

Court Housing in Liverpool

The population of Liverpool had swelled in proportion to its wealth and from the early years of the 19th century there was a need for more and more houses. Speculators were not slow to see the opportunities and set about building cheap housing for the masses. There was nothing humanitarian about their projects --- the homes were designed with but one specification which was to accommodate as many people as possible in order to accrue as much rent as possible, and the simple design did just that.

The design of a typical block was of two rows of terraced houses, back-to-back, each sharing a common dividing wall which ran like a spine down the centre of the building. Each side of the dividing wall consisted of a cellar dwelling and three stories above ground level----- each of the three stories containing a single room with the source of light and air coming from the front elevation of each. The buildings were nothing more than the human version of a pigeon-loft and their construction was a monument to the greed and inhumanity of those who designed and built them. Adding insult to injury, the rents were so high that in many cases several or more families were forced to join forces to occupy a single room in order to share the rent.



16 Court Burlington Street

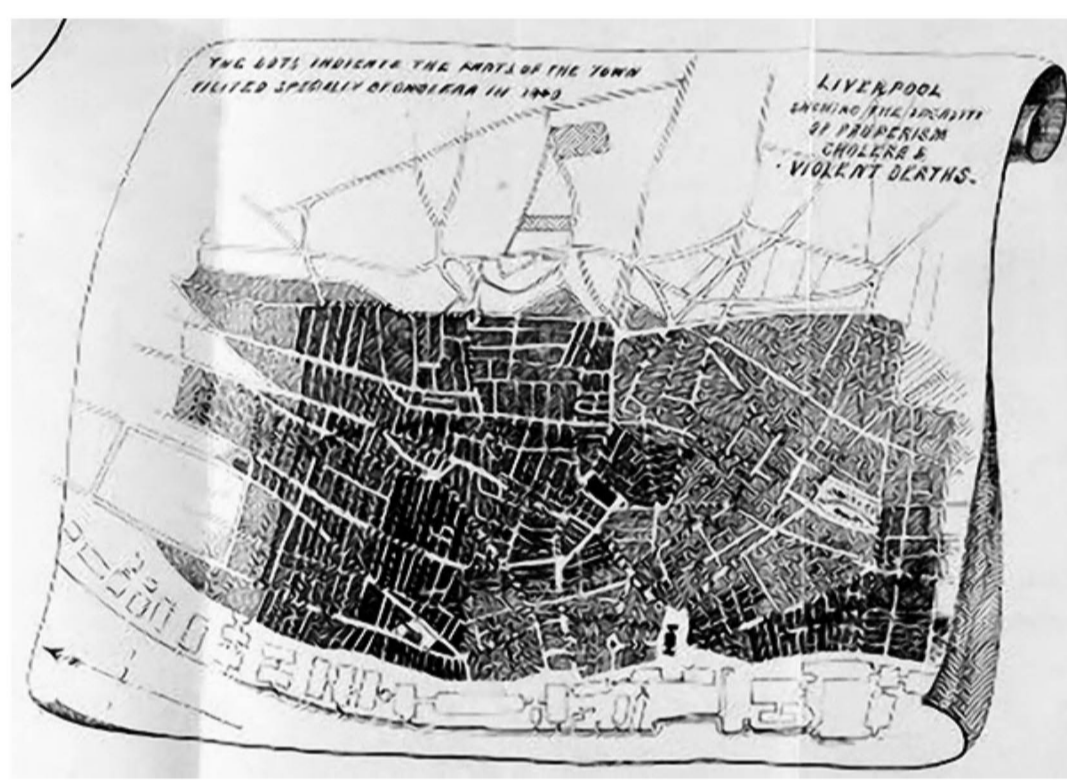
Sanitation was almost non-existent and the communal latrine was emptied on a "need-to-do" basis so that when it was overflowing, a number of men called "scavengers" had the unenviable job of a draining the whole putrid mess and removing it until next time. It is an indication of just how far we have come in such a relatively short time that in many parts of India, the same system is still in use. The cellar dwellings were literally the lowest of the low and were reliably described by no less an authority than Dr Duncan as; Being 10 to 12 feet square, sometimes flagged but more often than not with an earthen floor, windowless and with no source of light or air but a door standing lower than street level." Washing facilities were also lacking and if they existed at all it were situated within the confines of a communal courtyard along with a single source of cold water. In the more luxurious yards there was a communal washing area consisting of a stone-bench.



