MID NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORMSKIRK: DISEASE, OVERCROWDING AND THE IRISH IN A LANCASHIRE MARKET TOWN.

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I

'The great mass of fever cases are Irish, brought in from the crowded lodging-houses and other parts of the town where there are neither sewers nor drains, and where the supply of water is most imperfect. The inhabitants of these districts pay no attention to cleanliness nor ventilation; the surface of the ground near and around their houses is in general unpaved. Open middens, pigsties, and cesspools are crowded upon the dwelling-houses ...' Charles Price Symonds, surgeon, 1849.1

These comments could apply to several British towns in the 1840s. In particular they are an apt description of conditions in the teeming and over-populated areas which bore the brunt of large-scale Irish immigration during the famine of 1845–9. However, Symonds was not referring to mercantile Liverpool, nor to industrial Manchester or Glasgow. Instead the town in question was Ormskirk, the trading centre for the agricultural south-west Lancashire plain, and a market town of less than 6,000 inhabitants.

Ormskirk, like many Victorian towns, failed to cope with its expanding population. Here, as elsewhere, the lack of adequate sewerage facilities, overcrowding, and keeping animals near to dwelling houses contributed to the appalling conditions in which many townspeople lived their daily lives. The inevitable consequence was disease and an escalating death rate. The atrocious conditions in urban areas
with populations in excess of 100,000 are well known. Places such as Liverpool, Manchester, London and Glasgow have been the subject of much discussion, and the Irish have figured consistently in the areas of worst squalor. Dr. Finnegan’s research into the situation in York has shown that even in smaller towns, with populations of around 50,000, an influx of destitute Irish immigrants could pose enormous problems for public health when essential facilities were lacking. Less well recognised are the problems faced by the really small towns with populations below 6,000. Conditions in parts of Ormskirk towards the end of the 1840s were grim. Although the size of the problem was correspondingly smaller here, the difficulties faced by the unfortunate inhabitants were equally acute. This paper examines the deteriorating situation in Ormskirk during the period 1847 to 1849, describes the efforts made to deal with the crisis, and investigates the resulting political rumpus.

II

In 1847, although the population was increasing, socially Ormskirk was a town in decline. To understand the extent of Ormskirk’s social descent it is helpful to be aware of the main events that had taken place since more prosperous times in the late sixteenth century. In 1591 Ormskirk was held by the Crown. It was then described as a great, ancient and populous town, where a ‘great multitude’ of people gathered weekly for church and market and where large quantities of bread and ale were consumed. In this era of trade and expansion many new and often substantial houses were built between the older properties along the four main streets. As a seat of Quarter Sessions the town was already a meeting place for the local gentry, and at the head of Ormskirk’s society was the Earl of Derby. In 1603, when James I granted the manor of Ormskirk to the sixth earl, he included the rights to the market and fair. However, seventeenth century economic fortunes were marred by recurrent outbreaks of plague and by the disruptions of civil war. The destruction of the Derby family’s chief seat at nearby Lathom House, the sequestration of their estates,
and the family’s subsequent departure to Knowsley marked a turning point in Ormskirk’s good fortune. It is only realistic to assume that a degree of social and economic adjustment was necessary in the area. Nevertheless, the Earls of Derby had regained the manor of Ormskirk by 1660, and the place was still very much a gentry town throughout the eighteenth century.

The town hall was rebuilt in 1779 at the Earl of Derby’s expense, and housed both the court leet and the court of Quarter Sessions. Many local landed families owned houses in the town, and the Ormskirk races on nearby Aughton Moss were very much a gentry social occasion. The 1770s also saw the opening of the Liverpool to Preston turnpike and the construction of the Leeds and Liverpool canal. However, while the turnpike ran through the centre of Ormskirk the nearest access to the canal was more than two miles away. Industry on a grand scale never really took off in Ormskirk, and possibly lack of direct access to the canal system was a crucial factor. Ormskirk lost its Quarter Sessions status in 1817 when this court was transferred to Liverpool, and the race meetings ceased at about the same time when the land was enclosed. Although the area continued to hold its own as a regional market centre, by 1820 the ingredients which once gave Ormskirk its gentry-town character were beginning to disappear.

One institution that did not change was the Earl of Derby’s court leet which attempted to exercise control over the market and fair, and to deal with nuisances in the town. In the 1840s the Earl leased the market tolls to the leet jury for £30 annually. Although there were problems over pigs and cattle in the streets on market day, far more serious was the lack of control by the court leet over neglected property in the town. The court met only once per year, and fines were rarely enforced. The vestry minutes indicate a similar apathy. It seems that in the late 1830s and 1840s vestry meetings were concerned more with setting the church rate, repairing railings and extending the churchyard than with improving conditions within the community. In the early 1840s Ormskirk was governed by an archaic and inept system. It was a system which was about to prove disastrous for the health of the town.
The early Victorian township was a little over 570 acres in extent and the urban area accounted for only about one eighth.\textsuperscript{13} The mid-century census returns record a ‘handful’ of landed proprietors, and a small number of professional men, such as lawyers, doctors and bankers. Trades included leather dealing, malting, basketry and rope making. There were the essential millers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and butchers, and a substantial group of weavers who were mainly working in silk. It appears that silk weaving was principally a cottage industry in Ormskirk, for in 1851 only nine inhabitants described themselves as factory workers.\textsuperscript{14} In this town the factory was never a large employer of labour.

