

## THE PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT OF THE CORPORATION OF LONDON

THERE are no functions of Local Government more important or which have contributed more to the happiness, convenience, and welfare of the inhabitants of this country than those which come under the general description of "The Public Health Services." In this respect, as in many others, the City of London has a unique and most interesting record.

The history of the development of these services in the City during the past six or seven hundred years falls naturally into three main periods :—

i.e. (1) Prior to 1667. (2) 1668 to 1898. (3) 1898 to 1947.  
(1) *Prior to 1667.*

The early records show the gradual development of a social conscience with regard to matters of sanitation, sewerage, street cleansing, and lighting from most rudimentary beginnings.

The cleansing of the streets and other sanitary works were organised on a Ward basis, as appears from the following record in 1280.

*Letter Book A, fo. 88b, circa 1280.*

"That each Alderman cause to be elected in Wardmote four reputable men usually residing in the town to keep the pavements from obstructions, such as dung in the streets. And that these four cause the same to be repaired, put down, or raised as they shall see fit, and that they be empowered to levy distress upon these who shall do to the contrary ; likewise, where they find dung opposite a tenement, they shall make distress or take 4 pence. And if they can discover at any time by whom the dung has been so placed they shall take 4 pence of him, and let the other be in peace, and the dung shall be removed at his expense. And if it happen that the four men refuse to act as commanded, the Alderman shall distrain upon them for a similar penalty. And if the Alderman do nothing after warning given by the neighbours, the Sheriff shall distrain the Alderman by greivous distress, which shall not be given except on payment of a heavy fine."

The real responsibility fell on the individual householders, and that they did not always carry out their duties is shown by the following proclamation as to cleaning the streets of the City, made in 1309.

*Letter Book C, fol. XcVI.*

"Seeing that the people in the town do cause the ordure that has been collected in their houses, to be carried and placed in the streets, and in the lanes of the City, whereas they ought to have it carried to the Thames, or elsewhere out of the town ;

and that thereby the streets and lanes are more encumbered than they used to be :—we do forbid, on the King's behalf, that from henceforth any person shall have the ordure, that has been collected in his house, carried into the King's highways ; but let them cause the same to be carried to the Thames, or elsewhere out of the City, whither it used to be carried."

The Chamberlain appears to have had certain responsibilities "during the middle ages for such sanitary and public health measures as were undertaken by the City." For instance at the Wardmote of "Colmanstrete" held on 27th December, 1421, it was reported "the Chamberlain of the Guildhall used to pay a 'raker' 26/8 yearly to keep and cleanse the grates at London Wall and Lothbury, and because of non-payment the said grates are evilly and horribly stopped up with mud and ordure to the great nuisance of all the ward, wherein the said Chamberlain is at fault. And also the said Chamberlain ought to find a man to keep and cleanse the ditch there."

At the Wardmotes held on St. Thomas's Day in each Ward an "Inquest" was held into the state of the Ward, when complaints could be made and duly assessed by Juries or Inquestmen. The Ward returns were submitted to the Grand Court of Wardmote at Guildhall on the following Plow Monday. The presentation of reports of nuisances and offences to the Grand Court of Wardmote actually continued until 1857, when an Act of Common Council brought the custom to an end.

In addition to repairing and cleansing the street from the front of his house to the centre of the road, the householder had to hang out a light during the dark evenings and to provide a bucket of water at his door during the dry season and to act in turn as scavenger, beadle and constable. These duties were called "bearing lot." The making of money payments so that men might be employed to do these tasks instead of the householders doing them personally, was called "paying scot."

With regard to drains and sewers, commissioners were appointed from time to time for particular undertakings. For instance, the Alderman and Recorder were appointed Commissioners for a sewer in Fleet Street in 1499.

From quite early times Commissions of Sewers existed in various forms. As far back as the reign of Edward I (1239-1307) a commission was issued into London directed to the Mayors and Sheriffs.

In 1531, under an Act of 23 Henry VIII, the appointment of Commissioners of Sewers was vested in the Lord Chancellor and Lord Treasurer of England and the two Chief Justices for the time being. This Act was made perpetual by an Act of 3 and 4 Edward VI.

All these early Commissioners had power to tax the houses benefiting by their improvements, and an Act of 1622 gave Commissioners power not only to make sewers and vaults, but also to repair, pave and cleanse the highways, acquire property compulsorily for street widening and to supervise the street scavengers.

This was the position when in spite of all these precautions the Great Plague of 1665 swept through the City, followed in 1666 by the Great Fire, which destroyed about five-sixths of the City.

In 1667 Parliament passed an Act for the rebuilding of the City of London, the preamble to which seems particularly applicable to the present time.

