total change of Directors? I do not think it a valid excuse that they allow the Dolphin † to remain, in order

• Mr. Peel may perhaps remember a certain M. P. the most pertinacious and hard-mouthed wrangler that Mr. Percival had ever to deal with, and who was said actually to have hit one blot in the public accounts.

† I once visited the Dolphin. When I first came in sight of the spot on which the Company's Engine is erected, I was surprized not to observe the overwhelming volume of smoke which seemed to suffocate the invalids of the Hospital, and concluded that the engine was not at work; but I saw on my arrival that it was at work, and was told that they had burnt their smoke the last six years. This therefore was a fiction, and, now repeated in the Appendix, calculated merely for stage effect. Does not this small matter demonstrate, as much as a volume, the extreme anxiety of these people to serve their ends by the most unscrupulous and far-fetched artifices? Say, is it credible that those who could stoop to such a mean trick, would abstain from similar practices in other points? The whole description of it is full of exaggeration, not to say untruth. Indeed, the print is equally unfaithful in representing

to testify against the exaggerations and mistatements of their enemies. Their first consideration should have been to pacify the town by its removal; nor ought it to avail them to allege, like petted children, that they cannot proceed with their works till they are assured what are the intentions of Government with regard to future arrangements.

With regard to myself, I can assure you, Sir, that I feel it a duty to do my utmost to bring about a fair and upright consideration of the case, being no partizan of either side, except in so far as the cause of truth and justice is concerned. It has grieved me to see many of the most respectable members of society, some of them

the fluid from the sewer as gushing into the Dolphin, as any one who will take the trouble of inspecting it will perceive. I found that though very improperly placed, yet, in its relation to the sewer, it was defended against its influx by a bank of gravel, half as high as the tides; that, instead of rushing on the Dolphin, as pictured, the filth glides along the bank, and the water being admitted into the Dolphin, on the side opposite to the sewer, and at a considerable depth, (the filth, if any, would float chiefly on the surface) it is not easy to understand how any filth can enter it but what is in common to the whole river.

my own friends, led away by senseless clamour; though it ought not to surprize me; for it was on no better grounds that a like clamour and discontent arose in the last years of the last, and the first of this, century, on the subject of bread and corn. It makes one blush to recollect how many of the enlightened class of society were induced to believe that the scarcity and distress of those years, were not owing to bad seasons and real scarcity, but to monopoly, forestalling, and the improper supply of the markets. During these two years the crops were much shorter, the prices much higher, and the importation much greater than any years in the memory of man, and much the more disastrous by being consecutive years. It would appear that there is something peculiarly exciting and deluding in questions regarding the necessaries of life.

In case it should appear to His Majesty's Government, that the Directors of these Companies are not to be trusted, though with every motive of self interest, reputation and conscience, that can prompt men to fair and honorable dealing, let them be

compelled to remove Robson's unfortunate Dolphin, and to place it higher in the river. In case this and a sound reprimand shall not be thought sufficient, then let a new and fair examination be instituted, or let them feel the weight of the secular arm, and let the water be brought from \* Teddington to the environs of London, where it may also be converted to the purpose of decoration by sheets of water, jets d'eau, and architectural ornament. Would it not be becoming a great nation to lay out even to the amount of a million, towards the health and ornament of its glorious Metropolis.

It may be asked why I am anonymous in this communication. It is solely for the purpose of that peace, which is so desirable to an old man, who has retired from the world; and as it does not relate to facts, the truth of which rest on my veracity and personal responsibility, but lie open to be

\* The name of Teddington, the etymology of which is said to be Tide-end-town, points it out as the precise spot from which the supply should be taken, all below that being subject to the opprobrium of London filth.

verified or falsified by immediate inspection,  
the name of the writer is of no moment.

I have the honour to be,

with every sentiment of respect, Sir,

your most obedient, and very humble servant,

**AN OLD HOUSEKEEPER**

OF THE CITY OF WESTMINSTER.

P. S. On the day on which this was written, Sir F. Burdett moved the consideration of the Report. From the manner in which you were pleased to receive the motion, it may be perhaps inferred that His Majesty's government do not mean to interfere in this matter, but as more discussion will infallibly arise on so sensitive a subject, the writer of this judges it nevertheless advisable to forward it for your consideration.



## OMISSIONS.

It should have been remarked, that the Chairman of the Grand Junction Company answered me, when I taxed him with neglect in not having removed the Dolphin, and otherwise redressed the grievances, that as there was not a complaint brought to the Office oftener than once in a month, he believed the town was as well supplied as it had ever been.

At Page 6, the Steward of St. Thomas's Hospital says, "that subsidence was sufficient to render the water pure;" and the same observation ought to apply in all cases; for every good housekeeper always has, and always ought, to let the water subside for an hour or two before using it; all river water being more or less muddy, especially during and after floods.

At Page 11, it is erroneously stated that the proportion of deaths was 1 in 47, whereas it ought to be 1 in 42.

It may be worth remarking to those who are curious in such matters, that the whole population in 1820 was one million two hundred and twenty-five thousand eight hundred and sixty; the baptisms of the same year thirty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty-three; the burials twenty-nine thousand two hundred and fifteen.

The seeming discordance between the baptisms and burials stated in the Bills of Mortality and the Census is accounted for, by considering that the Metropolis, according to the Census, is much more extensive than the Bills.

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It may be worth remarking to those who are curious in such matters, that the whole population in 1850 was one million two hundred and twenty-five thousand eight hundred and sixty; the baptisms of the same year being three thousand seven hundred and fifty-three; the females twenty-nine thousand two hundred and fifteen.

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