The population increased from 2,554 in 1801 to a total of 4,891 inhabitants in 1841. Most Ormskirk people were born either in the town itself or in the surrounding villages. However, by 1841 a substantial sub-section of the population was native to Ireland. About 400 inhabitants, one twelfth of the population, were Irish-born, and an even greater proportion was of Irish descent. By 1851 there were 6,183 inhabitants, and the number born in Ireland had risen to over 1,100, or about 18% of the population.\textsuperscript{15} In comparison Liverpool, with the greatest proportion of Irish immigrants of any town in Britain, had an Irish-born population figure of 22.3%. The figure for tiny Ormskirk is even more surprising when compared with much larger towns. Dundee and Glasgow had similar percentages of 18.9% and 18.2%, Manchester 13.1%, and London only 4.6%.\textsuperscript{16}

The growing number of Irish people in Ormskirk first caused comment in 1834. ‘They are of late years much increased, living in or keeping low lodging houses.’\textsuperscript{17} Among them were many labourers who came over at harvest-time to work on Lancashire farms. These extra earnings helped the holders of very small tenements to pay their rents at home, and nationally such seasonal migration had reached a considerable level by 1841. In that year, 57,651 harvesters crossed the Irish Sea. Tiny holdings were particularly common in the western part of Ireland, and in County Mayo over one third of the population worked as harvesters.\textsuperscript{18} Mayo was a common place of birth for mid-nineteenth century Ormskirk people,\textsuperscript{19} and possibly in the
years of crisis many returned to a place that was already familiar to them.

III

Stacey's research into the burials of Ormskirk inhabitants indicates an upward curve in the death rate long before the crisis of the mid 1840s was reached. Between 1819 and 1823 the estimated death rate was 17.6 per 1,000 inhabitants. From 1829 to 1833 it climbed to 23.1 per 1,000, and rose yet again to 25.2 per 1,000 in the period 1839–43. In spite of this there was generally an annual surplus of births over deaths, and this trend continued until 1846. In the two years between 26 September 1847 and 26 September 1849 more people died than were born in the town. The death rate reached 46.1 per 1,000, or one death for every 21.7 persons in Ormskirk. Not even the worst district of London in 1849, a year of cholera and excessive sickness, could match figures like these. Despite these appalling statistics Ormskirk continued to attract immigrants. The returns of the Registrar General, quoted in 1849, suggest a population of 5,141 in 1847. Another contemporary estimate suggests that between 1847 and 1850 the population reached 5,760. Part of this increase was due to itinerant labourers working on the Liverpool to Ormskirk railway, which opened at Easter 1849. Undoubtedly there were many Irishmen among this workforce, but it was their countrymen who arrived starving and fever-stricken in 1847 who brought the greatest problems to the town.

Ormskirk's inter-census death rate was based on the 1847 population figure, and does not take into account the further increase in inhabitants between then and 1849. The figure of 46.1 per 1,000 may, therefore, be slightly exaggerated. However, even if the highest population estimate of 5,760 is used, this still gives an appallingly high death rate for the late 1840s of 41.1 per 1,000, or 1 in every 24.1 of the population. Indeed, William Farr at the Registrar General's Office believed that any figure higher than 30 per 1,000 indicated 'sanitary conditions highly destructive of human life'.

Ormskirk
Early Victorian Ormskirk was still largely contained within the limits of the seventeenth-century urban area. Possibly these bounds bore a close resemblance to those of the medieval town. Some attempt at sewerage the main streets had been attempted by 1849, but this consisted of short lengths which often failed to link with each other. Aughton Street was a part of the main north–south route from Preston to Liverpool, and yet its only public sewer was a drain, twenty yards in length, at its upper end near the market site. This emptied itself into a depression in the street, and the refuse from most of Aughton Street was left to find its foul-smelling way into the Mere Brook on the Ormskirk/Aughton boundary.\textsuperscript{26} In common with most roads in the town, Aughton Street was paved with cobble stones and boulders, and received the overflow from several privies and countless middens. Some lodging houses at its lower end had no privy accommodation at all, and excreta were tipped directly into the street. This was one of the main entrances to the town, and yet at times the smell was so bad that townspeople went considerably out of their way to avoid this route. Conditions in Moor Street were only marginally better, and ‘liquid abominations’ constantly flowed across its surface. It appears that when the railway cut the Moor Street sewer in two, the cutting was seen as a convenient disposal point for its contents. The remaining portion of the sewer linked with short sewers in the lower ends of Burscough Street and Church Street. However, this system, if system it could be called, then disgorged itself into the fields behind the Church Street houses. Eventually this effluent also found its way into the Mere Brook.\textsuperscript{27}

While the population remained at the level of 1801, sewerage disposal apparently caused few problems. However, by 1851 Ormskirk’s population had more than doubled. To house these extra people a total of 460 new houses were constructed.\textsuperscript{28} Although to some extent this expanded the built up area out from the town centre, many new buildings were erected in the confined courtyards behind the inns and houses which lined Ormskirk’s streets (map 1). These yards already contained many ancillary buildings, and it seems likely that, whether suitable for habitation or not, those available were soon occupied by the
Map 1: Ormskirk 1851 (surveyed 1849), O.S. 5" = 1 mile, sheet 1
(part of) High density housing of the poor lies beside the spacious gardens of richer townspeople. North is at the left.
newcomers. There is no evidence of buildings more than two storeys high in these yards, nor is there any mention of cellar dwellings. However, in these confined areas construction strategy was to fill the available space with as many houses as possible. The attention paid to planning, water supply or sanitation was minimal and was often entirely absent.

In 1849 nine-tenths of the courts, yards and houses were entirely destitute of covered drains, and the refuse flowed across these confined areas into channels in the streets. Several butchers had slaughter houses in the courtyards, and blood and guts were cast on the midden, which also served as the refuse heap for the cottages. Heaps of manure often remained in the courts for at least a year. They were seen as a source of income by the cottagers, who waited for them to ‘ferment’ before selling them off to farmers as fertiliser. Throughout the town the privy was the usual toilet facility, but for many inhabitants of the courts and yards there was not even one earth closet to share. No more than five Ormskirk properties had the luxury of a water-closet, and three of these passed their contents into a channel in Burscough Street.

The water supply came from pumps and wells, and contamination with mites and animalcula was common. On average, there was one well or pump to every five households in 1849. In reality, many wells were poisoned with sewerage and slaughter house refuse, and the water supply was far from evenly distributed. Better class houses had their own supply on their premises while many groups of cottagers had none. In 1849 one proprietor claimed to supply one hundred families from his own well, while another Ormskirk inhabitant counted 117 men, women and children waiting for water at one time. The poor of Church Street, Barkhouse Hill, Green Lane and Hants Lane had to fetch water over a distance of several hundred yards from the Iron Dish Well near the Ormskirk/Scarisbrick boundary.