“Forasmuch as the City of London being the Imperial seat of His Majesty’s Kingdoms, and renowned for Trade and Commerce throughout the World, by means of a most dreadful Fire lately happening therein, was for the most part thereof burnt down and destroyed within the compass of a few days, and now lies buried in its own ruins : For the speedy restoration whereof, and for the better regulation, uniformity and gracefulness of such new buildings as shall be erected for habitations in order thereunto ; and to the end that great and outrageous fires—so far as human providence can foresee, may be reasonably prevented or obviated for the time to come—Further, to the intent that all encouragement and expedition may be given unto, and all impediments and obstructions that may retard or prohibit, the undertaking or carrying on a work so necessary, and of so great Honour and Importance to His Majesty and this Kingdom, and to the rest of His Majesty’s Kingdoms and Dominions may be removed : Be it therefore enacted.”

Section 22 of this Act provided :—

“That the numbers and places for all common sewers, drains and vaults, and the order and manner of paving and pitching the streets and lanes within the said City and Liberties thereof, shall be designed and set out by such and so many persons as the Mayor, Alderman and Commonalty, in Common Council assembled, shall from time to time authorise and appoint under their Common Seal”—also that “It shall and may be lawful to and for the said persons so authorised and appointed as aforesaid or any seven or more of them to impose any reasonable tax upon all the houses within the said City, and Liberties thereof, in proportion to that benefit they shall receive—and that all other Commissioners whatsoever be altogether suspended to intermeddle in the premises within the said City and Liberties thereof for the space of 7 years next and for so long after the said intended buildings shall be fully finished.”

Under this section, on 12th February, 1668, the Court of Common Council appointed the first Commission of Sewers—a body which continued to function for over 230 years.

This brings us to our second period :—

(2) *1668 to 1898.*

The Commissioners appointed under the Act of 1667 were the Aldermen and Deputies and Representative Members of the Common Council for the several Wards of the City.

The Act was made permanent by a further Act of 1670-71. At the same time additional powers were conferred in regard to street cleansing, and provision was made for Ward Assessments instead of "houses that benefited."

The powers and duties of the Commission were varied and enlarged by Acts of Parliament passed in 1708, 1766, 1768, 1771, 1793, 1817 (the well-known Michael Angelo Taylor's Act) and 1823.

In 1848 The City of London Sewers Act was passed repealing some of these Acts and consolidating the powers of the Commission. This Act was continued and extended by the City of London Sewers Act, 1851, most of which still remains in force.

It is obvious that the Commissioners of Sewers carried out their duties with ability. That they earned the confidence of the central Government is proved by the added functions which were from time to time entrusted to them, under the following Acts (*inter alia*) which made the Commission the Sanitary or Local Authority for the City of London : viz. :—

Burial Acts 1852 and 1857.

Metropolitan Street Act 1867.

London Hydraulic Power Acts 1871 and 1884.

Sale of Food and Drugs Acts 1875 and 1879.

Local Loans Act 1875.

Factory and Workshops Acts 1878, 1883 and 1895.

City of London Commissioners of Sewers (Artizans' Dwellings) Act 1881.

Electric Lighting Acts 1882, 1888, and 1893.

Housing of the Working Classes Acts, 1890, 1893 and 1894.

Public Health (London) Acts 1891 and 1893.

Private Street Works Act 1892.

Corporation of London Loans Act 1892.

London (Equalisation of Rates) Act 1894.

As the Rating Authority in the City the Commission was empowered to raise the funds necessary under the Public Libraries Act 1855, the Elementary Education Act 1870, the Infant Life Protection Act 1872, and many other statutes.

It will be apparent therefore that the Commission was a most important body, with extremely varied and responsible duties to perform. In fact, enemies of the Corporation of London alleged that the Corporation possessed the honours of a municipality without actually performing the functions thereof, these functions being carried out by the Commissioners of Sewers, and it was even suggested that they should absorb the Corporation ; with this, naturally, the Corporation could not agree, and in 1897 an Act (The City of London Sewers Act 1897), promoted by the Court of Common Council was passed, whereby the Corporation took over all the rights, powers, duties, assets and liabilities of the Commission, thus bringing to an end a distinguished and honourable career of 230 years, during the last 50 years of which it spent £2,500,000 in Street Improvements, £200,000 in the erection of

Artizans' Dwellings, £88,000 in acquiring Depots in connection with the Cleansing Department, and as the Burial Board for the City it acquired land at Ilford and laid out the City of London Cemetery at a cost of £82,000, which indirectly led to the preservation of Epping Forest for the use of the public for ever.

So we reach the third portion :—

(3) 1898 to 1947.

On the 16th January, 1898, the Special Committee presented a Report to the Court of Common Council containing a scheme for putting the City of London Sewers Act 1897 into execution.

It commenced with a tribute to the Commissioners of Sewers :—

“ It is a most agreeable duty to recognise the very useful and valuable work of the Commission, evidences of which are to be seen and experienced at all points of the City, alike in respect to street improvements, sanitary works, and the daily cleansing and lighting of the streets.”

