

# *The Cholera Epidemic, 1849*

The second part of an edited lecture by Edward Luscombe  
delivered to the Plymouth Athenaeum on 23 May 2002

IN THE SUMMER of 1849 a terrible epidemic of cholera broke out. The first case was discovered on board an emigrant ship in the port early in June. The Revd. G. H. Hetling (*Hetling Close*) was one of the curates at St. Peter's. He had received medical training before his ordination. He discovered a case in Stonehouse Lane where he was visiting parishioners. His previous experience in medical practice in London, Paris and Bristol had familiarised him with the whole course of cholera; he was quick to recognise the symptoms and fully aware of the necessity of precautions against its spread. When he reported the presence of cholera to the parish guardians and urged that as "the district was one in which the disease was sure to spread rapidly, no time should be lost in preparing to meet the emergency..."

One of the guardians was incredulous, ridiculed the assertion, and endeavoured to pass the matter over lightly. But another came forward to support Mr Hetling, thanked him, and proceeded to investigate conditions in Stonehouse Lane. Here the medical officer found more than one unmistakable case of cholera. Cases soon began to appear in

different parts of Plymouth, Devonport and Stoke; but Stonehouse Lane, now called King Street, in the parish of St. Peter, was the chief centre of the malady. Three days later the cases were counted by hundreds, and rapidly this dreaded scourge spread through the insanitary and overcrowded slums of the Three Towns, raging with special severity in the densely populated quarters with which St. Peter's district abounded.

A locality peculiarly susceptible of disease, from the crowded and unwholesome condition of the dwellings and the character and habits of the people. The condition of the Three Towns was now deplorable indeed. Individuals did their best, but there was a shortage of trained nurses. The Guardians were at their wits end in trying to cope; those nurses they had were wearing themselves out with overwork; some had died.

At that time, Miss Sellon and her Sisterhood were residing in Morice Town and Fr Prynne knew little of them before that time.

He subsequently wrote 'I had a visit from Miss Sellon one evening: "I am come", she said "to ask if you will accept the services of myself and my Sisters in your parish. A distrustful thought crossed

me. 'Shall I bring these devoted ladies from another parish to such scenes and such dangers?

I must have hesitated and said some words to this effect.

"You must not look upon us as mere ladies," said Miss Sellon, "but as Sisters of Mercy, and the proper place for Sisters of Mercy is amongst the sick and dying; if you refuse our aid we must offer it elsewhere."

"I will not refuse," I replied, "come with me." And together we went, accompanied by Mr Hetling, into the very worst of it. From that night their work began, and continued ceaselessly until by God's blessing the sickness ended. At the urgent request of Miss Sellon some of the Sisters from Park Village (Regent's Park, London) came to help with the work.

A temporary hospital was erected in the fields (Five Fields) above the Mere (Stonehouse Lake, now Victoria Park), on the site of which St. Dunstan's Abbey now stands.

Fr Prynne wrote: For three months we seemed to be living amongst the dying and dead. A large wooden hospital was erected in our parish. We set up an Altar in the largest ward, in order that everything might be ready for communicating the dying. On the day of its opening, Mother Lydia's adversary, Mr Hatchard, (the Rector of St. Andrew's Church, an evangelical church) was there, along with the clergy of St. Peter's, and two Roman Catholic priests giving the Sacrament to poor dying crea-

tures. As the visitation reached its climax the deaths became very frequent and rapid. I was walking out one morning at about nine o'clock. I met a woman hurrying along, and in answer to my inquiry, she said she was going to fetch the doctor for her husband, who had been seized with cholera. In the evening both she and her husband were in their coffins. The woman had died first.

Special services were held to pray for the sick, and for deliverance from this dreadful affliction. The church was crowded with awestruck anxious worshippers, many of whom had not been to the church before. The selfless devotion of Prynne and his helpers in the fight against the epidemic was recognised by many as an inseparable part of the religion for which Prynne and St. Peter's stood.