The Hants Lane area was very much a ‘Little Ireland’, and here amidst the crowded houses, and the uneven and unpaved surfaces, lay innumerable pigsties and middens. Aughton Street was another area where conditions were
particularly bad. Nursery Yard on its eastern side was one of several courts with no water supply at all. This side of the street had a steepish gradient, and the refuse from two pigsties and middens at the top of the incline oozed through into the dwellings in the yard. There was a similar situation in Forshaw's Yard, which had eight cottages in a confined area. Those in the front were forced to empty their middens through the house. In the Grammar School Courts the cottages lay below a slaughter house, a currier's shop, privies, four pigsties, and a large midden. Although this yard had some drainage, there was a constant oozing of effluent. The water supply came from the public well outside the yard in Aughton Street, but the drain from the court passed only five feet away from the pump. On the other side of the street a cowkeeper named Murphy had a shallow well with 'tinged and flavoured' water. The occupants of nearby cottages existed in close proximity to Murphy's 'horse, cow, pig and petty midden', which oozed through the wall over the pavement. 32

The dwellings within the courtyards were often as grim as their environs. Several properties were built back-to-back or against outbuildings in adjoining yards. 33 There was, therefore, no provision for through ventilation. However, given the fetid external atmosphere, it is doubtful if this would have been an improvement. Even where both front and back doors existed and where the cottages were kept in good condition, the adjacent dampness, dirt and neglect hardly improved the quality of life. The extent of overcrowding in the yards was generally appalling, and was particularly bad in Prescot's yard in Moor Street. In 1874, there were thirty-five houses and 115 people crammed into this court. 34 The place was probably even more overcrowded in the darker days of the 1840s. In 1849 eight of the buildings in this court were used as lodging houses. The largest of these had only four rooms. An inspection by the constabulary produced a total of fifty-seven lodgers in Prescot's court, and even this figure was nowhere near the full complement of eighty-one persons that these eight hovels could hold. To this figure must also be added the lodging house keepers, their wives, and their twenty-five children. This, of course, makes no allowance for any other families squashed into this yard. 35
Most lodging houses were located in the yards and alleys of the town, and nowhere was the overcrowding greater than in places like these. The rapid increase in the number of lodging houses in British towns was a by-product of the industrial revolution, housing travelling artisans and their families, vagrants and 'abandoned females'. The accommodation charge of about 2d. or 3d. per night entitled the lodger to perhaps part of a bed. The conditions in Edinburgh lodging houses in 1843 were regarded as typical of those in Lancashire:

The crowded and filthy state of lodging houses, particularly for some time before and after harvest, the nasty state of their beds, frequently occupied by promiscuous intercourse of the sexes in poverty, rags, and filth, many of them labouring under dangerous and infectious disease, the nightly succession admitted to the same apartments, the same beds and the same bed-clothes, with their wandering and unsettled mode of life, present a condition of things as favourable to engendering and diffusing disease as it is well possible to conceive.

Ormskirk had sixty lodging houses in 1849, and all except four were run by Irishmen. Yearly rents ranged from £2.12s.0d. to £11.0s.0d. The largest lodging houses had six rooms, but it was far more common to find only two or three. The size of rooms varied from 7' × 7' to 18' × 16'. Greater size did not ensure more comfort, for it merely enabled extra people to be squeezed in. In Old Buildings Yard in Burscough Street the six lodging houses were described as 'wretched beyond description', and with a sickening smell both outside and in. Near the church in Culshaw's Yard was a 'wretched hovel, lost in filth', with only one room for all purposes. This building did at least have a window to let in daylight and air. In Fairbridge Yard in Aughton Street one lodging house was ventilated only through a hole in the roof. The two rooms in this lodging house were larger than usual with an average size of 14' × 15', but the overcrowding was fearful. The greatest number of lodgers this building housed was forty, and yet the total sleeping accommodation comprised three beds and two mattresses. Many Ormskirk houses had their windows bricked up to avoid window tax, but the complete lack of windows in this building suggests that it may once have been a barn or outbuilding. This was
admittedly an extreme case of overcrowding. Even so, the constabulary’s figures for the Ormskirk lodging houses show that six lodgers in a room 13’ × 13’ was not unusual. In many instances this was regarded by the lodging house keepers as only half the maximum capacity. 39

Duncan found a similar situation in Liverpool. Here the worst overcrowding occurred in cellars filled with migrant Irishmen, who perhaps paid 1d. per night for sleeping space on a scattering of straw. 40 When Dr. Lyon Playfair surveyed the lodging houses in nine Lancashire towns in 1843, 38.5% could be described as moderately clean. Included in his survey were Manchester, Liverpool, Rochdale and Wigan. 41 Although individual concepts of cleanliness vary, by 1849 conditions in Ormskirk were infinitely worse. Only seven of the town’s lodging houses were described as ‘clean’, and three of these had pigsties or privies close to the door. With conditions such as these, it is not surprising that Ormskirk doctors identified the Irish lodging houses and their compatriot lodgers as major contributors to the town’s insanitary and unhealthy state. 42

IV

The overcrowding in the courts, and in the lodging houses in particular, can only be understood through some knowledge of the Irish way of life. It is also helpful to have some background knowledge of the deprivations these people had suffered before reaching Ormskirk.