It recommended (*inter alia*) that :—

1. The Court itself take the position of the present Commission.
2. Four Committees be appointed as follows :—
  - (a) Improvements and Finance Committee, to whom should be referred questions of the Rates and accounts of the Treasurer, Parliamentary Business and Improvements.
  - (b) Streets Committee, to whom should be referred all questions relating to Pavements, Projections, Scavenging (Dust and Watering), Public Conveniences, Water Supply, Sewerage and Lighting.
  - (c) Sanitary Committee, to whom should be referred all questions on the Medical Officer's Reports, Lodging Houses, Slaughter Houses, Bakehouses, Diseased Meat, Removal of Nuisances, City Cemetery, Adulteration of Food and all Sanitary matters.
  - (d) Accounts Committee, for the purpose of checking all bills and accounts before the same were submitted for payment.

The Chamberlain, as Treasurer, had to keep separate and distinct accounts of all receipts and payments in connection with the Public Health Department, and to keep a separate banking account. A due proportion of his salary and office expenses had to be borne by the rates.

The first three were Ward Committees, and the Accounts Committee was to consist of 15 members, five appointed by each of the other three Committees.

The three Ward Committees still exist, the titles being varied in two cases. The Improvements and Finance Committee's functions as regards accounts were transferred in or about 1930 to the newly formed Rates Finance Committee, and when duties under the Town Planning Acts were allocated to this Committee it became the Improvements and Town Planning Committee.

The Sanitary Committee is now the Public Health Committee.

It is not necessary to enumerate the various Acts under which these Committees perform their duties, as they are the same as those under which the Commissioners worked, with such additions as have since been enacted.

*The Improvements and Town Planning Committee* finds itself confronted with problems similar to those which called the Commission of Sewers into being 280 years ago—i.e., those problems associated with the rebuilding of the City after "grievous destruction." It also administers the Artizans' Dwellings and Windsor House, and is now faced with the task of providing housing accommodation for a large number of homeless or inadequately housed persons. The expenditure of this Committee falling on Rates for the year 1946-47 was approximately £84,000.

*The Streets Committee* has the duty, through the City Engineer's Department, of maintaining the streets of the City, paving, cleansing and lighting them, and the expenditure for 1946-47 was over £297,000, in addition to approximately £37,500 on the Repair and Cleansing of Sewers.

*The Public Health Committee*, through the Medical Officer of Health's Department, has a great variety of responsible duties directed towards the maintenance of the health, not only of the small resident population of under 5,000, but of the many thousands who work in the City.

In this respect the City is fortunate in having within its borders the great voluntary hospital of St. Bartholomew's. The Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic, the Tuberculosis Dispensary and the Venereal Disease Clinic, although administered and financed by the Corporation, are held at St. Bartholomew's.

Health visitors assist at the Clinics, make visits to the homes of mothers and young children, in suitable cases arrange for home helps, and look after the welfare of foster children.

Sanitary Inspectors attend to all matters relating to alteration or defect of drains, unsanitary and overcrowded houses, and the disinfecting or disinfestation of infected or verminous premises, bedding and clothing. The Corporation maintains a disinfecting and cleansing station at 20, Golden Lane.

An important part of the Committee's work is the prevention of danger to health through unsound food. A staff of inspectors is kept at Smithfield Market, and others inspect food at the riverside wharves, and food exposed for sale in shops.

Samples of milk, ice cream, food and drugs are taken regularly and examined, both chemically and bacteriologically, as to quality and purity.

Repression of rats and mice is important not only from a health point of view, but also to prevent destruction of food; the Committee now employs a Rodent Officer and Six Assistants to deal with this problem.

The Public Health Committee is attempting to eliminate atmospheric pollution by enforcing the abatement of smoke nuisance,

and in this connection is investigating the possibility of district heating.

These are a few of the many activities of this Committee, which during the year 1946-47 cost the ratepayers just under £50,000.

By way of appendix it should be added that two other Committees, not under the Public Health Department, are also ministering to the health of the community, viz. :—

1. *The Port of London Health Committee*, which is the Sanitary Authority for the Port of London, has the duty of prevention of nuisances arising from barges, vessels and houseboats; it has through its officers power to inspect ships arriving from foreign ports, with a view to ascertaining whether any persons on board are suffering from infectious diseases. It administers the Isolation Hospital at Denton, erected in 1883, to which persons suffering from infectious diseases are taken direct from the incoming vessels by the Committee's own launches.

Its officers have powers of inspection of imported meats and other foodstuffs; they carry out disinfection of vessels.

The cost of these services for 1946-47 was £22,000.

2. *The Visiting Committee* consists of three Aldermen, nine Commoners and certain outside members appointed by the Court of Common Council under the Lunacy Act, 1890. It administers the Mental Hospital at Stone, near Dartford, Kent. The original cost of the land and buildings was provided out of the City's Cash, but extensive alterations and improvements have since 1898 been paid for out of rates. Both "maintained" and "private" patients are received. The cost to Rates for 1946-47 was nearly £13,000.

These then are the contributions that the Corporation of the City of London has made through its various Committees to the health, not only of the City but of the greater metropolitan area in the period 1898-1947. The future is uncertain in some respects, as it is not known how many of the services will be taken away from the City under the National Health Service Act, 1946.