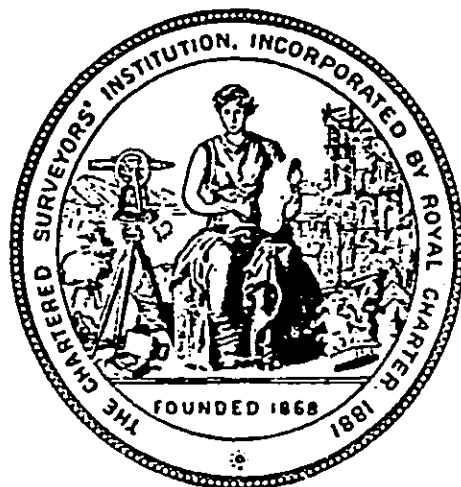


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**THE SANITARY EVOLUTION  
OF LONDON**

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THE  
SANITARY EVOLUTION  
OF LONDON

BY  
HENRY JEPHSON, L.C.C.

AUTHOR OF  
"THE PLATFORM: ITS RISE AND PROGRESS"

"The discovery of the laws of public health, the determination of the conditions of cleanliness, manners, water supply, food, exercise, isolation, medicine, most favourable to life in one city, in one country, is a boon to every city, to every country, for all can profit by the experience of one."

G. GRAHAM, Registrar-General, 1871.

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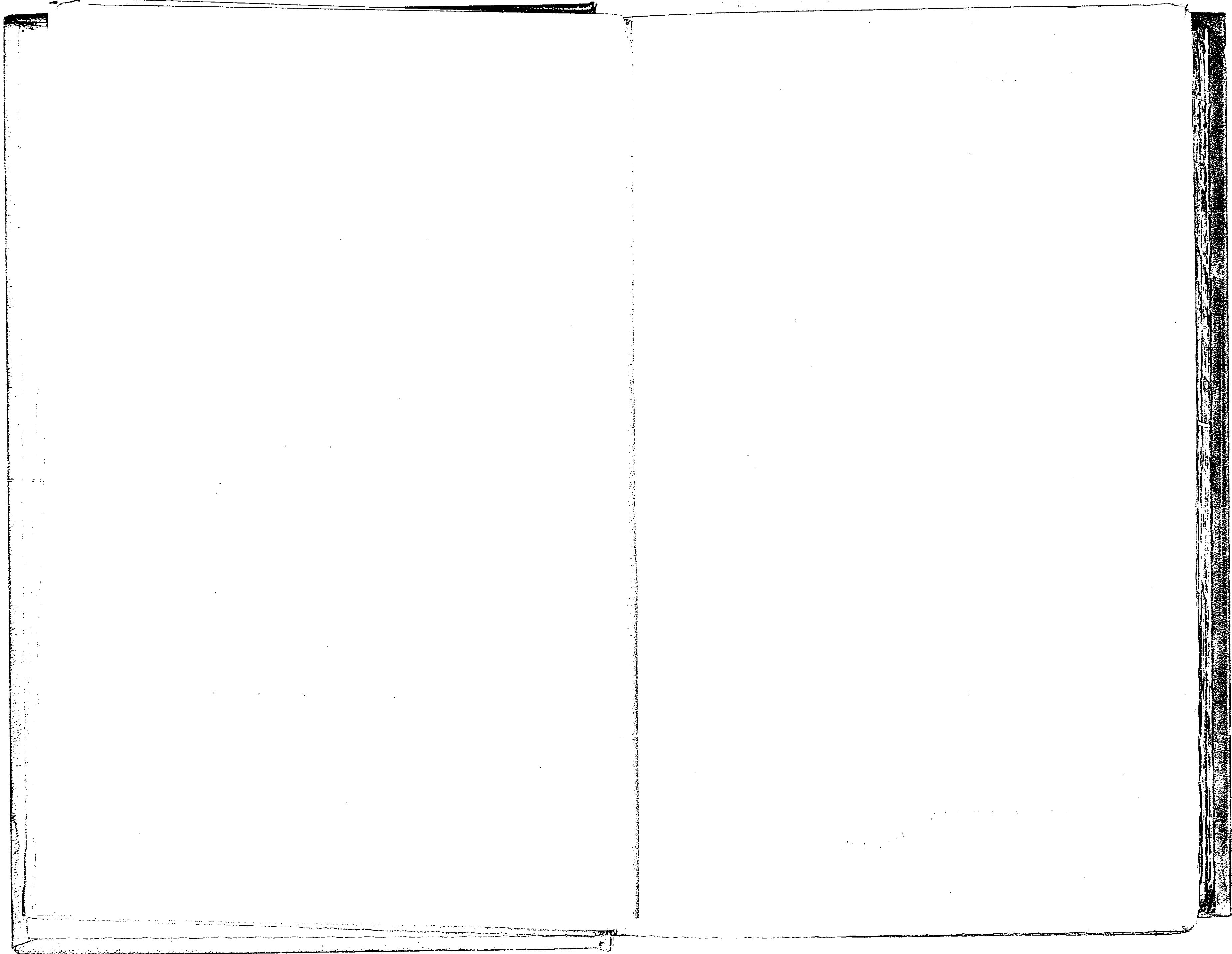
DEDICATED  
 TO  
 THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL  
 BY ONE OF ITS MEMBERS  
 THE AUTHOR

4, CORNWALL GARDENS,  
 S.W.

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| 1. Clerkenwell. | 4. C |
| 2. Holborn.     | 5. C |
| 3. St. Giles'.  | 6. C |

# The Sanitary Evolution of London

## CHAPTER I

THE health of the people of a country stands foremost in the rank of national considerations. Upon their health depends their physical strength and energy, upon it their mental vigour, their individual happiness, and, in a great degree, their moral character. Upon it, moreover, depends the productivity of their labour, and the material prosperity and commercial success of their country. Ultimately, upon it depends the very existence of the nation and of the Empire.

The United Kingdom can claim no exemption from this general principle; rather, indeed, is it one which, in the present period of our history, affects us more vitally than it has ever done before, and in a more crucial manner than it does many other nations.

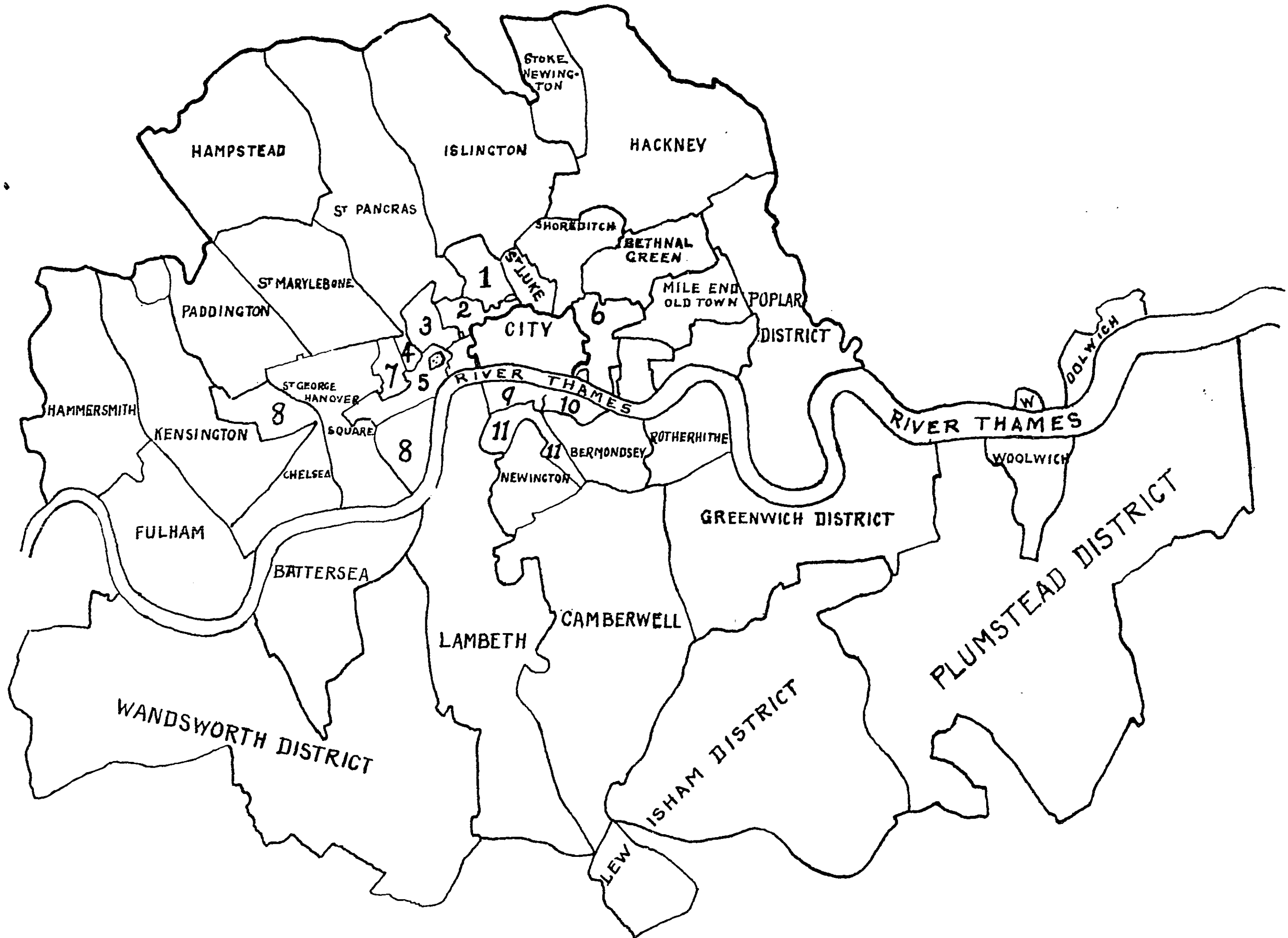
The more imperative is it, therefore, that every effort should be made to raise the health of our people to the highest attainable level, and to maintain it at the loftiest possible standard.

The subject is so vast and complicated that it is impossible, within reasonable limits, to treat more than a portion of it at a time.

London, the great metropolis, the capital of the Empire itself, constitutes, by the number of its inhabitants, so large a portion of the United Kingdom, that the health of its people is a very material factor in that of the kingdom. It has a population greater than either Scotland or Ireland, greater than any of our Colonies, except Canada and Australasia, greater than that of many foreign States—



SKETCH MAP OF LOCAL DISTRICTS IN LONDON.



REFERENCE TO NAMES OF PARISHES AND DISTRICTS NUMBERED ON THE MAP.

- |                 |                              |                              |                                       |
|-----------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Clerkenwell. | 4. Strand.                   | 7. St. James', Westminster.  | 10. St. Olave's, Southwark.           |
| 2. Holborn.     | 5. St. Martin-in-the-Fields. | 8. Westminster.              | 11. St. George the Martyr, Southwark. |
| 3. St. Giles'.  | 6. Whitechapel.              | 9. St. Saviour's, Southwark. |                                       |

"the greatest aggregate of human beings that has ever existed in the history of the world in the same area of space."

And, in a measure too, it is typical of other of our great cities.

A narrative of the sanitary history and conditions of life of the people of London, therefore, would be a material contribution to the consideration of the general subject in its national aspect, whilst it cannot but be of special interest to those more immediately concerned in the amelioration of the existing condition of the masses of the people of the great capital.

Such a narrative is attempted in the following pages.

It is, in the main, based upon the experiences, and inferences, and conclusions, of men who, more than any others, were in a position closely to observe the circumstances in which the people lived, their sanitary condition, and the causes leading thereto and influencing the same.

It includes the principal measures from time to time passed by the Legislature to create local governing authorities in sanitary matters—the various measures designed and enacted to improve the condition of the people—and the administration of those measures by the local authorities charged with their administration.

It is a narrative, in fact, of the sanitary—and, therefore, to a great extent of the social—evolution of this great city.

It is doubtful how long a time would have elapsed before the condition of the people came into real prominence had it not been for the oft-recurring invasions of the country by epidemic disease of the most dreaded and fatal forms. Ever-present diseases, disastrous and devastating though they were, did not strike the imagination or appeal to the fears of the public as did the sudden onslaught of an awe-inspiring disease such as cholera.

An epidemic of that dreaded disease swept over London in 1832, and there were over 10,000 cases and nearly 5,000 deaths in the districts then considered as metropolitan—the population of those districts being close upon 1,500,000.

For the moment, the dread of it stimulated the people,

and such governing authorities as there were, to inspection, and cleansings, and purifications, and to plans for vigorous sanitary reform; but the instant the cholera departed the good resolutions died down, and the plans disappeared likewise.

There were, however, some persons upon whom this visitation made more abiding impression; and they, struck by the waste of human life, by the frequent recurrence of epidemics which swept away thousands upon thousands of victims, and distressed by the perpetual prevalence and even more deadly destructiveness of various other diseases among the people, bethought themselves of investigating the actual existing facts, and the causes of them—so far at least as London, their own city, was concerned.

And then slowly the curtain began to be raised on the appalling drama of human life in London, and dimly to be revealed the circumstances in which the great masses of the working and labouring classes of the great metropolis lived, moved, and came to the inevitable end, and the conditions and surroundings of their existence.

The slowness with which England as a nation awoke to the idea that the public health was a matter of any concern whatever is most strange and remarkable. It seems now so obvious a fact that one marvels that it did not at all times secure for itself recognition and acknowledgment. But men and women were growing up amidst the existing surroundings, foul and unwholesome though those were, and some, at least, were visibly living to old age; population was increasing at an unprecedented rate; wealth was multiplying and accumulating; the nation was reaching greater heights of power and fame. What, then, was there, what could there be wrong with the existing state of affairs?

Real social evils, however, sooner or later, force themselves into prominence. For long they may be ignored, or treated with indifference by the governing classes; for long they may be endured by the victims in suffering and silence; but ultimately they compel recognition, and have to be investigated and grappled with, and, if possible, remedied.