Mid-nineteenth century Ireland was a backward country. Houses were frequently windowless, one-bedroom cabins, and bedsteads were often entirely absent. The rural Irish homestead often doubled as an animal shelter, and the midden heap was an attendant feature of many entrances. 43 Division of holdings over several generations had created tiny units of land, and by 1841 10% of farming families held less than one acre while 45% lived on farms of five to fifteen acres. Based on the cultivation of potatoes and corn, the subsistence economy was primitive and labour intensive. This was especially true of Munster and Connacht. However, towards the east of Ireland more sophisticated farming
methods yielded better crops, and dairying and cattle rearing were increasingly profitable. Unfortunately, as agriculture commercialised it became less labour intensive. Unemployment, over-population and consolidation of holdings increased the ranks of landless labourers, for only in the textile factories of Ulster was there a growing demand for workers. Other urban areas offered little prospect of employment. Even before the famine, emigration was seen as increasingly attractive, and when hunger intervened there was often no alternative. 44

The potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) reached Ireland in 1845, and by 1846 every county was affected. The winter of 1846–7 was particularly severe, and by spring 1847 the situation was desperate. Across large tracts of Ireland blackened, blighted potato stems were a sinister reminder of the extent of famine. Fields remained unploughed and in Mayo, with no recent tradition of corn growing, farming operations were at a standstill. In Clare the price of oatmeal was higher than the poor could afford, and people pledged clothes and blankets in an attempt to buy food. In Donegal there was neither food to eat nor seed to sow, the pigs were gone, cattle and sheep were few and poultry was scarce. 45

Fever follows famine, and dysentery was already prevalent in Wicklow in January 1847. When fever attacked, those affected found that relatives were often too scared to nurse them lest they, too, fell victim to disease. Many died from neglect, and in Cork the dead rotted on their beds of straw. As early as January 1847 some authorities were recommending emigration, and that month 8,000 people left Ireland’s shores. 46 They were swiftly followed by tens of thousands of smallholders. 47 During 1847 the Irish left Ireland in unprecedented numbers. By July 300,000 starving and often fever-infected Irishmen had reached Liverpool. For the better-off this was a staging post for America. For some it was a point of dispersal for Lancashire towns, such as Manchester, and for other urban areas farther afield, such as York and Leeds. For tens of thousands of Irishmen Liverpool was to become their adopted home, and for the majority it was one hell exchanged for another. 48
The potato harvest of 1847 was good, but it failed yet again in 1848, and the exodus continued. It is impossible to tell how many Irishmen eventually travelled the thirteen miles north from Liverpool to Ormskirk between 1847 and 1850. It is very likely that many of them spoke only Gaelic, and that the language barrier was an additional obstacle to be overcome. In a potentially hostile land it is only natural that the Irishman sought shelter with those who spoke his native tongue. It is also clear that most immigrants had the means to pay for only the cheapest accommodation, and floor-space in a crowded lodging house was all that many could afford. By giving shelter, however inadequate, to their fellow countrymen the lodging house keepers were acting in a traditionally Irish way. This propensity to help each other was a notable feature of Irish communities in Liverpool. In Ormskirk the fact that bedsteads were few and far between was nothing new for the immigrant Irish, nor were the heaps of manure, the pigsties and lack of sanitation any cause for surprise on their part. The dangerous difference was that these were now encountered amongst high density housing. The Irish labourer, having lived through the ravages of famine in Ireland, had a greater chance of food and work in Ormskirk and its hinterland than he had in his own country. Unfortunately his prospects of an early death from infectious disease did not lessen. Months of starvation had reduced the Irishman’s resistance to disease, and the indications are that, although numerically inferior, he rose high in Ormskirk’s list of casualties.

Unfortunately, as the Irish in Ormskirk were almost certainly illiterate, they have left no written record as to what they felt about their appalling predicament. In her sensitive study into the Irish in York, Frances Finnegan doubts that the Irish preferred the densely-packed slums of back-street York to their rural cabins in western Ireland. Similarly, it is unlikely the immigrants in Ormskirk from county Mayo preferred their close-packed housing and the flatness of the Lancashire plain to the Atlantic shores of their native county. Their general apathy to their tribulations in this Lancashire market town can be seen only as a measure of their dejection and despair. Often their time here was tragically short, for the lodging houses were
breeding grounds for infectious diseases with high mortality rates. In the words of surgeon Symonds, all too frequently the Irish in Ormskirk ‘only came to die’. 

52

V

Ormskirk’s rising death rate from about 1819 onwards suggests that the town’s sanitary state was deteriorating even before the famine. Nevertheless, as late as 1845 the workhouse, with accommodation for 200 paupers, seldom had more than 100 inmates.53 It was not until 1847 that crisis point was reached.

On 8 April 1847 the Board of Guardians for the Ormskirk Union recognised the need for a fever shed. They also instructed their clerk to apply for a warrant to pass Patrick Joyce and his two children back to Ireland, and initiated proceedings against Luke Jordan and Timothy McDermot for their dirty houses. These events are important as they apparently mark the onset of Ormskirk’s crisis. By early June fever was raging in the town. One of its victims was Peter McMaster, the Union surgeon. His successor resigned after only one week, and by the end of the month there was insufficient room in the workhouse for the sick poor.54

It is not clear what type of sickness this was, but the prime suspect has to be typhus which is spread by the faeces of body lice that have bitten infected patients. The disease was rife where overcrowding was common, where bedding was used by several people, and where scant regard was placed on personal hygiene. So frequent was typhus among poor Irish communities that a common sobriquet was ‘Irish fever’. A further possibility is that another louse-transmitted disease, relapsing fever, was also present.55 Dysentery may well have been widespread. It is perhaps less likely that typhoid was a major factor in the increase in sickness during that fatal spring of 1847, for this is typically a disease of the late summer months.