Hopwood street court

A municipal rubbish removal scheme was non-existent. These places were called 'courts' and as noxious as they were in their conception their notoriety was to increase further after 1840. The Irish Famine saw unprecedented numbers of Irish immigrants arriving in Liverpool with the intention of traveling to America but many of them were unable to afford the fare and others were fleeced out of what little money they had. Inevitably, a great proportion of the immigrants found themselves becoming a part of life in the courts swelling the occupancy to insupportable numbers of seething humanity. Even Dickens would have found it beyond his descriptive powers to tell of life in a Liverpool court, circa 1840, and the residents would have been excused for believing that Compassion, Philanthropy and Humanity had taken a long holiday but there were caring people working behind the scenes and they are the true heroes and heroines of the city.

Nothing can illustrate more emphatically just how far we have come along the road in the matter of Public Health than the complete inability of the Victorians to identify the causes of the diseases afflicting the people living in the courts. They knew that there were outbreaks of Cholera, they recognized Typhus and they all too often saw Tuberculosis; they knew there was no sanitation, they knew there was overcrowding and they knew there was no sewerage, and yet inexplicably they never associated one with the other. The nearest they got to an answer was an idea which gained general recognition from 1840 onwards called the Miasma Theory which stated that "bad air" from rotting vegetation was the source of the problem.



Ecclesiastical and social map of Liverpool showing a cholera Map c 1849

As vague as this was, it did have a tenuous grasp on the fact that hygiene was the root cause of the ills afflicting the courts and it did lead eventually to dealing with these basic tenets of living although the wheels ground exceedingly slowly. Although the denizens of the reeking courts didn't know it there were heroes and heroines even in those dark corners of the earth working to improve their dreadful lot in life. Sadly, most of their work would not come to fruition until well into the next century and there were many who lived their whole lives in poverty and degradation in mid-Victorian Liverpool while others made small fortunes.

It was standard procedure in hospitals run by Florence Nightingale that they should be scrupulously clean and she saved many lives during the Crimean War { 1850,s} in her hospital at Scutari merely by applying this simple formula. It is illustrative of the ignorance as to the value of hygiene at that time, when even her nurses thought she was just obsessive. Florence Nightingale later lectured in Liverpool and worked with Rathbone in health matters throughout the city.



Dr Duncan

Dr. William Henry Duncan was born in Seel St in 1805. his former home later became The Blue Angel nightclub. He graduated as Dr. of Medicine in 1829 at Edinburgh and returned to Liverpool where his work as a General Practitioner took him into the poorest quarters of the city. He quickly came to realize that it was no coincidence that the greater part of his patients lived in slum conditions and until those conditions altered then his efforts were negligible. The authorities at the time held the ludicrous theory which equated the health of the city to the wealth of the city and as that was booming then all was well. It was Duncan's great achievement to draw the authorities attention to the plight of the thousands of slum dwellers which was accomplished with the use of pamphlets and lectures. He also warned of the epidemics which were bound to arise. His efforts and those of other like-minded philanthropists in the city led to action in Parliament, resulting in Duncan's appointment as the first Medical Officer of Health in the country in 1846, a massive task which would occupy him for the rest of his life. At the time of Duncan's appointment, the number of Irish immigrants was increasing daily and a conservative estimate placed a number of 80,000 remaining in the city, most of them crammed into the

courts. There were several occasions when no less than 40 people were found to be inhabiting one of the cellar rooms previously mentioned. Three years later and Duncan's forecast of an epidemic came true with an outbreak of Asiatic cholera in 1849. Hundreds died daily and although it was no consolation to Duncan to be proven right the outbreak triggered the beginning of the end of life in the courts and drew the attention of the authorities as nothing else could to the plight of the people living in them. Although they were still working on the basis of the Miasma Theory the authorities at last began to draw up some basic plans for rubbish removal and sanitation.

Good hygiene was the thread which ran through all of the reformers proposals and very often they were so simple that they would seem to be of little consequence. One of the most basic ideas was the introduction of the wash-house in which Kitty Wilkinson was the instigator and prime-mover. So simple and yet so effective, a place where each community could wash their clothes in the luxury of hot water and Kitty was astute enough to provide warm rest-rooms and a meeting place for women whose lives were nothing but unremitting toil. The wash-houses spread throughout the city and it is impossible to estimate how many lives they saved nor how much they eased the work-load of the women who used them. The value of the wash-house can never be underestimated and it is an indication of their worth that they were still in use in the 1950's, as my mother could have testified. The wash-houses were an improvement without any shadow of a doubt but in terms of lightening a woman's work-load, relative to today's appliances it was still hard labour to push a week's washing in a pram to the nearest wash-house and then push it back again and let's not forget that the clothes still remained to be ironed with a solid-cast iron heated on the fire. Kitty Wilkinson had come to Liverpool from Ireland in 1812 as an immigrant.



Kitty Wilkinson



Wavertree Washhouse

Although the above philanthropists worked effectively within their sphere, the real answer was the removal of the source of all ills, the courts themselves. This was accomplished in the fullness of time but within that time-span a whole generation lived in a squalor unimaginable today.