The real beginning of such investigations was not until near the close of the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Information then for the first time was collected, of necessity very limited in extent, crude in form, and of moderate accuracy, but none the less illuminating in its character—information from which one can piece together in a hazy sort of way a general impression of the condition of the working and poorer classes in London at that period.

Foremost among the diseases which worked unceasing and deadly havoc among the people was fever. By its wide and constant prevalence and great fatality, it was the first upon which attention became fixed. The returns which were collected as regarded it related to twenty metropolitan unions or parishes, and in them only to the pauper population, some 77,000 in number. But they showed that in the single year of 1838, out of those 77,000 persons, 14,000, or very nearly one-fifth, had been attacked by fever, and nearly 1,300 had died.\*

Being limited to the technically pauper population this information related only to one section of the community; but it nevertheless afforded the means of forming a rough estimate of the amount of fever among the community as a whole.

And another fact also at once became apparent, namely, that certain parts of London were more specially and persistently haunted or infested by fever than others. In Whitechapel, Holborn, Lambeth, and numerous other parishes or districts, fever of the very worst forms was always prevalent—"typhus, and the fevers which proceed from the malaria of filth." The sanitary condition of those districts was fearful, every sanitary abomination being rampant therein, whilst certain localities in them were so bad that "it would be utterly impossible for any description to convey to the mind an adequate conception of their state." And most marvellous and deplorable of all was the fact that this fearful condition of things was

\* See Parliamentary Papers, 1837-8, vol. xxviii., and P.P. 1839, vol. xx. p. 106, Dr. S. Smith.

allowed, not merely to continue, but to flourish without any attempt being made to remedy, or even to mitigate, some of the inevitable and most disastrous consequences.

As regarded the districts in which the wealthier classes resided, systematic efforts had been made on a considerable scale to widen the streets, to remove obstructions to the circulation of free currents of air, and to improve the drainage—an acknowledgment and appreciation of the fact that these things did deleteriously affect people's health. But nothing whatever had been attempted to improve the condition of the districts inhabited by the poor. Those districts were not given a thought to, though in them annually thousands and tens of thousands of victims suffered or died from diseases which were preventable.

Reports such as these attracted some degree of attention, and awakened a demand for further information, and in 1840 the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee to inquire as to the health, not only of London, but of the large towns throughout the country. Their report\* enlarged upon the evils previously in part portrayed, and emphasised them.

"Your Committee," they wrote, "would pause, from the sad statements they have been obliged to make, to observe that it is painful to contemplate in the midst of what appears an opulent, spirited, and flourishing community, such a vast multitude of our poorer fellow-subjects, the instruments by whose hands these riches were created, condemned for no fault of their own to the evils so justly complained of, and placed in situations where it is almost impracticable for them to preserve health or decency of deportment, or to keep themselves and their children from moral and physical contamination. To require them to be clean, sober, cheerful, contented under such circumstances would be a vain and unreasonable expectation. There is no building Act to enforce the dwellings of these workmen being properly constructed; no drainage Act to enforce their being properly drained; no general or local regulation to

184 . P.P., vol. xi. p. 13.

enforce the commonest provisions for cleanliness and comfort."

Lurid as were the details thus made public of the condition in which the vast masses of the people in London were living, neither Parliament nor the Government took any action beyond ordering successive inquiries by Poor Law Commissioners, or Committees of the House of Commons, or Royal Commissions.

Before one of these Commissions\* the following striking evidence was given—evidence which it might reasonably be expected would have moved any Government to immediate action:—

"Every day's experience convinces me," deposed the witness,† "that a very large proportion of these evils is capable of being removed; that if proper attention were paid to sanitary measures, the mortality of these districts would be most materially diminished, perhaps in some places one-third, and in others even a half.

"The poorer classes in these neglected localities and dwellings are exposed to causes of disease and death which are peculiar to them; the operation of these peculiar causes is steady, unceasing, sure; and the result is the same as if twenty or thirty thousand of these people were annually taken out of their wretched dwellings and put to death—the actual fact being that they are allowed to remain in them and die. I am now speaking of what silently but surely takes place every year in the metropolis alone."

But the Government took no action—beyond a Building Act which did little as regarded the housing of the people. No local bodies took action, and years were to pass before either Government or Parliament stirred in the matter.

In dealing historically with matters relating to London as a whole, it is to be remembered that for a long time there had been practically two Londons—that defined and described as the "City," and the rest of London—that which

\* Commission for inquiring into the state of large towns and populous districts, 1844.

† Dr. Southwood Smith, P.P. 1845, vol. xviii.

had no recognised boundaries, no vestige of corporate existence, and which can best be described by the word "metropolis."

The "City" was virtually the centre of London—the centre of its wealth, its industry, its geographical extent—a precisely defined area of some 720 acres, or about one square mile in extent, and originally surrounded by walls. Its boundaries had been fixed at an early period of our history, and had never been extended or enlarged. So densely was it covered with houses at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and so fully peopled, that there was practically no room for more, either of houses or people; and from then to the middle of that century its population was stationary—being close upon 128,000 at each of those periods.

Apart altogether from political influences, there were in the "City" powerful economic forces at work which profoundly affected the condition and circumstances of the people, not only of the "City," but of London.

These, which were by no means so evident at one time, became more and more pronounced as time went on.

All through the earlier part of the nineteenth century England was attaining to world pre-eminence by her commerce, her manufactures, and her wealth. The end of the great war with France saw her with a firm grip of all the commercial markets of the world. Her merchants pushed their trade in every quarter of the globe—her ships enjoyed almost a monopoly of the carrying trade of the world.

In this progress to greatness London took the foremost part, and became the greatest port and trade emporium of the kingdom, a great manufacturing city, and the financial centre of the world's trade.

It was upon this commerce that the prosperity and glory of London were built: it was by this commerce that the great bulk of the people gained their livelihood, and that a broad highway was opened to comfort, to opulence, and power. And so the commercial spirit—the spirit of acquiring and accumulating wealth—got ever greater possession of London.

That spirit had long been a great motive power in London; it became more and more so as the century wore on, until almost everything was subordinated to it.

That indisputable fact must constantly be borne in mind as one reviews the sanitary and social condition of the people of London at and since that time. Other constant factors there were, also exercising vast influence—the constant factors of human passions and human failings—but widespread as were their effects, they were second to the all-powerful, the all-impelling motive and unceasing desire—commercial prosperity and success.

Synchronous with the rise in importance of the port of London, and with its trade and business assuming ever huger volume and variety, a noteworthy transformation took place.

The "City," by the very necessities of its enormous business, became gradually more and more a city of offices and marts, of warehouses and factories, of markets and exchanges, and houses long used as residences were pulled down, and larger and loftier ones erected in their place for business purposes.

In some places, moreover, ground was entirely cleared of houses for the construction of docks, or for the erection of great railway termini.

How marked were the effects of these changes is evidenced by the fact that from 17,190 inhabited houses in the "City" in 1801, the number had sunk to 14,575 in 1851.

The explanation was the simple economic one, that land in the "City" yielded a much larger income when let for business than for residential purposes. Offices and warehouses were absolutely essential in the "City" for business. What did it matter if people had to look for a residence in some other place? London was large. They could easily find room. And the process, without control of any sort or kind, and wholly unimpeded by legislation or governmental regulation, went on quite naturally—entailing though it did consequences of the very gravest character, then quite unthought of, or, if thought of, ignored or regarded as immaterial.

This then was, at that time, and still is, one of the great, if not indeed the greatest of the economic forces at work which has unceasingly dominated the housing of the people not only in the "City," but in the metropolis outside and surrounding the "City," and, in dominating their housing, powerfully affected also their sanitary and social condition.

The "City" was in the enjoyment of a powerful local governing body—namely, the Lord Mayor and Corporation, or Common Council, elected annually by the ratepayers; and numerous Acts of Parliament and Royal Charters had conferred sundry municipal powers upon them.

For that important branch of civic requirements—the regulation of the thoroughfares and the construction of houses and buildings—they had certain powers. The vastly more important sphere of civic welfare—namely, the matters affecting the sanitary condition of the inhabitants—was delegated by the Corporation to a body called the Commissioners of Sewers, annually elected by the Common Council out of their own body, some ninety in number. And these Commissioners had, in effect, authority in the City, directly or indirectly, over nearly every one of the physical conditions which were likely to affect the health or comfort of its inhabitants. They could also appoint a Medical Officer of Health to inform and advise them upon public health matters, and Inspectors to enforce the laws and regulations.

The "City" was thus in happy possession of a powerful local authority, and a large system of local government. And it stood in stately isolated grandeur, proud of, and satisfied with, its dignity, and privileges, and wealth; glorying in its own importance and splendour; content with its own system of government, and its powers for administering its municipal affairs, and indifferent to the existence of the greater London which had grown up around it, and which was ever becoming greater.

Greater indeed. The population of the "City" in 1851 was 128,000; that of the metropolis not far short of 2,500,000.

The number of inhabited houses in the "City" was hundreds short of 15,000. In the metropolis it was over 300,000.

The "City" was 720 acres in extent: what in 1855 was regarded as the metropolis was about 75,000 acres in extent.

And here, with no visible boundary of separation between them, were what were still "Parishes," but what were in reality great towns; not merely merged or rapidly merging into each other, but already merged into one great metropolis. Some of them even had a greater population than the "City" itself. St. Pancras, for instance, with 167,000 persons; St. Marylebone with 157,000, and Lambeth with 139,000.

Of that greater London—or, in effect, of London itself—there is a complicated and tangled story to tell.

Long before the middle of the nineteenth century had been reached, the time had passed when the "City" could contain the trade, and commerce, and manufactures, and business, which had grown up. They had overflowed into London outside the walls, and just as in the "City" the great economic forces produced certain definite changes in the circumstances and sanitary condition of the people living therein, so, in the greater London, the commercial spirit radiating gradually outwards, produced precisely similar results, only on a far wider scale, and with more potent effect.

Trade, and commerce, and wealth, and population, were increasing by leaps and bounds; and like the rings which year by year are added to the trunk of a tree, so year by year, decade by decade, London—the metropolis—spread out, and grew, and grew. From something under one million of inhabitants in 1801, the population increased to nearly two and a half millions in 1851, partly by natural increase, due to the number of those who were born being greater than of those who died, partly by immigration from the country.

This was London, in the large sense of the title—London, the great metropolis which had never received recognition

by the law as one great entity, and whose boundaries had never been fixed, either by enactment, charter, or custom.\*

Dependent as is the public health, or sanitary and social condition of the people, upon the circumstances in which they find themselves placed, and the economic forces which are constantly at work moulding those circumstances, it is in as great a degree dependent on the system of local government in existence at the time, upon the scope and efficacy of the laws entrusted to the local authorities to administer, and upon the administration of those laws by those authorities.

As for local government—unlike the "City"—this greater London was without form and almost void. With the exception of the Poor Law Authority—the Boards of Guardians—whose sphere of duty was distinctly limited, there was, outside the boundaries of the "City," not even the framework of a system of such government; and the confusion and chaos became ever greater as years went on and London grew.

There was no authority so important as to have any extended area for municipal purposes under its control and management except certain bodies, five in number, entitled "Commissioners of Sewers," charged with duties in connection with the sewerage of their districts.

In some parishes some of the affairs of the parish were managed by the parishioners in open vestry assembled, at which assembly Churchwardens, Overseers of the Poor, and Surveyors of Highways were appointed to carry out certain limited classes of work. In others, the parishioners elected a select vestry to do the work of the parish.

But for many of the vitally important municipal affairs there were no authorities at all.

As the non-City and out-districts became more thickly peopled, and streets and houses increased in number, the inconvenience of there being practically no local government at all made itself felt.

In some cases, the owners of the estates which were

\* Royal Commission, 1853-4, p. xii.

being so rapidly absorbed into London and being built upon, applied to Parliament for powers to regulate those estates.

In other cases, persons with interests in a special locality associated themselves together and obtained a private Act of Parliament giving them authority, under the name of Commissioners or Trustees, to tax and in a very limited way to govern a particular district or group of streets forming part of a parish. Thus it happened that a large number of petty bodies of all sorts and kinds came into existence. Any district, however small, was suffered to obtain a local Act of Parliament for the purpose of managing some of its affairs, and this, too, without any reference to the interests of the immediate neighbours, or of the metropolis as a whole. Most of the limited and somewhat primitive powers possessed by them were derived from an Act passed in 1817,\* and related to the paving of streets and the prevention of nuisances therein. Some of these bodies were authorised to appoint surveyors or inspectors; also "scavengers, rakers, or cleaners" to carry away filth from streets and houses, but the exercise of such powers was, of course, purely optional. Indeed, there were scarcely any two parishes in London governed alike.

What the exact number of these various petty authorities was is unknown. Of paving boards alone, it is said that about the middle of the last century there were no less than eighty-four in the metropolis—nineteen of them being in one parish. The lighting of the parish of Lambeth was under the charge of nine local trusts. The affairs of St. Mary, Newington, were under the control of thirteen Boards or trusts, in addition to two turnpike trusts.†

In Westminster:—

"The Court of Burgesses and the Vestry retained general jurisdiction over the whole parish for certain purposes; but the numerous local Acts so effectually subdivided the control and distributed it among boards, commissioners, trustees, committees, and other independent bodies, that

\* The Metropolitan Paving Act, 57 George III. cap. 29.

† See Report of Vestry, 1856-7.

uniformity, efficiency, and economy in local administration had become impossible."\*

There were authorities exclusively for paving; authorities for street improvements; authorities for lighting; even authorities for a bridge across the river. In the course of years, several hundred such bodies had been created, without any relation one to the other, and without any central controlling authority, good, bad, or indifferent, by as many Acts of Parliament. They were mostly self-elected, or elected for life, or both; and were wholly irresponsible to the ratepayers, or indeed to any one else; nor were their proceedings in any way open to the public. Many of them had large staffs of well paid officials; and there were perpetual conflicts of jurisdiction between them, and an absolute want of anything approaching to municipal administration.

It has been roughly stated—roughly because there are no reliable figures—that there were about three hundred such bodies in London—"jostling, jarring, unscientific, cumbrous, and costly"—the very nature of many of them being "as little known to the rest of the community as that of the powers of darkness."