In the 1840s disease was widely believed to be spread by the miasma or foul smells.56 There was no shortage of these in Ormskirk in 1847. In an attempt to deal with the situation the Board of Guardians instructed all Ormskirk
inhabitants to whitewash their houses, and to clear out their ‘middlingsteads’, cesspools and open drains. These were measures which could perhaps have alleviated the situation if the main culprit was intestinal infection and if efficient disposal methods had been adopted. In fact the sickness continued, and the salary of the succeeding medical officer, Charles Price Symonds, was increased. This was deemed necessary because of extra work arising from the influx of Irish poor and the great number of fever cases. In July many poverty-stricken Irish people were admitted to the workhouse, and the Guardians urged that those who were fit should be returned to their homeland. The law of settlement was complicated, and in 1846 the new concept of irremovability had further increased its complexity. Not every poor Irishman could be shipped back across the Irish Sea. Anyone with five years’ continuous residence in a parish could now apply for poor relief without fear of removal to his or her place of settlement. Widows were irremovable for twelve months after the deaths of their husbands, as were those who applied for temporary relief by reason of sickness or accident. Although Parliament passed a bill on 21 June 1847 which allowed repatriation with the minimum of delay, in that fever-ridden summer many of Ormskirk’s Irish population were irremovable. The sickness continued, and in the month of October alone, Symonds dealt with no less than 455 cases of ‘fever’. It would seem that about one in every twelve inhabitants was affected.

It is very likely that bowel infections such as typhoid were now a major source of disease. Unlike typhus these infections were spread by ingestion of infected food and water. Until 1869 doctors usually failed to differentiate between typhus and typhoid for both produced a rash, although only the latter was characterised by diarrhoea. Symonds was later to record how the unwashed Irish formed the bulk of fever cases in the Union, and his comments on that occasion form the opening paragraph of this paper. It is tragically apparent that the Irish came to Ormskirk, as they did elsewhere, ‘bringing pestilence on their backs, famine in their stomachs’ and often ‘dying in the streets on arrival’.

During 1848 the amount of outdoor relief almost doubled.
Fever was an ever-present spectre in the crowded yards, and in 1849 cholera, most dreaded of all diseases, added an extra dimension of fear. The horror associated with this infection was caused partly by its high rate of mortality and partly by the rapidity of its course. At times death could, and did, come within hours of the initial symptoms. Cholera reached Liverpool in December 1848 where its first victims were an Irish family. It did not become epidemic there for some months, but it broke out again in May 1849, and killed a total of 5,308 people. The illness arrived in Ormskirk on 26 July 1849. Between that date and 14 November 1849 the Union surgeon attended to thirty cases of cholera, and the overwhelming majority of patients came from Ormskirk. Sixteen people died from this disease during the summer and autumn of 1849, making its mortality rate a little over 50%. Although this was only a fraction of the death toll in Liverpool, it was serious enough in a town of less than 6,000 people. In Ormskirk, as elsewhere, cholera struck in those areas where infection of all types was already common. In 1849 Symonds told how fever had not for the last three years been absent from Green Lane, Prescot’s Yard, Moor Street and Old Buildings in Burscough Street. Its main breeding ground was the Irish lodging houses.

The summer and autumn of 1849 were particularly bad for intestinal infection in general. In September of that year Symonds applied for increased remuneration for extra attendances and supplies of medicine ‘during the recent time of cholera and diarrhoea’. Notices in the town urged all persons attacked with bowel complaints to apply for medicine, and in October an extra £5 was granted for drugs to treat these infections. Between 1 June and 14 November the Union surgeon attended to 117 instances of diarrhoea and 101 cases of ‘fever’, and it seems that Ormskirk inhabitants formed the vast bulk of sick patients.

In analysing illness there is always the element of incorrect diagnosis to be taken into account, and for the same reason it is impossible to be absolutely precise concerning the reasons for death. Indeed in Ormskirk the specific cause of death was often not given. Out of a total of 474 people who died in the town in the two years to 26 September 1849,
‘other causes’ accounted for 175 deaths. However, from the illnesses that are identified, it is clear that infections such as cholera and typhoid were only partly to blame for ‘this terrible excess of mortality’. In the cold and damp houses of early Victorian Ormskirk diseases of the respiratory tract were even more lethal than those of the intestinal organs. In this period 119 people died from illnesses described as consumption, pneumonia, bronchitis and inflammation of the lungs, as opposed to ninety-one from ‘fever’, cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery. Typhus carried off a further thirty-seven people, and twenty-nine died from ‘scarlatina’. Only twenty-three people died of ‘old age’. The child mortality rate was tragically high. No less than 159 infants died before they were three, forty children died between the ages of two and seven, and twenty-five were aged from seven to fourteen. Thus almost half of those who died in Ormskirk in these two years did not live to see their fifteenth birthday.

Even the dead caused problems, for by 1849 the churchyard was full. Ormskirk surgeon, Robert Marsden, related how the surface could not be disturbed to the depth of one foot without ‘turning up the mouldering remains of some who undoubtedly expected to rest in peace’. Marsden regarded the ‘noxious exhalations which must arise from the constant upturning of this animal matter’ as ‘poisonous in itself, injurious to health as well as to decency, and painful to witness’.

It is clear that large-scale remedial measures were necessary.

VI

There seems little doubt that in 1847 epidemic fever and the famine-starved Irish reached Ormskirk together. Although neither fever nor the Irish were new phenomena for the town, there was no background of experience to call upon when the two arrived simultaneously and in comparatively large numbers. Some responsibility for the crisis of the late 1840s must rest on the shoulders of the English landowners, for it was they who allowed the neglect and decay of their
property to continue. It is also apparent that the Ormskirk court leet was a dismal failure in effecting any worthwhile control or remedial measures. An authority which met only once per year was obviously ill-equipped to deal with a sudden influx of several hundred immigrants.\(^\text{73}\)

The more conscientious inhabitants were seriously concerned about the situation. On humanitarian grounds alone the condition of Ormskirk was grave, but there were also sound financial and economic reasons for attempting long-term improvements. For example, in 1848 the amount of outdoor relief, £1095.8s.0d., was double the amount it had been in 1846. Although this reduced considerably, and somewhat surprisingly, in 1849, the vast proportion was expended in those areas which were most notorious for disease and dirt. In a more hygienic town there would be less sickness, which in turn should reduce the depth of poverty, and there would be less demand on the pockets of those who contributed to the poor rate.\(^\text{74}\)

It is ironic that Ormskirk’s crisis occurred at the exact time the new rail link brought the chance of renewed prosperity to the town. Ormskirk was now within easy reach of Liverpool, and there was hope that the mercantile middle class would be encouraged to pay high prices for building land in the area.\(^\text{75}\)

In Liverpool the wealthy were moving outwards and away from the same conditions on a far larger scale. While Ormskirk’s difficulties continued, there was little hope that they would be attracted to a place where the prevailing conditions were those that they were trying to avoid.