Again Prynne wrote:

"I cannot pass over this subject without speaking of the devoted and heroic labours of the Sisters of Mercy, then recently established by Miss Sellon (Mother Lydia) during this visitation, and of the invaluable assistance which they rendered us. They were a band of heroines in the army of God the thought of personal danger did not seem to enter their minds. They had a tent in the field near the hospital to harbour and feed the orphaned children.

The Hospital was a temporary wooden building for sixty beds, erected by the Court of Guardians

under the advice of their medical officer. Two marquees were set up for the nurses and for the carrying on of the work connected with the hospital. It was during the raging of the cholera that the Sisters asked to be allowed to receive Holy Communion daily to strengthen them for their work. And from that time there has been a daily celebration of Holy Communion (the Mass) without break for more than 150 years. During 1849 and 1850 the alterations necessary to make Eldad Chapel a more suitable building for the Church's services were completed, and on October 5th 1850, the building was consecrated by Bishop Philpotts. Directly after the consecration of St. Peter's Church, Bishop Philpotts laid the foundation stone of the new house for Miss Sellon's community to be built on the land where the hospital had stood.

Appreciation of the Sisters' services was not confined to the tardy recognition accorded them in the Three Towns. The secular press of Britain vied with the Church papers in sounding their praise. But despite all the heroic work done by the sisters, the antagonism shown by the Protestants and Dissenters continued.

The only dissidents from the nation-wide tribute paid to

Mother Lydia and the Sisters of Mercy were the local Protestant element and the Low Church press. The prejudice of the former against the Sisters was still so strong that when a member of the Plymouth Board of Guardians proposed a "vote of thanks to Miss Sellon and the Sisters of Mercy for their heroic attention to the sick during the cholera, it was captiously objected that they had not been resident in the town long enough to be counted citizens": where upon the proposer withdrew his motion, "rather than not see it carried unanimously", but not before he had berated the objectors for their ingratitude and sectarian pettiness.

There was a great hostility to the Roman Catholic Church at this time, exacerbated by the building of the Cathedral and the consecration of the new bishop in Plymouth. Approval had been given for the creation of new RC dioceses and cathedrals in England. There was a great deal of opposition and any behaviour in the Church of England which hinted at an association with Roman practices came in for hostility. Mother Lydia and her Sisters were prime targets. A correspondent to a local paper wrote "She prepared an oratory, with an altar and crosses, ordained services accord-

ing to Popish ritual, and called them by popish names (prime, compline, vespers) equipped her sisterhood with a peculiar dress, adopted from the popish vestiar, provided them with rosary beads and crosses, called them Sisters of Mercy, and assumed the title of Mother Superior.”

But the Bishop of Exeter came down heavily on the side of Miss

Sellon, “This pious, this zealous, almost angelic woman” he called her.

As indeed he had supported Fr Prynne” With mv hand upon my heart, I exonerate Mr Prynne from any blame in this matter (the hearing of confessions), and I acquit him even of indiscretion, and I pray God that every clergyman in my diocese may do his duty as well as Mr Prynne has done his.”

The concluding part, dealing with the young Fr Ignatius in Plymouth, will feature in the next Newsletter

## *R.I.P. Canon Ivor Llewellyn Davies*

WITH SADNESS we announce the death of one of our trustees, and a frequent contributor to this Newsletter, Canon Ivor Llewellyn Davies, on 24th June 2005.

His funeral and burial took place recently at St Eigon’s church near Hay on Wye. He will be very much missed. An obituary will appear in the next Newsletter.

*May he rest in the peace of Christ*

## CHAIRMAN’S REQUEST

CANON PETER COBB, the Master of the Walsingham Guardians and a regular Llanthony pilgrim, has a complete collection of the Trust Newsletters with the exception of No. 4, which I think was produced in 1976. If anyone has a copy of our 4th Newsletter that they can spare I would be pleased to pass it on to Fr. Cobb. He will make sure that eventually his, hopefully, complete collection is preserved for posterity.