Add to these numerous, clashing, and incompetent authorities, various great public companies or corporations—the water companies, and gas companies, and dock companies, each with its own special rights—which were far more favourably and generously regarded by Parliament than were the rights of the public, and one has fairly enumerated the local governing bodies then existing in London.

In fact, in no parish of the great metropolis of London was there a local authority possessed of powers to deal in its own area with the multitudinous affairs affecting the health and well-being of the people.

Nor was there in the metropolis any central authority—no single body, representative or even otherwise—to attend to the great branches of municipal administration which affected and concerned the metropolis as a whole, and

\* See Special Report of the Vestry, 1889, p. 208.

which could only be dealt with efficiently by the metropolis being treated as a whole.

The consequences to the inhabitants of London of the absence of any efficient form of local government were dire in character, terrible in extent, and unceasing in operation. The higher grades of society suffered in some degree, as disease, begotten in filth and nurtured in poverty, often invaded with disastrous consequences the homes of the well-to-do; but it was by the great mass of the industrial classes and the poorer people that the terrible burden of insanitation had to be borne, and upon them that it fell with the deadliest effect.

The non-existence of a central authority, or of any capable local authorities whose function it would have been to protect them from the causes of disease, had resulted in an insanitary condition which year after year entailed the waste of thousands upon thousands of lives. And the people, in the cruel circumstances of their position, were absolutely powerless to help themselves, and had no possible means of escape from the ever-present, all-surrounding danger.

The first absolute necessity of any sanitation whatever is the getting rid by deportation or destruction of all the filth daily made or left by man or beast, for such filth or refuse breeds all manner of disease, from the mildest up to the very worst types and sorts, and promptly becomes not only noxious to health, but fatal to life. The more rapidly and thoroughly, therefore, this riddance is effected, the better is it in every way for the general health of the public.

So far as the metropolis was concerned, this necessity had for generation after generation been very lightly regarded; and when at last it so forced itself upon public notice that it could no longer be ignored, the measures taken were wholly inadequate and ineffective.

What system there was in London as to the disposal of sewage throughout the earlier half of last century was based upon a Statute dating so far back as Henry VIII.'s reign, amended by another in William and Mary's reign. Under these Statutes certain bodies had been constituted by the

Crown as Commissioners of Sewers for certain portions of London, and charged with the duty of providing sewers and drains in their respective districts, and maintaining the same in proper working order.

But what might have been good enough for London in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries was certainly not adequate in the nineteenth, when London had extended her borders in every direction, and her population had reached almost two and a half millions. Successive Parliaments had not troubled themselves about such a matter; and this neglect, which now appears almost incredible, was typical of the habitual attitude of the governing classes to the sanitary requirements of the masses of the population of the metropolis.

In the eighteen hundred and forties, five such bodies of Commissioners were in existence in London, each with a separate portion of the metropolis under its charge and exercising an independent sway in its own district; and when we collect the best testimony of that time as to their work and that of their predecessors, we have the clearest demonstration of their glaring incapacity, and of the utter inadequacy and inefficiency of the sewerage in their respective districts.

Many miles of sewers had, it is true, in process of time been constructed, and did exist, but much of the work had been so misdones that the cure was little better than the disease.

A river is always a great temptation to persons to get rid of things they want to get rid of, particularly when the things are nasty and otherwise not easily disposed of. Londoners only followed the general practice when they constructed their sewers so that they discharged their contents direct into the Thames. The majority of these sewers emptied themselves only at the time of low water; for as the tide rose the outlets of the sewers were closed, and the sewage was dammed back and became stagnant. When the tide had receded sufficiently to afford a vent for the pent-up sewage, it flowed out and deposited itself along the banks of the river, evolving gases of a foul and offensive



character. And then the sewage was not only carried up the river by the rising tide, but it was brought back again into the heart of the metropolis, there to mix with each day's fresh supply of sewage; the result being that "the portion of the river within the metropolitan district became scarcely less impure and offensive than the foulest of the sewers themselves."

This was bad enough, but there were miles of sewers which, through defects of construction or disrepair, did not even carry off the sewage from the houses and streets to the river, but had become "similar to elongated cesspools," and, as such, actual sources and creators of disease.

Incredible almost were the stupidities perpetrated by these Commissioners in regard to the construction of the sewers. At even so late a date as 1845 no survey had been made of the metropolis for the purposes of drainage; there was a different level in each of the districts, and no attempt was made to conform the works of the several districts to one general plan. Large sewers were made to discharge into smaller sewers. Some were higher than the cesspools which they were supposed to drain, whilst others had been so constructed that to be of any use the sewage would have had to flow uphill!

It might reasonably have been expected that in the nineteenth century, at least, the twenty parishes which formed the district of the Westminster Commissioners of Sewers would have been equal to producing an enlightened and capable body as Commissioners, but the Westminster Court of Sewers was certainly not such. Even their own chief surveyor, in 1847, stigmatised it as a body "totally incompetent to manage the great and important works committed to their care and control."

Upon it were builders, surveyors, architects, and district surveyors—a class of persons whose opinions "might certainly be biassed with relation to particular lines of drains and sewers."

Of another of the courts—namely, the Finsbury Court of Sewers—one of the Commission had been outlawed; another was a bankrupt.

It was stated at the time that "jobbery and favouritism and incompetence were rampant," and that the system was "radically wrong and rotten to the core." Certain it is that these bodies failed completely to cope with the requirements of the time. London was spreading out in all directions, and the increase of houses and population was very rapid. Practically no effort, however—certainly no adequate effort—was made by the various bodies of Commissioners to provide these new and growing districts with the means of getting rid of their sewage. And then, inasmuch as the sewage had somehow or other to be got rid of, and some substitute for sewers devised, the surface drains, and millstreams, and ditches were appropriated to use and converted into open sewers or "stagnant ponds of pestilential sewage."

London was "seamed with open ditches."

According to contemporary reports there were in Lambeth numerous open ditches of the most horrible description. Bermondsey was intersected by ditches of a similar character, and abounded with fever nests. Rotherhithe was the same. Hackney Brook, formerly "a pure stream," had become "a foul open sewer."\* In St. Saviour's Union the sewers were in a dreadful condition . . . "the receptacle of all kinds of refuse, such as putrid fish, dead dogs, cats, &c. Greenwich was not drained or sewered."

What certainly was conclusively demonstrated was that the existence of several bodies of Commissioners, each with a district to itself, presented an insuperable obstacle to any general system of sewerage for greater London; and that one capable central authority was the first essential of an adequate and efficient system for London as a whole.

Thus, then, in this first essential of all sanitation—one might say of civilisation—no adequate provision was made by Parliament for the safety of the metropolis; whilst as to other essentials of sanitation, there were no laws for the prevention of the perpetration of every sanitary iniquity; and such authorities as there were failed absolutely to use even the few powers they possessed.

The defective and inefficient sewerage of the metropolis

\* Report of Commission of 1845.

precluded the possibility of any proper system of house drainage, for there being few sewers there were few drains, and consequently instead of drains from the houses to the sewers there were cesspools under almost every house. At the census of 1841 there were over 270,000 houses in the metropolis. It was known, then, that most houses had a cesspool under them, and that a large number had two, three, or four under them. Some of them were so huge that the only name considered adequate to describe them was "cess-lake." In many districts even the houses in which the better classes lived had neither drain nor sewer—nothing but cesspools; and many of the very best portions of the West End were "literally honeycombed" with them. And so jealous was the law as regarded the rights of private property that so late as 1845 owners were not to be interfered with as regarded even their cesspools, no matter how great the nuisance might be to their neighbours, no matter how dangerous to the community at large. Indeed, the Commissioners of Sewers had no power to compel landlords or house-owners to make drains into the sewers, and of their own motion the landlords would take no action.

In the lower part of Westminster the Commissioners of Sewers had actually carried sewers along some of the streets, but they found "very little desire on the part of the landlords" to use them. "So long as the owners get their rent they do not care about drainage. . . . The landlords will not move; their property pays them very well; they will not put themselves to any expense; they are satisfied with it as it stands."

Strange level of satisfaction! when one reads the following evidence given two years later before the Metropolitan Sewers Commission:—

"There are hundreds, I may say thousands, of houses in this metropolis which have *no drainage whatever*, and the greater part of them have stinking, overflowing cesspools. And there are also hundreds of streets, courts, and alleys, that have no sewers; and how the drainage and filth is cleared away, and how the poor miserable inhabitants live in such places it is hard to tell.

"In pursuance of my duties, from time to time, I have visited very many places where filth was lying scattered about the rooms, vaults, cellars, areas, and yards, so thick, and so deep, that it was hardly possible to move for it. I have also seen in such places human beings living and sleeping in sunk rooms with filth from overflowing cesspools exuding through and running down the walls and over the floors. . . . The effects of the stench, effluvia, and poisonous gases constantly evolving from these foul accumulations were apparent in the haggard, wan, and swarthy countenances, and enfeebled limbs, of the poor creatures whom I found residing over and amongst these dens of pollution and wretchedness."\*

And this witness was unable to refrain from passing a verdict upon what he had seen:—

"To allow such a state of things to exist is a blot upon this scientific and enlightened age, an age, too, teeming with so much wealth, refinement, and benevolence. Morality, and the whole economy of domestic existence, is outraged and deranged by so much suffering and misery. Let not, therefore, the morality, the health, the comfort of thousands of our fellow creatures in this metropolis be in the hands of those who care not about these things, but let good and wholesome laws be enacted to compel houses to be kept in a cleanly and healthy condition."

There were, it was said, "a formidable host of difficulties" as regarded the execution of improved works of house drainage.

There was the opposition of the proprietors on the ground of expense; there were the provisions of the Act of Parliament,† which were so intricate as to be almost unintelligible and unworkable; there was the want of a proper outfall for the sewage; and the want of a supply of water to wash away the filth—a possible explanation for the existing state of abomination, but certainly not a justification for the prolonged inaction of successive Parliaments and Governments in allowing affairs to reach

\* J. Phillips, p. 63 Metropolitan Sewers Commission, 1847.

† See P.P. 1854-5, vol. liii. p. 249, &c.

so frightful a pass, and for dooming the people to a condition of things which it was entirely beyond their power to remedy even as regarded the single house they inhabited.

Just as everything connected with sewerage and drainage was so placidly neglected, and so fearfully bad, so also was it as regarded another matter of even more vital necessity, namely, the supply of water to the inhabitants of London for drinking, or for domestic, trade, or sanitary purposes.

"Water is essential as an article of food. Water is necessary to personal cleanliness. Water is essential to external cleansing, whether of houses, streets, closets, or sewers."

Manifestly, the supply of water was not a matter which the individual in a large community such as London could in any way make provision for by his own independent effort. And yet there was no public body in London, central or local, representative or otherwise, charged with the duty of securing to the people even the minimum quantity necessary for life.

Early in the seventeenth century the New River Company was formed for the supply of water to London. And as years went on Parliament evidently considered it fulfilled its obligations in this respect by making over to sundry private companies the right of supplying to the citizens of London this vital requirement, or, as it has been termed, this "life-blood of cities"; and Parliament had done this without even taking any guarantee or security for a proper distribution to the people, or for the purity of the water, or the sufficiency of its supply.

Practically, a generous Parliament had bestowed as a free gift upon these Water Companies the valuable monopoly, so far as London was concerned, of this necessity of life.

Although by the middle of the nineteenth century there was no portion of the metropolis into which the mains and pipes of some of the companies had not been carried, yet, as the companies were under no compulsion to supply it to

all houses, large numbers of houses, and particularly those of the poorer classes, received no supply. Indeed, in many parts of London there were whole streets in which not a single house had water laid on to the premises.

In the district supplied by the New River Company, containing about 900,000 persons, about one-third of the population were unsupplied; and in the very much smaller area of the Southwark Company's district about 30,000 persons had no supply.

Even in 1850 it was computed that 80,000 houses in London, inhabited by 640,000 persons, were unsupplied with water.

A very large proportion of the people could only obtain water from stand-pipes erected in the courts or places, and that only at intermittent periods, and for a very short time in the day; sometimes, indeed, only on alternate days, and not at all on Sunday.

"To these pipes," wrote a contemporary, "the inhabitants have to run, leaving their occupation, and collecting their share of this indispensable commodity in vessels of whatever kind might be at hand. The water is then kept in the close, ill-ventilated tenements they occupy until it is required for use."\*

The quality of the water which was supplied by the companies left much to be desired. That supplied by the New River Company was, as a rule, fairly good in quality; but that supplied by the other companies was very much the reverse. Financial profit being their first and principal consideration, they got it from where it was obtainable at least capital outlay or cost, regardless of purity or impurity; and almost without exception took it from the Thames—"the great sewer of London"—took it, too, from precisely the places where the river was foulest and most contaminated by sewage and other filth; and as there were no filtering beds in which it could have been to some extent purified before its distribution to householders, its composition can best be imagined.

Looking at the great river even now in its purified state,

\* Report of Medical Officer of Health for Clerkenwell, 1856.

as it sweeps under Westminster Bridge, any one would shudder at the idea of being compelled to drink its water in its muddy and unfiltered state, and of one's health and life being dependent on the supply from such a source. How infinitely more repugnant it must have been when the river was "the great sewer" of the metropolis.

The great shortage of company-supplied water compelled large numbers of people to have recourse to the pumps which still existed in considerable numbers in many parts of London, the water from which was drawn from shallow wells.

The water of these "slaughter wells," as they have been termed, appears to have combined all the worst features of water, and to have contained all the ingredients most dangerous to health.

"If," wrote a Medical Officer of Health some years later, "the soil through which the rain passes be composed of the refuse of centuries, if it be riddled with cesspools and the remains of cesspools, with leaky gas-pipes and porous sewers, if it has been the depository of the dead for generation after generation, the soil so polluted cannot yield water of any degree of purity."\*

As all these "ifs" were grim actualities, the water of such wells was revolting in its impurity and deadly in its composition.

Of Clerkenwell it was indeed stated positively that "the shallow-well water of the parish received the drainage water of Highgate cemetery, of numerous burial grounds, and of the innumerable cesspools in the district."