The Nuisances Removal Act of 1846 was of limited scope in effecting any permanent improvement in Ormskirk’s insanitary state. However, this Act gave rural Poor Law authorities power to deal with nuisances such as bad housing, foul drains, overflowing cess-pools and accumulating refuse heaps. Justices in petty sessions could prosecute for these offences.\(^\text{76}\) After 1846 the main responsibility for Ormskirk’s sanitary control shifted from the inept court leet to the Board of Guardians of the Ormskirk Union, and until 1850 this was the main authority to deal with the crisis. The Ormskirk Union was typical of many in that it was based on a market town which was already the natural centre for the district. It administered relief over a rural area which
stretched from Aintree in the south to Tarleton and Hesketh Bank in the north, and in 1849 catered for a population of 35,000 people. Its weekly meetings were concerned with the running of the workhouse, in administering poor relief, and in attempting to deal with the crisis in the town of Ormskirk.77

In April 1847 the Ormskirk Guardians were making use of their new powers when they asked the magistrates to prosecute two particularly dirty householders. A further twelve names (nine of them Irish) were submitted to the magistrates for action in May 1848. This was perhaps only the tip of the iceberg. The Ormskirk Union also set up a sanitary committee, and appointed two members of the Ormskirk constabulary as inspectors of nuisances.78 However, for want of real power it proved impossible to achieve any lasting benefit.

More far reaching than the Nuisances Act was the Public Health Act of 1848 which set up the General Board of Health, and which empowered local authorities to establish boards of their own. This local board of health could then take over management of sewerage and water, authorise the removal of rubbish heaps and other ‘nuisances’, and deal with offensive slaughter-houses and with houses unfit for habitation. Most importantly this legislation empowered local boards of health to levy a rate to cover the expense of the required improvements.79

Before the Act could be adopted for an area a preliminary inquiry was usually needed. If at least 10% of ratepayers petitioned the General Board of Health an inspector would be sent from London to assess the situation. However, should the death rate exceed 23 per 1,000 over a seven year period, this Board had the power actually to force local authorities to establish a local board of health.80 Ormskirk was quick to take advantage of the new legislation. In November 1848, 162 ratepayers petitioned for an inspector to visit Ormskirk, and twelve months later Robert Rawlinson held his inquiry at the town hall. Rawlinson was no stranger to the task, for he had already inspected nineteen towns and numerous villages. Included amongst them were places far larger than Ormskirk, such as Dover, Portsmouth, Birmingham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne.81

When Rawlinson visited Ormskirk the town was still
suffering from the shock of cholera, and from the widespread intestinal infections which had attacked so many during the summer and autumn months. His subsequent report, written in November 1849, includes numerous letters and surveys by local people, together with his personal comments and recommendations. Rawlinson urged that a local board of health should be set up in Ormskirk as soon as possible. He emphasised the need for an adequate sewerage system, for a good supply of fresh water, and for control over bad housing conditions. The sickness which derived from the unhealthy lodging houses frequently cost the ratepayer more than the whole amount of rent paid for them. Rawlinson considered that providing proper lodgings free of cost would actually be cheaper than allowing these buildings to remain in their present state. Even in 1849 Rawlinson clearly believed that the initiative for improving the lot of the poor must come from above. Forty years later he was to state that one may 'Just as well tell the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk as to tell these people to be well housed, well clothed and well fed'. The inspector also suggested that a new cemetery should be provided, and that the rights to the market and fair should be purchased from the Earl of Derby. By an Order in Council dated 13 July 1850 Ormskirk’s local board of health became a reality. This was the first such board in Lancashire and one of the first in England. Of course, it could be argued that, just as Liverpool acquired the first permanent Medical Officer of Health because its conditions were the worst in the country, Ormskirk was among the first local boards for very similar reasons.

One of the new board’s earliest duties was to draw up by-laws regulating slaughter houses, street cleaning, removal of refuse, and conditions in the lodging houses. These by-laws were confirmed by London in February 1851. Robert Rawlinson, also responsible for the plans for Liverpool’s Bala Lake project, supervised Ormskirk’s engineering works. By 1854 the original sewerage scheme was completed, and the Greetby Hill reservoir supplied spring water at a cost of 1d. or 1½d. per house per week. Ormskirk, which in 1849 had not one bath, was now up among the leaders in sanitary improvement.
How successful was this new authority? It is unfortunate that none of the board’s earliest minutes have survived. Those that are extant, from 1863, portray the board at its fortnightly meetings vetting planning applications, dealing with nuisances and setting the rate. There were also several occasions when they dealt with failures in their new water and sewerage equipment. In spite of the pioneering efforts of the early 1850s, Ormskirk’s ultimate road to health was painfully slow, and an initial decline in the death rate was not maintained. In 1869 the death rate was down to 21 per 1,000, but it rose to 28.6 per 1,000 in 1880, and reached 35 per 1,000 in 1900. By this date the board had become the Ormskirk Urban District Council, and the Insanitary Property Committee was concerned about conditions in the courts and alleys of the town.

‘... the closeness, narrowness, bad arrangement, bad condition of the buildings ... and the want of light, air, ventilation and proper conveniences, is dangerous and prejudicial to the health of the inhabitants,...’

By now pig-keeping had been abandoned in favour of poultry, pigeons and rabbits, but half a century of ‘improvement’ still left much to be desired.

VII

The earliest of these improvements was surrounded by a bitter political row, and it is clear that in the early 1850s certain townspeople preferred an unhealthy town to an increased rate. Indeed the publication of Rawlinson’s report resulted in an ‘anti-Public Health meeting’ and a counter petition with 760 signatures. One of the chief opponents of Ormskirk’s board of health was Joseph Stoner. Stoner was a prominent member of the Board of Guardians. He had often chaired meetings, and at the time of Rawlinson’s inquiry was vice-chairman of the Ormskirk Union. He gave evidence at this inquiry regarding the high mortality rate and the amount expended in out-door relief, and believed that a local board of health would accomplish much good, provided it acted with ‘rigid economy’. It is, therefore,
remarkable that in the next few years Joseph Stoner was the most vociferous of those who criticised Ormskirk’s sanitary authority. His political opponents claimed that this was because, as the owner of several dilapidated and unhealthy cottages, the cost of improving their hygiene would fall upon him.92

The original petition for a local board of health in Ormskirk was organised by solicitor, William Welsby, chairman of the Board of Guardians.93 Stoner apparently had no part in the petition. The opponents of the new board were later to record how, at the inquiry, Stoner asked Rawlinson who had sent for him, and how many signatures he had received. The inspector replied that he was there at the request of the ratepayers, but refused to comment on their numbers. Stoner asked Rawlinson to allow him to examine the document. The inspector was firm. ‘No sir. I will not. I hold it up, but into it you shall not look’94

This inquiry was clearly an eventful occasion. It was attended by the town’s medical officers, and by others with first hand experience of Ormskirk’s difficulties. Many tradesmen and ‘working men’ were also present. Some expressed concern at the cost of Ormskirk’s proposed improvement, for several owners of insanitary property had persuaded their tenants that improvement would prove expensive for them. In spite of the appalling housing conditions, the cottage owners had gained a certain amount of support for their opposition. Rawlinson was clearly aware of this, and later commented on the suicidal and blind resistance of the poor.

The cost of a piped water supply was a particular issue, for those reluctant to change believed that deepening old wells and digging new ones was a cheaper way to improve the situation. Rawlinson’s argument was that piped water was a less expensive undertaking. Other enquiries concerned the rating system and the way that the new board would be managed.95

This board consisted of nine people elected by the property owners and ratepayers. The first election was scheduled for the following 1 October, and one third of the board was to retire annually.96 As this first election drew close, political notices about the town warned that the local
board of health had the power to interfere with all property within its area. These notices appear to be the work of the group of cottage owners, although they are signed simply 'An Observer'. A counter attack soon argued that such 'power' was limited to abating nuisances. The ability to interfere with new buildings, or to alter old ones, was strictly confined to proper drainage provision, and the new board could ensure that no house was erected without a privy. Electors were urged to choose men who would compel property owners to do their duty at their own expense not that of the ratepayers.  

Presumably Joseph Stoner supported the cottage owners, and his name does not appear among the board members who drew up the new by-laws in 1851. Three of his like-minded supporters gained admission at the second election, and Stoner certainly contested the election of 1852. The local board of health was now accused of wasting ratepayers' money, and its members were challenged to answer charges at a public meeting on 25 March. One member was the vicar of Ormskirk, Rev. Rawstorne, whom Stoner accused of Puseyism, a charge he also levelled at the holder of the advowson, the Earl of Derby. Stoner, a member of the schools committee, had already quarrelled with the previous vicar over his tractarian views. He believed his successor had similar leanings towards catholicism, and sought to prevent him teaching religion to pupils. Rev. Rawstorne provided lessons for poor children, and Stoner alleged that the schoolmaster at the Charity School was cruel and that a boy had died as a result of ill treatment. The vicar defended the teacher, and Stoner's accusation was overruled by the coroner's verdict two days before the public meeting took place.  

Stoner's opponents were swift in retaliation. They gained support from the vicar of Altcar, who attacked Stoner in a letter to the Evening Standard headed 'The Slanderer'. Stoner's 'monstrous charges', it was claimed, were an attempt to force himself into office by attacking several members of the local board of health. The same day, 27 March, printed notices aimed at the 'Working Men of Ormskirk' and the 'Ratepayers of Ormskirk' defended the actions of the board over the question of finance. Working
men were assured that the bulk of expense would fall not upon tenants but upon the cottage owners, and warned how those who cried out the loudest about high rates were those whose property was in the worst condition. The ratepayers were asked if they wished to be led by a party of mischievous ignorant meddlers, and warned against involvement in a 'scheme of malignant revenge against your esteemed vicar, victim to the selfish greedy avarice of a set of cottage owners'.

The offensive continued. A poster appeared advertising an 'Ourang-Outang' on exhibition in Burscough Street. It proclaimed that this extraordinary creature had little knowledge of theology, and that it found schoolmasters to be especially obnoxious. This is an obvious reference to Stoner, who lived in Burscough Street. Other posters and pamphlets followed. One, dated 1 April, advertised the 'Great Attraction' of a Russian Bear in a public house in Church Street who hated pure water, and who became almost ungovernable at the prospect of it. Another told how two ruffianly fellows, lurking about Derby Street with 'burglarious intentions', confessed to being in the pay of the 'Russian Bear, Stunner and Co.' Stoner and his party were clearly unamused at being the butt of an April Fool jibe, and responded with more speed than originality. Their poster claimed that the author of the other material had 'debased himself below an Ourang-Outang', and it asked why he did not defend other board members in their extravagant waste of public money.

In the event Stoner and company narrowly failed in their bid for election. Stoner was soon involved with a petition to parliament which called for amendments to the 1848 Act. It complained that the 1848 Act was 'defective, incomplete, unjust, and . . . in the hands of selfish men it furnishes and gives opportunity to them to oppress the people of those towns into which it is introduced'. This petition further alleged that the earlier elections had been rigged, and implied that William Welsby was involved in dishonest proceedings. There was perhaps a grain of truth in these accusations, for candidate Welsby had acted as both returning officer and teller, and refused to allow anyone to scrutinise the count. Nevertheless, Welsby's reaction was
positive. In July 1852 Stoner was accused of several acts of libel, and his name appeared prominently below a public notice of apology. It seems that for Joseph Stoner this was an ignominious end to a highly emotional election campaign.