On the south side of the river the water in most of the shallow wells was tidal—from the Thames, which is a sufficient description of the quality thereof—and where people did not live close enough to the river to draw water from it for their daily wants, they took it from these tidal wells. Vile as it was, it had to be used in default of any better.

Where such wells were not available, the water for all

\* See Report of Medical Officer of Health for St. Giles'.

household consumption was taken from tidal ditches which were to all intents and purposes only open sewers. A contemporary report gives a graphic picture of this form of supply\* :—

"In Jacob's Island (in Bermondsey) may be seen at any time of the day women dipping water, with pails attached by ropes to the backs of the houses, from a foul, foetid ditch, its banks coated with a compound of mud and filth, and with offal and carrion—the water to be used for every purpose, culinary ones not excepted."

An adequate supply of wholesome water has for very long been recognised as of primary sanitary importance to all populations, but with a densely crowded town population the need of care as to the quality of the supplies is peculiarly urgent. And yet, through the indifference of successive Governments, the people of the great metropolis of London were most inadequately supplied with water, and what water was supplied to the great mass of them, or was available for them, was of the foulest and most dangerous description. The inadequacy of supply not alone put a constant premium upon dirt and uncleanness, both in house and person, but it intensified the evils of the existing sewers and drains, as without water efficient drainage was impossible. And the horrible impurity of the water affected disastrously and continuously the health of the great mass of the people.

Many dire lessons, costing thousands upon thousands of lives, were needed before it was borne in on the Government of the country that the arrangements regarding the supply of water for the people of London required radical amendment.

Much of the health of a city depends upon the width of its thoroughfares, the free circulation of air in its streets and around its buildings, and the sound and sanitary construction of its houses.

In every one of these respects all the central parts of London were remarkably defective. The great metropolis had grown, and had been permitted to grow, mostly at

\* Report of General Board of Health, 1850.

haphazard. Large parks and open spaces there were in the richer and more well-to-do parts, and some handsome thoroughfares; but "there were districts in London through which no great thoroughfares passed, and which were wholly occupied by a dense population composed of the lowest class of persons, who, being entirely secluded from the observation and influence of better educated neighbours, exhibited a state of moral degradation deeply to be deplored."\*

Parliament had taken some interest as to the width of the streets, and had shown some anxiety for improvements in them. Hence, much local and general legislation was from time to time directed to control the erection of buildings beyond the regular lines of buildings. Thus the Metropolitan Paving Act, 1817, contained stringent provisions as to projections which might obstruct the circulation of air and light, or be inconvenient or incommodious to passengers along carriage or foot ways in certain parts of the metropolis.

In 1828 the Act for Consolidating the Metropolis Turnpike Trusts, also, contained certain restrictive provisions, but these were rendered futile by the construction put upon its terms by the magistrates.

Again, in 1844, further enactments were made by the Metropolitan Building Act to restrain projections from buildings; but after a short administration of its provisions it was found that shops built on the gardens in front of the houses, or on the forecourts of areas, did not come within the terms of the Act. And so the Act, in that very important respect, was useless.

The action of Parliament had been mainly prompted by the necessity for increased facilities of communication, and by the desire to safeguard house property from destruction by fire; whilst the most important of all aspects of the housing of the people—namely, the sanitary aspect—received no consideration, and was completely ignored as a thing of no consequence.

\* Report of Select Committee of the House of Commons, P.P. 1838, vol. xxviii.

But whatever the motive of action by Parliament, the ensuing legislation was in the main inoperative or ineffective. The resolution of landowners to secure the highest prices for their property, and the determination of builders, once they got possession of any land, to utilise every inch of it for building, and so to make the utmost money they could out of it, defeated the somewhat loosely drawn enactments. Means of evading the legislative provisions were promptly discovered, and, in despite of legislation, builders, architects, and surveyors of the metropolis were unrestrained in their encroachments upon areas and forecourts—at times even were successful in breaking the existing lines of buildings in metropolitan streets or roads by encroachments which were only discovered too late to be prevented.

Nor was there anything to prevent houses being built on uncovered spaces at the backs of existing buildings, thus taking up whatever air-space had been left between the previous buildings. Hence, great blocks of ground absolutely covered with buildings, back to back, side to side, any way so long as a building could by any ingenuity be fitted in. Hence the culs-de-sac, the small and stifling courts and alleys. Nor were there any regulations forbidding certain kinds of buildings which would be injurious to the health of their inhabitants. Hence the mean and flimsy and insanitary houses which were being erected in the outer circle of the metropolis, and which wrought havoc with the health and lives of the people. Hence, too, the erection, on areas and forecourts, of buildings which narrowed the streets, diminished the air-spaces and means of ventilation, and destroyed the appearance of the localities.

And once up they had come to stay; for years were to pass before the Legislature created any effective means for securing their amelioration, and for generations they were permitted to exercise their evil and deadly sway over the people, and to scatter broadcast throughout the community the seeds of disease and death.

The then existing actual state of the case was summed up by Dr. Southwood Smith in his evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1840:—

“At present no more regard is paid in the construction of houses to the health of the inhabitants than is paid to the health of pigs in making sties for them. In point of fact there is not so much attention paid to it.”

Legislation against some of the evils which had already reached huge proportions, and which, as London grew, were spreading and developing, was not alone ineffective, but earlier legislation, in one notorious Act, had been the direct incentive to, and cause of evils. This was the Act which imposed a tax upon windows.\* In effect this Act said to the builder, “Plan your houses with as few openings as possible. Let every house be ill-ventilated by shutting out the light and air, and as a reward for your ingenuity you shall be subject to a less amount of taxation.” †

The builder acted upon this counsel, and the tax operated as a premium upon the omission from a building of every window which could by any device be spared; with the result that passages, closets, cellars, and roofs—the very places where mephitic vapours were most apt to lodge—were left almost entirely without ventilation. ‡

In effect, the window duties compelled multitudes to live and breathe in darkened rooms and poisoned air, and with a rapidly increasing population the evils resulting therefrom were being steadily intensified.

Admirable was the comment passed upon the tax in 1843:—

“Health is the capital of the working man, and nothing can justify a tax affecting the health of the people, and especially of the labouring community, whose bodily health and strength constitute their wealth, and, oftentimes, their only possession. It is a tax upon light and air, a tax more vicious in principle and more injurious in its practical consequences than a tax upon food.”

Not until 1851 was the tax abandoned, but its evil con-

\* 38 George III. cap. 40.

† An opening only a foot square cost an additional 8s. 3d. tax per annum.

‡ 1843, Commissioners on State of Towns. Evidence of W. E. Hickson, p. 436.

sequences, wrought in stone and embodied in bricks and mortar, endured many a long year after.

The existing laws or regulations as to building were wholly inadequate to secure healthy houses. And there was no public authority with power to compel attention to the internal condition of houses so as to prevent their continuance in such a filthy and unwholesome state as to endanger the health of the public. There was no power to compel house owners to make drains and carry them to the common sewer where it existed. No persons were appointed to carry into effect such communication. No persons were authorised to make inspection and to report upon these matters.

The poor, or, indeed, the working classes generally, were powerless to alter or amend the construction of the dwellings in which they were compelled to reside, still less to alter their surroundings. Any improvement in the condition of their dwellings could only be by voluntary action on the part of the landlords, or of interference by Government to compel that measure of justice to the poor, and of economy to the ratepayers.

Parliament failed to interfere with any effect; and as to the landlords or house-owners, their interest ran all the other way.

Few persons of large capital built houses as a speculation, or had anything to do with them. Many, however, who were desirous of making the highest possible interest on their money acquired either freehold or leasehold land, and built cheap and ill-constructed houses upon it without the least regard to the health of the future inmates.

And the small landlords were often the most unscrupulous with regard to the condition of the houses they let, and exacted the highest rents.

Inasmuch as this freedom as regarded house construction had been going on almost from time immemorial, it was not only the newly-built houses which were bad. Earlier built houses had rapidly fallen into disrepair and semi-ruin, and were steadily going from bad to worse, and becoming ever less and less suitable for human dwellings.

The following description\* of parts of St. Giles and Spitalfields shows what, under a state of freedom as to building, had been attained to in 1840, and is typical of what so extensively prevailed in the central parts of London:—

“Those districts are composed almost entirely of small courts, very small and very narrow, the access to them being only under gateways; in many cases they have been larger courts originally, and afterwards built in again with houses back to back, without any outlet behind, and only consisting of two rooms, and almost a ladder for a staircase; and those houses are occupied by an immense number of inhabitants; they are all as dark as possible, and as filthy as it is possible for any place to be, arising from want of air and light.”

Here is another description—that of “Christopher Court,” a cul-de-sac in Whitechapel—given, in 1848, by Dr. Allison, one of the surgeons of the Union:—

“This was one of the dirtiest places which human beings ever visited—the horrible stench which polluted the place seemed to be closed in hermetically among the people; not a breath of fresh air reached them—all was abominable.”

It is needless to multiply instances. There is a dreadful unanimity of testimony from all parts of London as to the miserable character and condition of the houses in which in the middle of the nineteenth century the industrial and the lower classes were forced to live; the deficiency or total absence of drainage, the universal filth and abomination of every kind, the fearful overcrowding, the ravages of every type of disease, and the absolute misery in which masses struggled for existence.

The density of houses upon an area has long been recognised as one of the great contributing causes to the ill-health of a community, but when coupled with the overcrowding of human beings in those houses, the combined results are always disastrous in the extreme.

\* Select Committee, 1840. Evidence of J. Pennethorne, p. 166.

Overcrowding had been a long-standing evil in London; had existed far back in history.

As London had grown, the evil had grown; and about the middle of the last century it was immeasurably greater than ever before, and its disastrous consequences were on a vastly larger scale.

The great economic forces which resulted, in certain districts of London, in the destruction of houses and great clearances of ground, had largely reduced the available accommodation for dwellings, and the expelled inhabitants, chained to the locality by the fact of their livelihood being dependent upon their residence being close by, were forced to invade the yet remaining places in the neighbourhood suited to their means. As the circle of possible habitations contracted, while the numbers seeking accommodation therein increased, a larger population was crowded into an ever-diminishing number of houses.

It was also a most unfortunate but apparently inevitable consequence that once a beginning was made to improve some of the streets and thoroughfares of London, and to substitute in any district a better class of houses and shops for those actually existing, the improvements necessarily involved increased overcrowding in that particular locality and in those adjoining it. But so it was.

Thus, in the eighteen hundred and forties a new street—New Oxford Street—was formed. It was driven through “a hive of human beings, a locality overflowing with human life.” Evidence given before the Commission in 1847 described the results:—

“The effect has been to lessen the population of my neighbourhood by about 5,000 people, and therefore to improve it at the expense of other parts of London. Some have gone to the streets leading to Drury Lane, some to St. Luke’s, Whitechapel, but more to St. Marylebone and St. Pancras. The vestries of St. Marylebone and St. Pancras disliked this very much. Places in the two latter parishes which were before bad enough are now intolerable, owing to the number of poor who formerly lived in St. Giles’.”

And a year or so later, from across the river, came the complaint from Lambeth that "owing to the number of houses pulled down in Westminster and other places, there had been a great influx of Irish and other labourers which necessarily caused a great overcrowding of the miserable domiciles already overfull."

This Lambeth complaint is specially interesting, as it refers to another great cause of overcrowding—the constant immigration into London of labourers and poor people in search of work or food.

Owing to the ever increasing and urgent demand for house accommodation for the working and poorer classes, it became a very remunerative proceeding for the occupier of a house to sub-let it in portions to separate families or individuals, and the practice gradually extended to and absorbed streets hitherto belonging to the better class. The owner of a property let his whole house to a tenant; this tenant, seeing an easy way of making money, sub-let the rooms in it in twos or threes, or even separately, at a very profitable rate to individual tenants. Nor did the sub-letting end here, for these tenants let off even the sides or corners of their room or rooms to individuals or families who were unable to bear the expense of a whole room. And so the house sank at once into being a "tenement house"—that prolific source of the very worst evils, sanitary, physical, and moral, to those who inhabited them.

Even the underground kitchens and cellars, which were never intended for human habitation, were let to tenants, and thus turned to financial profit.\* It mattered not that they were without air or ventilation, or even light; it mattered not that they were damp, or sometimes even inundated with the overflow of cesspools; it mattered not that they were inhabited contrary to the provisions of Section 53 of the Building Act of 1844, for that section was of no operative effect whatever. It is true that "Overseers" were to report to the "Official Referees," who were

\* P.P. 1854, vol. xlv. p. 2. In part of the parish of St. Marylebone only there were 1,132 underground or cellar dwellings.

to give notice to and inform the owners and occupiers of such dwellings as to the consequences of disobeying the Statute, and the "District Surveyor" was to carry out the directions of the Referees. But nothing was ever done—Overseers, District Surveyors, and Referees, all neglected their duties.

Overcrowding was usually at its worst in one-room tenements, and in an immense number of cases in the metropolis one room served for a family of the working or of the labouring classes. It was their bedroom, their kitchen, their wash-house, their sitting-room, their eating-room, and, when they did not follow any occupation elsewhere, it was their workroom and their shop. In this one room they were born, and lived, and slept, and died amidst the other inmates.

And still worse, in innumerable cases, more than one family lived in one room.

When this one room was in a badly drained, damp, ill-constructed, and unventilated house, reeking with a polluted atmosphere, and that house was in a narrow and hemmed-in, unventilated "court" or "place" or "alley"—as an immense number of them were—the maximum of evil consequences was attained.

The evils of overcrowding cannot be summed up in a phrase, nor be realised by the description, however graphic, of instance upon instance. The consequences to the individual living in an overcrowded room or dwelling were always disastrous, and, through the disastrous consequences to great masses of individuals, the whole community was affected in varying degree.

Physically, mentally, and morally, the overcrowded people suffered. Not a disease, not a human ill which flesh is heir to, but was nurtured and rendered more potent in the human hothouse of the overcrowded room; and the ensuing ill-health and diseases not alone doubled the death rate, but increased from ten to twenty-fold, at least, the number of victims of disease of one sort or another—diseases dealing rapid death, or slowly but surely sapping human strength and vitality.



In the report of the London Fever Hospital for 1845 a certain overcrowded room in the neighbourhood was described—a room which was filled to excess every night, sometimes from 90 to 100 men being in it; a room 33 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 7 feet high. From that one room alone no fewer than 130 persons affected with fever were received into the hospital in the course of the year.\*

One, whose very close experience of the conditions of life and circumstances of the poorer classes of London at the time of the cholera epidemic of 1848-9 entitled him to speak with special authority on the subject, thus summed up his views and conclusions:—

“The members of the medical profession, in the presence of these physical evils, when they are, as so often happens, concentrated, find their science all but powerless; the minister of religion turns from these densely crowded and foul localities almost without hope; whilst the administrators of the law, especially the chaplains and governors of prisons, see that crime of every complexion is most rife where material degradation is most profound.”†

And he quoted from the report of the Governors of the Houses of Correction at Coldbath Fields and Westminster the following passage:—

“The crowning cause of crime in the metropolis is, in my opinion, to be found in the shocking state of the habitations of the poor, their confined and foetid localities, and the consequent necessity for consigning children to the streets for requisite air and exercise. These causes combine to produce a state of frightful demoralisation. The absence of cleanliness, of decency, of all decorum—the disregard of any needful separation of the sexes—the polluting language and the scenes of profligacy hourly occurring, all tend to foster idleness and vicious abandonment. Here I beg emphatically to record my conviction that this constitutes the *monster mischief*.”

And then he himself adds:—

“If to considerations like these regarding the moral and

\* See Hansard, vol. cxv. 1851 (Lord Ashley's speech).

† P.P. 1850, vol. xxi. p. 179 (Dr. Grainger).

religious aspect of this great question, be added those suggested by the indescribable physical sufferings inflicted on the labouring classes by the existing state of the public health in the metropolis, the conviction must of necessity follow, that the time is come when efforts in some degree commensurate with these great and pervading evils can no longer with safety be deferred.”\*

This opinion was expressed three years after the Royal Commissioners of 1847 had said in their report:—

“There appears to be no available (legal) means for the immediate prevention of overcrowding; all we can do is to point it out as a source of evil to be dealt with hereafter.”

One gets a clue to the unceasing insanitary condition of the greater part of London and to the inhuman conduct of so many tenement house-owners when one realises that there was no legal punishment whatever for the perpetration and perpetuation of the insanitary abominations, no matter how noxious or dangerous they were, nor how rapidly or directly they led to disease or death. An order to abate a nuisance (which usually was not obeyed) appears to have been the only penalty, and it was only obtainable at great trouble and after great delays; and, even if obtained and the nuisance abated, there was nothing to prevent the offender at once starting the nuisance again. Offences of the most heinous description—amounting morally to deliberate murder—were perpetrated with absolute impunity. Houses which were scarcely ever free from fever cases were allowed to continue year after year levying their heavy death tax from the unfortunate inhabitants.

In Whitechapel one house, inhabited by twelve or fourteen families, was mentioned as scarcely free from fever cases for as many years.

“It is also a fearful fact that in almost every instance where patients die from fever, or are removed to the hospital or workhouse, their rooms are let as soon as possible to new tenants, and no precautions used, or warning given; and in some houses, perfect hotbeds of fever probably, where a

\* P.P. 1850, vol. xxi.

patient dies or is removed, the first new-comer is put into the sick man's bed."

Sanitary improvement was almost a hopeless task. There was a dead weight of opposition to it in the ignorance and recklessness and indifference of the poorer classes, the very hopelessness of being able to improve their condition. And there was an active and bitter opposition from those house-owners or lessees who for their own financial profit exploited the poorer classes.

"There is one house in Spitalfields," said Dr. Lynch, "which has been the constant habitation of fever for fifteen years. I have enforced upon the landlord the necessity of cleansing and lime-washing it, but it has never been done! . . . There are many landlords with whom nothing but immediate interest has any effect."\*

The favourite principle that an Englishman's house was his castle was used as a defence against any suggestion that the malpractices committed therein should be curbed.

Others argued, "I am entitled to do what I like with my own."

"We everywhere find people ready to declare in respect to every evil: There is not any law that could compel its removal, the place complained of being private property."

All sorts of far-fetched and strained arguments were devised by them in the efforts to evade responsibility for the infamous condition of their property, and to defend and justify inaction.

Fortunately some voices began to be raised as to the persons upon whom both equitably and morally the responsibility lay of improving the condition of things.

"I would suggest," said a voice in 1837, "the idea of the landlords of many of the wretched filthy tenements being held responsible for their being tenantable, healthy, and cleanly."

And the Commissioners in 1844 reported:—

"There are some points on which the public safety demands the exercise of a power on the part of a public

\* Dr. T. Lynch, Medical Officer of West London Union (Holborn).

authority to compel attention to the internal condition of houses so as to prevent their continuance in such a filthy and unwholesome state as to endanger the health of the public."

And they recommended that:—

"On complaint of the parish, medical, or other authorised officer, that any house or premises are in such a filthy and unwholesome state as to endanger the health of the public, the local authority have power to require the landlord to cleanse it properly without delay."

But ideas or recommendations were alike ignored by the Government and Parliament, and several years were to pass before any legislation was attempted which would make owners responsible for their misdeeds in matters affecting the public health, and would subject them to penalties for their misconduct.

There were many other causes contributing largely to the insanitary condition of the people of the metropolis, prominent, if not most deleterious, amongst them being the widely-prevalent practice of interring the dead in the already overcrowded churchyards or burial grounds in the midst of the most densely populated districts of London—a practice resulting in "the slaughter of the living by the dead."

Burial grounds long since utilised to their utmost for the disposal of the dead were utilised over and over again for graves which could only be dug in the débris of human remains, until the soil reeked with human decomposition; the surrounding atmosphere was polluted by the horrible process, and they became monstrous foci of infection.

How extensive this evil was may be realised from figures given by Mr. Chadwick in a report to the Government:—

"In the metropolis, on spaces of ground which do not exceed 203 acres, closely surrounded by the abodes of the living, layer upon layer, each consisting of a population numerically equivalent to a large army of 20,000 adults, and nearly 30,000 youths and children, is every year imperfectly interred. Within the period of the existence of

the present generation upwards of a million of dead must have been interred in those same spaces."

And he asserted that:—

"The emanations from human remains are of a nature to produce fatal disease, and to depress the general health of whoever is exposed to them; and interments in the vaults of churches, or in graveyards surrounded by inhabited houses, contribute to the mass of atmospheric and other impurities by which the general health and average duration of life of the inhabitants is diminished."

Too horribly gruesome and revolting are the descriptions of these graveyards—places where the dead were, so to speak, shovelled in as the filth of the streets is into scavengers' carts, and which "gave forth the mephitical effluvia of death"; such a one as that in Russell Court, off Drury Lane, where the whole ground, which by constant burials had been raised several feet, was "a mass of corruption" which polluted the air the living had to breathe, and poisoned the well water which in default of other they often had to drink. Or those in Rotherhithe, where "the interments were so numerous that the half-decomposed organic matter was often thrown up to make way for fresh graves, exposing sights disgusting, and emitting foul effluvia."

The master hand of Dickens has given a more vivid picture of one of these places than any to be found in Parliamentary Blue Books:—

"A hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed. . . . Into a beastly scrap of ground, which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination, and a Caffre would shudder at, they bring our dear brother here departed to receive Christian burial. With houses looking on on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate—with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life—here they lower our dear brother down a foot or two; here sow him in corruption, to be raised in corrup-

tion; an avenging ghost at many a sick bedside; a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilisation and barbarism walked this boastful island together."

Interments in the vaults of the churches—then a common practice—were also a fruitful source of sickness and death. It mattered not whether or not the bodies were hermetically closed in leaden coffins, for "sooner or later every corpse buried in the vault of a church spreads the products of decomposition through the air which is breathed, as readily as if it had never been enclosed"; thus adding to the contamination of the atmosphere.

The death roll from this horrible condition of things cannot be gauged, but those most conversant with the matter were firmly convinced that it was the direct cause of fevers, and of all kinds of sickness among the people.

Pollution of the atmosphere which people had to breathe, and upon the purity of which the public health in varying degree depended, was caused also by various businesses and processes of manufacture grouped together under the name of "noxious trades," such as bone-boilers, india-rubber manufacturers, gut-scrapers, manure manufacturers, slaughterers of cattle, and many others.

In 1849\* a description had been given of a street in Shoreditch which shows to what extent this evil had attained:—

"It is impossible to believe, passing through this main street, that so great a number of pigsties, bone-boileries, dog-and-cat's meat manufactories, and tallow-melting establishments, on a large scale . . . should exist in a densely-crowded and closely-built locality. The noxious trades and occupations which so greatly abound here exerted a most deleterious influence upon the health of the inhabitants."

Parliament, in 1844, had enacted with regard to several of these that it should not be lawful for any person to establish any such business at a less distance than 40 feet from the public way, or than 50 feet from any dwelling-house; and that it should not be lawful to erect a dwelling-house within 50 feet of such businesses.

\* P.P. 1849-50, vol. xxi.

But these legislative restraints were utterly inadequate as any sort of check upon the evil; for, even if a nuisance were abated, there was no law to prevent its repetition, and so the evil promptly re-appeared. The stench did not limit their sphere of action by feet, but distributed their abominations over large areas; and the manufacturers cared not what nuisances they subjected people to, nor how far the horrid smells were wafted by the winds, so long as they themselves could carry on a profitable business. And the intentions of Parliament were wholly frustrated by the District Surveyors, who were charged with the enforcement of the Act, and who wholly failed in their duty.

As for slaughter houses, until 1851 any person could start one who pleased, and practically where he pleased, subject only to the shadowy restriction of the common law as to doing anything which might be considered a nuisance.

And so these numerous and various abominations, mixed with the impurity of the atmosphere caused by the masses of smoke emitted from the chimneys of factories and private houses, and with the sickening smell from the Thames, spread sickness and death throughout great portions of the metropolis, and were one of the great causes of its insanitary condition.

## II

Previous to the fifth decade of the last century it was only very rarely that the prevalence of disease, or any subject connected with the health of the community, received recognition by Parliament.

In 1840 the Medical Society of London, in a petition to Parliament, called attention to the increase of smallpox, and to its preventability by vaccination, and to the imperfect means of vaccination throughout the country.

The mortality from this—"one of the greatest pests that ever afflicted humanity"\*—was very great. In one city in the south of England no less than 500 persons had died of

\* Hansard, 1840, vol. liii. p. 1110.

it in one year. In London in 1839 upwards of 1,000 had died of it.

And Parliament, after an unusual amount of discussion, passed an Act\* for extending the practice of vaccination, and enacted that Boards of Guardians might contract with their Medical Officers or other medical practitioners "for the vaccination of all persons resident in their Union or Parish."

And at the same time "inoculation" or "otherwise producing smallpox" was made penal—to the extent of one month's imprisonment.

In 1846 there was a sudden display of Parliamentary energy in health matters.

The total want of baths and wash-houses for the poorer classes of the people in the towns was brought under the notice of the Legislature, and, as it was deemed "desirable for the health, comfort, and welfare of the inhabitants of towns, &c., to encourage the establishment therein of baths, wash-houses, and open bathing places," an Act was passed giving power to the Parochial Authorities to establish such institutions and to borrow money for the purpose.†

Their provision would have tended to an increased degree of cleanliness among the people, and consequently an improved sanitary condition, but it was long before many of these institutions were established, the local authorities being slow in availing themselves of the facilities thus offered, and this piece of legislation—like every other of the sort—being purely permissive or facilitatory.

And in the same year Parliament so far awakened to the fact that certain causes of disease were removable, that in a preamble to an Act‡ it acknowledged that it was "highly expedient for the purposes of preserving the health of Her Majesty's subjects that better provision should be made for the removal of certain nuisances likely to promote or increase disease."

\* 3 and 4 Vic. cap. 29.

† Expenses to be charged upon Borough Fund, and receipts to be paid into same.

‡ 9 and 10 Vic. cap. 96.

The better provision made by the Act did not amount to much. There were two forms of insanitary evil to be combated: one the chronic insanitary condition of the masses of the people, the other the invasion of the country by some exceptional or unusual epidemic disease.

As to the former, authority was given to certain public officers, on receipt of a certificate of two medical men, to complain of the existence of certain nuisances. The Justices before whom the case was heard might order the abatement of the nuisance; and if the order were not obeyed, the parties complaining might enter upon the necessary cleansing of such dwelling, and the cost of the same might be imposed on the owner or occupier.

In London, the power of complaint was vested in the officers of those petty local bodies which have already been described, and, in their default, in the Boards of Guardians.

Ludicrous, truly, was the idea that the countless thousands of nuisances existing in London could be remedied, or even temporarily abated, by so cumbrous, dilatory, and complicated a procedure as the complaint of an individual backed by the certificate (which would have to be paid for) of two doctors to the officer of a more or less hostile and self-interested local body, who might or might not bring the complaint before the Justices, whose decision, even if it were in favour of the complainant, could only effect a reform so far as the precise nuisance complained of was concerned, and that only temporarily, for were the nuisance renewed the whole procedure would have to be gone through again.

Yet this was the "better provision" propounded and enacted by Parliament in 1846 for the regeneration of the sanitary condition of the great masses of the people of London. Nor was it even intended to be permanently available, for the Act was only to be in force for two years.

The dreadful nemesis for such dense inappreciation by Parliament of its obligations to the community was, unfortunately, soon to fall heavily upon the unhappy people of the metropolis. Thousands of miles away in Hindoostan,

Asiatic cholera of a deadly type had been playing havoc with the people of the country. Thence it was slowly but steadily moving westward; so much so that the desirability of making some preparations for defence against its invasion of England became apparent; and in 1847 a Royal Commission was appointed to "inquire whether any, and what, special means might be requisite for the improvement of the health of the metropolis, with regard more especially to the better house, street, and land drainage, . . . the better supply of water for domestic use, &c., &c., &c."