VIII

Early Victorian Ormskirk was a town still gripped by 'antiquated shreds of vassalage', where alternative forms of government were set up against a background of small-town political squabbles, and on which was superimposed the tragedy of Ireland. In 1847 an unknown number of sick and starving men, women and children precipitated the town into a crisis for which it was quite unprepared, and with which it was at first quite unable to cope. This insight into the problems of Ormskirk highlights the need for further research in other small towns. One obvious candidate for such investigation is Prescot, where in 1851 one fifth of the population of less than 5,000 was Irish-born. Another is somewhat larger Warrington, which also suffered an influx of destitute Irish immigrants. However, it would be inappropriate to link the Irish with every insanitary Victorian town which had reasonable access to an Irish Sea port. In an unpublished essay Janet Withersby shows how Skelmersdale, with no Irish population to speak of, developed disastrous problems of health and sanitation in the 1860s.

A comparison with other small towns would allow the situation in Ormskirk to be seen in better perspective. Present evidence suggests that for those unfortunate individuals, forced by poverty and circumstance into the courts and yards of Ormskirk, conditions were just as intolerable as in far larger towns. The depth of misery and the virulence of infection in this tiny market town differed from Liverpool, Manchester and York only in that lesser numbers were affected. It could even be argued that the overall effect of open sewers, dilapidated housing and epidemic fever on general morale and health was worse in a small locality. In Ormskirk the crowded and disease-ridden courts of the poor
often lay cheek by jowl with the gardens of more affluent townspeople. Here squalor and pollution could not be hidden in the same way as in the large towns and cities, and assailed the eye and nose of inhabitant and traveller alike.

NOTES

1 L(ancashire) R(ecord) O(fice, Preston), UDOr 15/10, Robert Rawlinson, Report (to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage drainage and supply of water and the Sanitary Conditions of the Inhabitants of the Town and Township of Ormskirk in the County of Lancaster) (1850), p. 15.


4 P.R.O. DL 1/159.

5 P.R.O. MR4.


7 Ibid., pp. 239, 261, 262.


9 L.R.O. DDK 290/13/1; Farrer and Brownbill, VCH Lancs., III, p. 261.


12 Rawlinson, Report, p. 11; L.R.O. PR 2886/34.

13 L.R.O. DRL 1/58.


15 Stacey, Ormskirk, pp. 9, 25; Rawlinson, Report, p. 11.


17 Stacey, Ormskirk, p. 9.

18 E.R.R. Green, 'The Western Seaboard', in R. Dudley Edwards and

19 Stacey, Ormskirk, p. 10.
20 Ibid., p. 33.
22 Ibid., p. 11.
23 Ibid., p. 11.
26 Rawlinson, Report, p. 28; L.R.O. DRL 1/58; P.R.O. MR4.
27 Rawlinson, Report, pp. 28, 29.
28 Stacey, Ormskirk, p. 25.
29 ‘Cottages’ is the general term given to these buildings in Rawlinson’s report.
30 Rawlinson, Report, pp. 18, 19, 22, 25, 28, 29, 32, 37.
31 The well was named from an iron ladle once chained to it; O.S. Maps, 5’ to 1 mile, Ormskirk (1851). Rawlinson, Report, pp. 25, 27, 32.
32 Ibid., pp. 27, 28, 32.
33 O.S. Maps, 5’ to 1 mile, Ormskirk (1851).
34 L.R.O. UDOr 2/2.
35 Rawlinson Report, p. 21.
37 Ibid., p. 329.
38 Ibid., p. 331.
39 Rawlinson, Report, pp. 18–21.
42 Rawlinson, Report, pp. 14, 15, 19–21, 25, 29, 30, 32.
45 ‘Correspondence from January–March 1847 relating to the measures adopted for the relief of the distress in Ireland (second part)’, Brit. Parl. Pap.: Famine Relief in Ireland, VII. Session 1847 (Shannon, 1970), pp. 25, 148, 535.
47 Oliver MacDonagh, ‘Irish Emigration to the United States of America and the British Colonies During the Famine’, Great Famine, p. 320.
48 Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, pp. 276–283.
49 MacDonagh, ‘Irish Emigration’, p. 323.
53 L.R.O. PUS 1/2.
57 L.R.O. PUS 1/2.
60 10 Vic. cap. 33. An Act to amend the laws relating to the removal of poor persons from England and Scotland.
64 Burnett, *Social History of Housing*, p. 9.
73 Some mid-nineteenth century court leet records are in the Earl of Derby’s estate office at Knowsley, and have not yet been examined.
74 Rawlinson, *Report*, p. 15.
78 L.R.O. PUS 1/2.
81 Rawlinson, *Report*, pp. 5, 42.
83 Rawlinson, *Report*, pp. 10, 36. In fact, the court leet continued until 1876 when the local authority finally gained control of the market. Its last act was to present a clock tower to the town, which still stands in the midst of the market place.
L.R.O. UDOr 15/12.


L.R.O. UDOr 1/2.

Stacey, Ormskirk, p. 34; L.R.O. UDOr 9/1 Medical Officer of Health Reports 1894–1921.


Midwinter, Social Administration in Lancashire, p. 94.

L.R.O. PUS 1/2; Rawlinson, Report, pp. 5, 25.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/11.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/26.

Ibid.


L.R.O. UDOr 15/8.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/9.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/12; UDOr 15/14; UDOr 15/26.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/20. Puseyism – a derogatory term for the doctrines of E.B. Pusey and the Oxford Movement, i.e. the revival of Catholic doctrine and observance in the Church of England.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/15; UDOr 15/20.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/15.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/16; UDOr 15/17.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/25.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/19.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/19.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/24.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/26.

Midwinter, Social Administration in Lancashire, p. 94.

L.R.O. UDOr 15/21.

Information from J.G. Timmins, Lancashire Polytechnic.

Rawlinson, Report, p. 13.

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