One important conclusion was at once forced upon the Commissioners, namely, that the great and vital task of making adequate provision for the sewerage of London could not be accomplished so long as it was entrusted to several bodies, each with a district of its own.

"Everything," they said, "pointed to the necessity of operations being superintended by one competent body"; and they declared that it was expedient that a Commission for the entire drainage of the whole of the metropolis should be appointed with a special view to such measures, and with aid to carry them out.

This report was followed in the ensuing year (1848) by an Act of Parliament\* abolishing the various Commissions of Sewers (except those of the City), and creating in their stead one executive body whose members were to be appointed by the Crown.

Wide powers were given to this central body: among them that no house was to be built or re-built without proper drains, and without proper sanitary conveniences, and that if houses built before the passing of the Act were not properly drained, the Commissioners might order the work to be done.

The Metropolitan Commissioners of Sewers were duly appointed, and they divided the area over which they had jurisdiction into seven separate sub-districts, with a Commission for each.

The creation of this body constitutes a great landmark in the sanitary evolution of London, for it was the first recog-

\* 11 and 12 Vic. cap. 112.

dition by Parliament of the great principle of the unity of London; of the necessity—at least so far as regarded one matter—for one central governing authority for the numerous populations, and bodies, and districts which were becoming welded together into one mighty town and one vast community.

It is true, the recognition extended only to this one matter, and that the Central Board was to be a Board nominated by the Crown, and without any vestige of representation upon it, but none the less was it a forward step towards a sounder and wiser system of government than that which had hitherto prevailed.

That the new body failed to prove equal to the task imposed upon it was due as well to the constituent members thereof as to the imperfections of the machinery devised by the Act. Its failure, however, in no way controverted the soundness of the great principle thus, for the first time, recognised by Parliament.

The evidence given before the Royal Commissioners brought into view the enormous area of filth and limitless insanitation in London: it displayed some of the principal sources of the excessive amount of disease and premature mortality; and to some extent it elucidated the principles and demonstrated the practicability of large measures of prevention. And it also disclosed the regrettable fact that since the epidemic of cholera in 1832 there had been little or no improvement in the sanitary condition of many parts of the metropolis—indeed, in most parts of it the evils were wider spread and acuter in form, whilst, owing to the increase of population, the numbers affected were vastly larger.

All the while the Commissioners were sitting, the evil seeds of insanitation were producing a tremendous crop, and events actually occurring at the moment emphasised the crying need for some means of grappling with the intolerable existing evils. The whole class of zymotic diseases—diseases which constitute the true gauge of the healthiness or unhealthiness of a community—received a rapid and immense development.\* From 9,600 deaths from such

\* P.P. 1850, vol. xxi. p. 4.

diseases in 1846, the number increased to 14,000 in 1847; and in this latter year the metropolis was visited by two epidemics which rendered the mortality of the last quarter of the year higher than that of any other quarter of any year since the new system of registration of deaths had been commenced.\* Typhus fever produced fourfold its ordinary mortality—other diseases showed a similar increase—and towards the end of November influenza broke out and spread so suddenly and to such an extent that within five or six weeks it attacked no less than 500,000 persons out of 2,100,000—the then population of London. Altogether the excess of mortality in 1847 over 1845 was very close upon 50,000 persons.

The attitude of Parliament and of successive Governments about this period, as regarded the insanitary condition of the masses of the inhabitants of London, is now almost incomprehensible. The plea of ignorance cannot be urged in exculpation, for their own Blue Books and official returns were there to inform them. Moreover, the existence of similar evils throughout the country, where they were on a very much smaller scale, was recognised both by the Government and Parliament.

Lord Morpeth, a member of the Cabinet, speaking in 1848 in the House of Commons, said †:—

“It is far from any temporary evil, any transient visitant, against which our legislation is now called upon to provide. It is the abiding host of disease, the endemic and not the epidemic pestilence, the permanent overhanging mist of infection, the annual slaughter doubling in its ravages our bloodiest fields of conflict, that we are now summoned to grapple with.”

Yet they resolutely shut their eyes to the huge mass of misery and fearful waste of life which was going on at their very doors, and all around them. This was proved beyond controversy by their action in 1848. In that year the Government introduced into Parliament a measure which was, in effect, a comprehensive sanitary code, and which, if

\* Metropolitan Sanitary Commission, 1848, 2nd Report.

† Hansard, 1848, vol. xcvi. p. 392.

duly enforced, was capable of conferring vast benefit on the community at large.

Describing the provisions of the Bill, Lord Morpeth said :—

“It will be imperative upon the local administrative bodies to hold meetings for the transaction of business; to appoint a surveyor; to appoint an inspector of nuisances; to make public sewers; to substitute sufficient sewers in case old ones be discontinued; to require owners or occupiers to provide house-drains; to cleanse and water streets; to appoint or contract with scavengers to cleanse, cover, or fill up offensive ditches; . . . to provide sufficient supply of water for drainage, public and private, and for domestic use.

“The permissive powers to be granted to the local administrative bodies . . . include the power to make house-drains upon default of owner or occupier, to make bye-laws with respect to the removal of filth, to whitewash and purify houses after notice . . . to require that certain furnaces be made to consume their own smoke . . . to provide places for public recreation, to purchase and maintain water-works.”

The Bill, which was duly passed and became an Act, in fact provided means for coping with many of the sorest dangers, it curbed some of the powers for evil which so many persons had such little scruple in exercising; it provided methods for bringing to punishment at least some of the evil-doers who hitherto had gone scot free; and it held out some prospects of the diminution of the huge death rate and still huger sick rate.

Though a somewhat similar Bill, introduced in 1847, and which was withdrawn, had included the metropolis, this Act did not apply to the metropolis. Its application was limited to the rest of England and Wales. London—the capital of the kingdom—was, it was said, “reserved for a separate Bill.” “The separate Bill,” however, did not make its appearance. The subtle, all-pervading influence of vested rights was too powerful for any such reform to be

attempted.\* And so, the Government and Parliament, deliberately excluding the metropolis from this beneficial legislation, left untouched the centre and main emporium of disease, and left the people of London exposed on all sides to the merciless onslaught of the direst diseases which can afflict mankind.

Cholera, however, the only power able to awe the Government, was now so close at hand that some special provision had to be devised for the protection of the public health. Parliament, this time not excluding the metropolis, re-enacted the trumpery “Nuisance Removal and Diseases Prevention Act” of 1846, with some slight enlargements, and one important addition, namely, authority for the appointment by the Privy Council of a General Board of Health, which might issue directions and regulations for the prevention of epidemic and contagious disease.

Upon this slender thread Londoners were left dependent for such measures as might afford them some protection against the impending epidemic. No other help was at hand. Nor was there much time for help to be organised or preparations made, for cholera had reached Egypt and Constantinople, and by June, 1848, had crept forward to St. Petersburg. Isolated suspicious cases occurred in London in the summer of 1848,† then an undoubted case in Southwark on the 22nd of September, and then more undoubted cases, and the disease had secured a footing. As the winter approached it died down and ceased, having carried off some 468 victims.

The Privy Council had appointed a General Board of Health, and early in November the Board issued regulations directing the Guardians to take the necessary measures for the cleansing of houses, the abatement of nuisances, and generally for the removal of all matters injurious to health. To direct is one thing, to get obeyed is

\* “Vested rights in crowded houses, deadly stenches, putrid water, foggy courts, and cesspools.” See “Health by Act of Parliament,” *Household Words*, 1850, vol. i.

† P.P. 1850, vol. xxi. p. 42.

another, and with some few exceptions, these directions were disregarded. Partly, the fault was Parliament's.

The Act, by naming various local authorities, had created a divided power, and consequently a divided responsibility, which resulted in inaction, neglect, delay, and loss of life; and though the General Board of Health might require the Boards of Guardians and other local bodies to put the regulations into force, they had no power to compel them to do so, and in default of such power the General Board of Health was almost helpless.

The cessation of the disease proved to be only temporary. Scarcely was 1849 entered on than the epidemic broke out again, steadily gathering momentum as the summer went on.

In Bethnal Green there was an outbreak in the night—sudden and panic-striking—“consternation and alarm were spread abroad—the hurried passing and re-passing of messengers, and the wailing of relatives, filled the streets with confusion and woe, and impressed all with a deep sense of awful calamity.”

And the epidemic spread and spread until in one week in September (1849) the deaths from it amounted to 2,026.\*

Were the full facts known, the mortality was doubtless far higher.

And then the epidemic began rapidly to abate, and by the end of the year had ceased, having slain some 14,600 victims.†

Numerous and important were the lessons inculcated by this disastrous epidemic. It afforded the most definite evidence that had yet been obtained of the influence upon health of local conditions and pre-disposing causes.

It showed that in the most violent and extensive outbreaks of the pestilence its virulence was invariably confined to circumscribed localities. It showed that the habitat of cholera and the habitat of fever were one and the same.

\* P.P. 1850, vol. xxi. p. 110.

† In London in 1832-3 (population 1,682,000), the attacks were 14,144, the deaths were 6,729. 1848-9 (population 2,206,000), the attacks were about 30,000, the deaths about 14,600, so that in the last epidemic the deaths were more numerous than the attacks in 1832-3, whilst the attacks were more than double.

Deaths from cholera took place in the very same streets, and houses, and rooms, which had been again and again visited by fever; and rooms were pointed out where some of the poor people had recovered from fever in the spring to fall victims to cholera in the summer.

As it was tersely summed up by one of the most active and capable medical officers of the Board of Health:—

“We find but one cause of so much sickness, suffering and death—the prolific parent of all this diversified offspring—‘filth.’

“It is in filth, in decomposing organic matter, that the main causes of epidemic diseases are to be sought out—filthy alleys, filthy houses, filthy air, filthy water, and filthy persons.”

What the General Board of Health could do, it did, as was indeed to be expected from such sanitary enthusiasts as Lord Ashley, Dr. Southwood Smith, and Mr. Edwin Chadwick, but the local authorities were dilatory, lukewarm, or actually hostile, and their proceedings, where anything was done, were altogether inadequate for insuring those prompt, comprehensive, and vigorous measures so urgently demanded in the presence of a great and destructive epidemic such as malignant cholera.

The system of house-to-house visitation was essential for the discovery and checking of the disease, but, wrote the Board, “nothing effective was done or attempted in the metropolis. We repeatedly and earnestly urged upon the Boards of Guardians the importance to the saving of life of making immediate arrangements for special measures of prevention, but our representations were made in vain.

“The local authorities could not be induced to carry into effect the preventive measures we proposed.”

Several unions and parishes, among whom were some of the most wealthy and populous, positively refused to comply with the directions of the Board.

In the case of Bethnal Green, just described, the Board issued a “Special Order.” But even under these urgent circumstances “the Board of Guardians appointed no



medical officer for five days, they provided no nurses, they established no hospital, they opened no dispensary, they appointed one inspector of nuisances instead of two, and they made no provision for extensive and effectual lime-washing."

The explanation of the inaction and hostility of the local authorities lay in the fact that the various measures prescribed by the Act interfered with private interests, and especially with interests which were largely represented on the Boards of Guardians. Among the members of those boards there was often "an antagonistic power" at work which prevented proper attention being paid to the sanitary condition of the localities of the poor. In many instances, owners of small houses and cottage property, to which class of dwellings the provisions of the Act more particularly applied, were themselves members of such boards, and when this was not the case, they exerted an influence not the less powerful because it was indirect. This interest often conspired to impede efficient sanitary measures.\*

Local interests also operated, the apprehension being that if active and really efficient measures were adopted the trade of the neighbourhood would suffer.

In one instance—an instructive one—where the epidemic had extensively prevailed among the poor, its existence was denied, and house-visitation resisted, till, after considerable delay and loss of life, a number of shopkeepers were attacked by the disease, and *then*, all opposition ceased.

The evidence of the unfitness of the local authorities charged with the administration of the Act for the duties imposed upon them was overwhelming. The unfortunate position was accentuated and intensified by the fact that the General Board of Health had no power either of compelling the local authorities to do their duty or of itself acting in default of their neglect; and the absence of this first essential of effective administration hampered and crippled its action.

The Board summed up its experience of this great visitation of 1848-9:—

\* Dr. Grainger, P.P. 1849-50, vol. xxi.

"The evidence shows that where combined sanitary arrangements have been carried into effect the outbreak of the pestilence has been sometimes averted; that where not prevented, its course has been gradually arrested.

"That where material improvements have been made in the condition of the dwellings of the labouring classes, there has been an entire exemption from the disease, and where minor improvements were made, the attacks have been less severe and less extensive.

"That with reference to the measure of prevention, the immunity from the disease has been in proportion to the extent to which those measures have been carried into effect systematically and promptly."

By the end of the year the epidemic was practically over. And then the usual thing took place.

It is described a few months later by Dr. Grainger, who wrote:—

"In many of the most densely populated districts the inspectors of nuisances have been dismissed, the cleansing operations have been relaxed, and there is too much reason to apprehend that the courts and alleys will lapse back again into their accustomed filth, . . . that houses proved by the evidence of medical officers, inspectors, and local authorities to be unfit for human habitation will long continue to remain 'pest-houses,' spreading disease around; and that, in the midst of these tolerated and accumulated evils, the industrious classes will continue as heretofore to be decimated by fever, or, should it again break out, by cholera."\*

### III

The "City" of London, though constituting territorially and by population but a small portion of the metropolis, affords much matter of deep interest in connection with the sanitary evolution of London, totally apart from those great economic forces emanating from it which have dominated the whole of London life.

\* P.P. 1850, vol. xxi. p. 147.

The "City" differed mainly, as has already been pointed out, from "greater London" in that it had a real and active governing body for its local affairs, and that that body was possessed of considerable powers for dealing with the sanitary condition and requirements of its inhabitants. That those sanitary powers were annually delegated to a body entitled the Commissioners of Sewers in no way diminished its sanitary authority or weakened its efficiency, for that body was practically a Committee of its own, and had authority, directly or indirectly, over nearly every one of the physical conditions which were likely to affect the health or comfort of its inhabitants.

The "City" differed also in that it was able to obtain from the Government and Parliament powers which neither Government nor Parliament would grant to "greater London."

It differed too in that from 1848 onwards it was in beneficial enjoyment of the services of a Medical Officer of Health.

But in many respects the "City" was a microcosm of the metropolis; and though possessed of a local government, yet was it cursed with evils which were the terrible legacy left it by the ignorance, indifference, neglect, incapacity, or cupidity, of previous generations.

The graphic reports of its Medical Officer of Health—Dr. John Simon—have left us a most vivid and valuable contemporary picture of the sanitary condition and surroundings of the people living in the favoured area about the middle of the last century, and they disclose, in no hesitating manner, the desperate evils prevalent therein.

The Thames, "with the immeasurable filth" which polluted it, and its acres of mud banks saturated with the reeking sewage of an immense population, vitiated the atmosphere of the City, just as it did that of other parts of London. But sewers there were in the City, of one sort or another, over forty miles of them, and some of the filth of the City was carried away, at least into the river.

House drainage into the sewers was, however, either

lamentably deficient or non-existent, and cesspools abounded—abounded so freely that "parts of the City might be described as having a cesspool-city excavated beneath it."

"It requires," reported Dr. Simon to his employers, "little medical knowledge to understand that animals will scarcely thrive in an atmosphere of their own decomposing excrements; yet such, strictly and literally speaking, is the air which a very large proportion of the inhabitants of the City are condemned to breathe. . . . In some instances, where the basement storey of a house is tenanted, the cesspool lies, perhaps merely boarded over, close beneath the feet of a family of human beings whom it surrounds uninterruptedly, whether they wake or sleep, with its foetid pollution and poison."

For such evils, and such a state of things, he said, house drainage, with effective water supply, were the remedies which could alone avail; and it was only in the Session of 1848 that the authority to secure and enforce these remedies was vested by the Legislature in any public body whatsoever. The City was fortunately included, but the metropolis, with its two and a half millions of inhabitants, was unfortunately not.

The unrestricted supply of water, he pointed out, was the first essential of decency, of comfort, and of health; no civilisation of the poorer classes could exist without it; and any limitation to its use in the metropolis was a barrier which must maintain thousands in a state of the most unwholesome filth and degradation.

Even in the City, however, the supply of water was but "a fraction of what it should have been, and thousands of the population inhabited houses which had no supply of it."

Nor was what was supplied by the Water Companies much to boast of.

"The waters were conducted from their sources in open channels; they received in a large measure the surface-washing, the drainage, and even the sewage of the country through which they passed; they derived casual impurities from bathers and barges, and on their arrival were, after a

short subsidence in reservoirs, distributed without filtration to the public."

In some cases the scanty distribution was from a stand-pipe in a court or alley, for a very short time of the day. In other cases the water was delivered into butts or cisterns. Their condition is thus described:—

"In inspecting the courts and alleys of the 'City,'" he wrote, "one constantly sees butts, for the reception of water, either public or in the open yards of houses, or sometimes in their cellars; and these butts, dirty, mouldering, and coverless; receiving soot and all other impurities from the air; absorbing stench from the adjacent cesspool; inviting filth from insects, vermin, sparrows, cats, and children; their contents often augmented through a rain-water pipe by the washings of the roof, and every hour becoming fustier and more offensive. Nothing can be less like what water should be than the fluid obtained under such circumstances."

It is interesting to observe that the evils of the system of water supply by private companies were, even in the "City," so manifest that Dr. Simon expressed his opinion that the only satisfactory solution of the difficulty in connection therewith was the acquisition by the public authority of the control of the supply, and he urged the adoption of the principle of what is now denounced by some people as "municipal trading."

In every practical sense the sale of water in London was a monopoly.

"The individual customer," wrote Dr. Simon, "who is dissatisfied with his bargain can go to no other market; and however legitimate may be his claim to be supplied with this prime necessary of life at its cheapest rate, in the most efficient manner, and of the best possible quality, your Honourable Court (the Commissioners of Sewers) hitherto possesses no power to enforce it."

In the Public Health Act of 1848 the principle had been recognised by Parliament so far as towns in the country were concerned—local Boards of Health being authorised to provide their district with such a supply of

water as might be proper or sufficient, or to contract for such a supply. He urged that the City should obtain a similar power.

"All the advantages which could possibly be gained by competition, together with many benefits which no competition could ensure, would thus be realised to the population under your charge."

But that solution of the difficulty was more than half a century in advance of its accomplishment so far as either the "City" or "greater London" was concerned.

As to the atmosphere in the "City," there seems to have been no limit to the pollutions thereof, all of which were injurious to the health of the public.

Numerous noxious and offensive trades were carried on in the most crowded places.

Directly and indirectly, slaughtering of animals in the "City" was prejudicial to the health of the population, and exercised a most injurious influence upon the district.

The number of slaughter-houses registered and tolerated in the "City" in 1848 amounted to 138, and of these, in 58 cases, the slaughtering was carried out in the vaults and cellars.\*

And there were very many noxious and offensive trades in close dependence upon "the original nuisance" of the slaughter-house, and round about it, "the concomitant and still more grievous nuisances of gut-spinning, tripe-dressing, bone-boiling, tallow-melting, paunch-cooking, &c., &c."

Certain it is that offensive businesses of these and other sorts were carried on by their owners with an absolute disregard to the comfort or health of the public.

The matter was a difficult one to deal with, as any severe restrictions might destroy the trade or manufacture and take away from the people the employment which gave them the means of earning a livelihood. Furthermore, such restrictions were usually resented as an infraction of personal liberty. Dr. Simon forcibly and conclusively answered this contention.

"It might," he wrote, "be an infraction of personal

\* This was rendered illegal by the amended City Sewers Act of 1851.

liberty to interfere with a proprietor's right to make offensive smells within the limits of his own tenement, and for his own separate inhalation, but surely it is a still greater infraction of personal liberty when the proprietor, entitled as he is to but the joint use of an atmosphere which is the common property of his neighbourhood, assumes what is equivalent to a sole possession of it, and claims the right of diffusing through it some nauseous effluvium which others, equally with himself, are thus obliged to inhale."

Some improvement in this respect was rendered possible by the Act of 1851, which enacted that whatever trade or business might occasion noxious or offensive effluvia, or otherwise annoy the inhabitants of its neighbourhood, "shall" be required to employ the best known means for preventing or counteracting such annoyance.

But the remedy scarcely appears to have been availed of or enforced, and "greater London" was, as usual, excluded from the Act.

Another more constant pollution of the air was that resulting from intramural burial. "Overcrowding" in the "City" was not limited to the living; it extended even to the dead, and though the dead themselves had passed beyond any further possible harm from it, yet their overcrowding affected disastrously those they had left behind. Here the evils already described as existing in "greater London" existed also in acute form. Two thousand bodies or more were interred each year actually within the "City" area, and the burial grounds were densely packed. And "in all the larger parochial burying grounds, and in most others, the soil was saturated with animal matter undergoing slow decomposition."

And the vaults beneath the churches were "in many instances similarly overloaded with materials of putrefaction, and the atmosphere which should have been kept pure and without admixture for the living, was hourly tainted with the fœtid emanations of the dead. . . ."

In Dr. Simon's words:—

"Close beneath the feet of those who attend the services

of their church there often lies an almost solid pile of decomposing human remains, heaped as high as the vaulting will permit, and generally but very partially confined."

The Metropolitan Burials Act of 1852 effected a great improvement in this respect by putting a term to the indefinite perpetuation of this horrible evil. It gave the Secretary of State power to prohibit further intramural burials, and it gave the "City," and other local authorities, the power to establish burial places beyond the boundaries of the metropolis. But, even when thus stopped, years had to elapse before the condition of intramural burial grounds and vaults would cease to vitiate the air around them.\*

The atmosphere of the "City," the air which people breathed, was thus vitiated in varying degrees of intensity by numerous and various abominations—the polluted Thames, defective sewerage and drainage, offensive trades, intramural interments.

As regards the houses in which the people lived, these were crammed together—packed as closely together as builders' ingenuity could pack them—many of them combining every defect that houses could have, and so situated that ventilation was an impossibility.

"In very many parts of the City you find a number of courts, probably with very narrow inlets, diverging from the open street in such close succession that their backs adjoin, with no intermediate space whatsoever. Consequently each row of houses has but a single row of windows facing the confined court, and thus there is no possibility of ventilation, either through the court generally or through the houses which compose it. . . . Houses so constructed as to be as perfectly a cul-de-sac out of the court as the court is a cul-de-sac out of the street."†

And the climax of insanitary conditions was reached when these densely-packed houses were overcrowded by human beings.

\* See P.P. 1854-5, vol. x., General Report of Medical Council.

† Simon, 1st Report, 1849.

The process of converting dwelling-houses into warehouses, or business offices, or for trade or manufactures was in full swing—a constant force—and so the number of houses for people to live in became ever fewer.

And the “tenement houses,” in which the great bulk of the working classes lived, became more and more crowded; houses wherein “each holding or tenement, though very often consisting but of a single small room, receives its inmates without available restriction as to their sex or number, and without registration of the accommodation requisite for cleanliness, decency, and health.”

The Census of 1851 had shown an increase of over 4,200 in the population of the “City,” and a diminution of nearly 900 houses.

“Probably,” wrote Dr. Simon, “for the most part it represents the continued influx of a poor population into localities undesirable for residence, and implies that habitations previously unwholesome by their overcrowdedness are now still more densely thronged by a squalid and sickly population. . . .”

“It is no uncommon thing, in a room twelve feet square or less, to find three or four families styeed together (perhaps with infectious disease among them), filling the same space night and day—men, women, and children, in the promiscuous intercourse of cattle. Of these inmates it is nearly superfluous to observe that in all offices of nature they are gregarious and public; that every instinct of personal or sexual decency is stifled; that every nakedness of life is uncovered there. . . . Who can wonder at what becomes, physically and morally, of infants begotten and born in these bestial crowds? . . .”

Of overcrowding or “pestilential heaping of human beings,” this matter of “infinite importance,” he wrote:—

“While it maintains physical filth that is indescribable, while it perpetuates fever and the allied disorders, while it creates mortality enough to mask the results of all your sanitary progress, its moral consequences are too dreadful to be detailed.”

Pursuing his masterly analysis of the sanitary condition of the people in the “City” and its causes, he wrote:—

“Last and not least among the influences prejudicial to health in the City, as elsewhere, must be reckoned the social condition of the working classes. . . . Often in discussion of sanitary subjects before your Honourable Court, the filthy, or slovenly, or improvident, or destructive, or intemperate, or dishonest habits of these classes are cited as an explanation of the inefficiency of measures designed for their advantage. It is constantly urged that to bring improved domestic arrangements within the reach of such persons is a waste and a folly.

“It is unquestionable that in houses containing all the sanitary evils enumerated—undrained and waterless, and unventilated—there do dwell whole hordes of persons who struggle so little in self-defence against that which surrounds them that they may be considered almost indifferent to its existence, or almost acclimated to endure its continuance.

“It is too true that among the lower classes there are swarms of men and women who have yet to learn that human beings should dwell differently from cattle—swarms to whom personal cleanliness is utterly unknown; swarms by whom delicacy and decency in their social relations are quite unconceived.

“My sphere of duty lies within the City boundary.

“I studiously refrain from instituting comparisons with other metropolitan localities.

“I feel the deepest conviction that no sanitary system can be adequate to the requirements of the time, or can cure those radical evils which infest the under framework of society, unless the importance be distinctly recognised and the duty manfully undertaken of improving the social condition of the poor. . . .”

“Who can wonder that the laws of society should at times be forgotten by those whom the eye of society

habitually overlooks, and whom the heart of society often appears to discard?

"To my duty it alone belongs, in such respects, to tell you where disease ravages the people under your charge, and wherefore; but while I lift the curtain to show you this—a curtain which propriety may gladly leave unraised—you cannot but see that side by side with pestilence there stalks a deadlier presence, blighting the moral existence of a rising population, rendering their hearts hopeless, their acts ruffianly and incestuous, and scattering, while Society averts her eyes, the retributive seeds of increase for crime, turbulence, and pauperism."

And what was the physical result of this state of living?

"In some spots in the City you would see houses, courts, and streets, where the habitual proportion of deaths is far beyond the heaviest pestilence rate known for any metropolitan district aggregately—localities where the habitual rate of death is more appalling than any such averages can enable you to conceive.

"Among their dense population it is rare to see any other appearance than that of squalid sickness and misery, and the children who are reproduced with the fertility of a rabbit warren perish in early infancy.

"The diseases of these localities are well marked. Scrofula more or less completely blights all that are born . . . often prolonging itself as a hereditary curse in the misbegotten offspring of those who, under such unnatural conditions, attain to maturity and procreation.

"Typhus prevails as a habitual pestilence.

"The death rate during the last five years has been at the rate of about twenty-four per 1,000 per annum.

"The City of London appears peculiarly fatal to infant life.

"Of the 15,597 persons who died within your jurisdiction in the five years 1847-8 to 1852-3, nearly three-eighths died in the first five years of life."

To his employers he mostly appeals. He hopes that the statements in his reports may suffice to convince them of

the necessity which exists in the "City" of London for some effectual and permanent sanitary organisation.

"For the metropolis generally there is hitherto no sanitary law such as you possess for your territory."

He pointed out that—

"Inspection of the most constant, most searching, most intelligent, and most trustworthy kind is that in which the provisional management of our said affairs must essentially consist.

"The committee was given power by the Act for the amendment or removal of houses presenting aggravated structural faults.

"Wherever your Medical Officer of Health may certify to you that any house or building is permanently unwholesome and unfit for human habitation, you are empowered to require of the owner (or in his neglect yourselves to undertake) the execution of whatever works may be requisite for rendering the house habitable with security to life."

And he urged that:—

"The principle might be distinctly recognised that the City will not tolerate within its municipal jurisdiction the continuance of houses absolutely incompatible with healthy habitation.

"Here terminates my statement of the powers now vested in you for the maintenance of the public health.

"Authority so complete for this noble purpose has never before been delegated to any municipal body in the country.

"If the deliberate promises of Science be not an empty delusion, it is practicable to reduce human mortality within your jurisdiction to nearly the half of the present prevalence."

The most valuable and weighty of all his conclusions was that affixing the responsibility for the existing mass of insanitation and consequent misery. With a courage worthy of all admiration he did not hesitate, regardless of the consequences to himself, to fix the responsibility and blame where they were due.

"The fact is that, except against wilful violence, life is very little cared for by the law."

Of Parliament he wrote:—

"Fragments of legislation there are, indeed, in all directions; enough to establish precedents, enough to testify some half-conscious possession of a principle; but for usefulness little beyond this. The statutes tell that now and then there has reached to high places the wail of physical suffering. They tell that our law makers, to the tether of a very scanty knowledge, have, not unwillingly, moved to the redress of some clamorous wrong. . . . But . . . their insufficiencies constitute a national scandal, . . . something not far removed from a national sin. . . ."

"The landlord must be held responsible for the decent and wholesome condition of his property, and for such conduct of his tenants as will maintain that condition."

The clear, precise, and unqualified enunciation of such a principle must have given a shock to many of the members of the governing authority of the "City," and excited their wrath, the more especially as it was so absolutely sound and true.

"The death of a child by smallpox," he went on to say, "would in most instances call for a verdict of 'homicide by omission' against the parent who had neglected daily opportunities of giving it immunity from that disease by the simple process of vaccination; the death of an adult by typhus would commonly justify still stronger condemnation (though with more difficulty of fixing and proportioning the particular responsibility) against those who ignore the duties of property, and who knowingly let for the occupation of the poor dwellings unfit even for brute tenants, dwellings absolutely incompatible with health."

And then he proceeds to explain and justify and enlarge upon his assertion of the responsibility of the landlord.

"There are forty-five miles of sewerage in your jurisdiction, ready to receive the streams of private drainage, and leaving the owners of house property no excuse for the non-performance of necessary works. . . . But . . . the intentions of your Court, and the industry of its officers,

have been in great measure frustrated by the passive resistance of landlords. Delays and subterfuges have been had recourse to in order to avoid compliance with the injunctions of the Commission."

In his evidence before the Royal Commission of 1853-4 he said:—

"The poorer house property of the City is very often in the hands of wealthy people who have only the most general notion of its whereabouts, have perhaps never visited the place for which they receive rent, and in short know their property only through their agents.

"Instances have come to my knowledge of the very worst description of property being thus held ignorantly and carelessly by wealthy persons. Often for years we can get at no representative of the property other than the agent or collector who receives the weekly rent for some anonymous employer."

In his third Report to the Commissioners of Sewers he wrote:—

"It is easy to foresee the numerous obstacles which interested persons will set before you to delay the accomplishment of your great task.

"When your orders are addressed to some owner of objectionable property—of some property which is a constant source of nuisance, or disease, or death; when you would force one person to refrain from tainting the general atmosphere with results of an offensive occupation; when you would oblige another to see that his tenantry are better housed than cattle, and that, while he takes rent for lodging, he shall not give fever as an equivalent—amid these proceedings you will be reminded of the 'rights of property' and of 'an Englishman's inviolable claim to do as he will with his own.'

"Permit me to remind you that your law makes full recognition of these principles and that the cases in which sophistical appeal will often be made to them are exactly those which are most completely condemned by a full and fair application of the principles adverted to. With private affairs you interfere only when they become of public

import, with private liberty only when it becomes a public encroachment. The factory chimney that eclipses the light of heaven with unbroken clouds of smoke, the melting house that nauseates an entire parish, the slaughter-house that forms round itself a circle of dangerous disease—these surely are not private but *public* affairs.

“And how much more justly may the neighbour appeal to you against each such nuisance as an interference with his privacy; against the smoke, the stink, the fever that bursts through each inlet of his dwelling, intrudes on him at every hour, disturbs the enjoyment and shortens the duration of his life. And for the rights of property—they are not only pecuniary. Life, too, is a great property, and your Act (of 1851) asserts its rights.”

“The landlord of some overthronged lodging house complains that to reduce the number of his tenantry, to lay on water, to erect privies, or to execute some other indispensable sanitary work, would diminish his rental—in the spirit of your Act it is held a sufficient reply that human life is at stake—and that a landlord in his dealings with the ignorant and indefensive poor cannot be suffered to estimate them at the value of cattle, to associate them in worse than bestial habits, or let to them for hire at however moderate a rent the certain occasions of suffering and death.”

“Seeing the punctuality with which weekly visitation is made for the collection of rents in these wretched dwellings it would not be unreasonable to insist on some regulations for the clean and wholesome condition of his premises, water supply, and scavenging, &c.”

Such a regulation would “render it indispensable to the landlord of such holdings to promote cleanly and decent habits among his tenants—even to obtain security for their good behaviour.”

The picture thus presented of the sanitary condition of the people residing in the “City” about the middle of the last century is—it must be acknowledged—a terrible one; but it rests upon unimpeachable testimony.

The very grave and serious conclusion, however, follows

from it—that if the evils were thus terrible in the “City,” with a comparatively small population, only a little more than a twentieth of that of the metropolis, and where there was a local government with wide powers for dealing with matters affecting the public health—how infinitely more serious was the condition of things in the “greater London” with its huge population, and where there was practically no local government, and no punitive law for insanitary misdoings and crimes.

In some degree, the evils the people suffered under were of their own making, though many excuses can be urged in extenuation. In some degree, too, the people were unquestionably the victims of circumstances. But in the main, they were the victims of other people’s iniquities. It was those circumstances which the Government should have altered, or, at any rate, have endeavoured to control or modify—it was the unlimited power to do evil that the Government should have checked and curbed; but “greater London” was virtually left outside the pale of remedial legislative treatment by Parliament.

## IV

The great cholera epidemic of 1848–9 had deeply stirred public feeling in London. It had destroyed 14,600 people (and diarrhoea, its satellite, had destroyed many thousands more), and it had been “accompanied by an amount of sickness and physical misery beyond computation.” But even all its horrors, and all the proofs it afforded of the desperately insanitary condition of the masses in the metropolis, were not sufficient to induce the Government to depart from its policy of neglect, or to wring from Parliament measures which would lay the basis for the alleviation of the sufferings of the working population of the metropolis, or which would remove even a small part of the evils which fell so heavily upon those least able to sustain them, and least able to remove them.



The health of London was becoming worse every year. The number of persons dying from preventable disease had been steadily increasing.

One gleam of hope there was, however. An increasing number of persons were becoming interested in the health of the people, and were awakening to the gravity of the subject, and to the public discredit and inhuman scandal of the existing condition of things—an awakening of interest which, in February, 1850, reached to the extent of a public meeting.

The Bishop of London presided, and the meeting was rendered the more remarkable by speeches from Lord Ashley, then actively pressing sanitary and social questions forward, and by Charles Dickens.

Lord Ashley said:—

“The condition of the metropolis, in a sanitary point of view, was not only perilous to those who resided in it, but it was an absolute disgrace to the century in which they lived. It was a disgrace to their high-sounding professions of civilisation and morality. They were surrounded by every noxious influence—they were exposed to every deadly pestilence. . . . The water they drank, the air they breathed, the surface they walked on, and the ground beneath the surface, all were tainted and rife with the seeds of disease and death. . . .

“Let them look at another abomination—the existence of putrefying corpses in graveyards and in vaults amidst the habitations of the living—an abomination discountenanced by all the civilisation of modern days, as it was by that of the ancient days—the practice of intramural interments.

“Could anything be worse than the graveyards of the metropolis? Under a surface of ground not amounting to 250 acres there had been interred within thirty years in the metropolis far more than 1,500,000 human beings. What must be the condition of the atmosphere affected by the exhalations from that surface? . . .

“And what were the financial and social consequences of allowing such a state of things to exist?

“At least one-third of the pauperism of the country arose from the defective sanitary condition of large multitudes of the people. . . .”

Charles Dickens said:—

“The object of the resolution he was proposing was to bring the Metropolis within the provisions of the Public Health Act, most absurdly and monstrously excluded from its operation. . . . Infancy was made stunted, ugly, and full of pain; maturity made old; and old age imbecile.

“He knew of many places in London unsurpassed in the accumulated horrors of their long neglect by the dirtiest old spots in the dirtiest old towns under the worst old governments in Europe.

“The principal objectors to the improvements proposed were divided into two classes.

“The first consisted of the owners of small tenements, men who pushed themselves to the front of Boards of Guardians and parish Vestries, and were clamorous about the rating of their property; the other class was composed of gentlemen, more independent and less selfish, who had a weak leaning towards self-government. The first class generally proceeded upon the supposition that the compulsory improvement of their property when exceedingly defective would be very expensive. . . .

“No one,” he went on to say, “who had any knowledge of the poor could fail to be deeply affected by their patience and their sympathy with one another—by the beautiful alacrity with which they helped each other in toil, in the day of suffering, in the hour of death.

“It hardly ever happened that any case of extreme protracted destitution found its way into the public prints without our reading at the same time of some ragged Samaritan sharing his last loaf or spending his last penny to relieve the poor miserable in the room upstairs or in the cellar underground. It was to develop in the poor people the virtue which nothing could eradicate, to raise them in the social scale as they should be raised, to lift them from a condition into which they did not allow their beast to sink, . . . to cleanse the foul air for the passage of

Christianity and education throughout the land, that the meeting was assembled. The object of their assembly was simply to help to set that right which was wrong before God and before man."

The realisation of this object, noble as it was, was not easily attainable.

The Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields said that "the difficulty of legislation in these matters was to hit the medium between the rights of property and the rights of humanity." He might have added, with truth, that the difficulty had so far been met by sacrificing the rights of humanity to the rights of property.

Lord Ashley had pointed out that they "had to contend with ignorance, indifference, selfishness, and interest;" or as Lord Robert Grosvenor more vigorously expressed it, in a phrase which should live in history as giving the key to the mystery of the slow sanitary evolution of this great city, they had to contend against "vested interests in filth and dirt."

One thing was already absolutely clear, that it was hopeless to expect anything from the spontaneous action of land-owners or house-owners.

"They knew it was quite impossible," said the Bishop of Chichester, "to bring the owners of even one small court or alley, much less the owners or occupiers of any large district, to concur in any measure for the general good of their particular locality."

The fact was that nothing but the imperative directions of the law would secure the removal of evils or curtail the practice of infamous abuses—and even when the law was enacted for their remedy, nothing but its rigorous enforcement with adequate penalties would make it effective.

As the result of the meeting, a deputation waited on Lord John Russell, the then Prime Minister. His reply was not encouraging.

"In this city," he said, "there is very naturally and properly great jealousy of any interference either with local rights or individual will and freedom from control."

That great jealousy proved to be so powerful that nothing

was attempted by the Government except an abortive effort to deal with the loathsome and insanitary evils of intramural interments where vested interests were neither powerful nor loud voiced.

The Act was so defective that it never came into operation, and two more years elapsed before the Government again essayed to deal with the subject. And in the meanwhile that most horrible evil was permitted to work its will upon the dwellers in the metropolis.

To the enthusiasm of an individual, and not of the Government, was due the first effective attempt to grapple with one of the wide-spread, deep-seated evils which were working such havoc among the people. The most disastrous and vicious forms of overcrowding were at the time to be found in the so-called Common Lodging Houses—the sink of insanitary abominations.

These were the temporary and casual abodes of the dregs of London humanity—of the tramps, and the unfortunates, and the mendicants and criminals, male and female—when they could afford the penny or pence to pay for their night's lodging. In most cases these houses were low brothels and hotbeds of crime and moral degeneracy, their foul and filthy condition making them great sources and propagators of contagious and loathsome diseases.

In the "City" the authorities had power to regulate and control them. Not so, however, in the metropolis. There, no one had any authority in the matter, nor was there any authority for any one to have.

Lord Ashley, truly discerning that the one and only way of dealing with this evil was by regulation and constraint, introduced a Bill\* and actually carried it through Parliament, and two years later got another Act† embodying amendments which made it more effective.

What the Common Lodging House owner or keeper— anxious to secure the utmost profits from his property and regardless of all consequences to others—would not do, he was, by those Acts, made to do.

\* 14 and 15 Vic. cap. 28.

† 16 and 17 Vic. cap. 41.

The houses which he devoted to this purpose, solely for his own profit, were placed under the control and inspection of the police, and had to be registered as "Common Lodging Houses." Overcrowding in them was checked by restricting the number of inmates who might be in each room; regulations (confirmed by a Secretary of State) were made, and steadily enforced, for the separation of the sexes; for the proper cleansing of the houses; and for compelling the keeper to give immediate notice of fever or any contagious or infectious disease occurring therein. The accumulation of refuse was to be prevented, and provision had to be made for adequate sanitary accommodation, for better drainage, and for sufficient water supply.

A very brief experience showed that great practical benefits resulted from thus regulating these houses, and the amount of sickness and mortality in them became astonishingly small, considering the character of their inmates and the localities where they were situated; and inasmuch as the number of such houses was nearly 5,000, and the population in them about 80,000, the benefit was a really substantial one.

How obstinate and pertinacious was the opposition of house-owners, or middlemen, to regulation and supervision of any kind is illustrated by a case reported by the Assistant Police Commissioner.\* The owner of certain premises in St. Giles had been often applied to, without success, to remedy some gross sanitary defects therein which had resulted in the loss of life by fever. Brought to bay at last, at the Police Court, and ordered to remedy the evil, he said that he was willing to do all in his power to abate the nuisance . . . but, "he thought he ought not to be dictated to as to the way his property was to be managed." His words embodied the predominant spirit of the time. "There are," wrote the Assistant Police Commissioner in commenting upon this case, "owners of property whom nothing but the strong arm of the law can move."

Unfortunately the Act did not go far enough. Single

\* P.P. 1854, vol. xxxv. p. 7.

rooms occupied by families did not come within its scope. They constituted an enormous proportion of the habitations of the people, and they were allowed to continue the prolific cause of sanitary evils and of physical and moral degradation.

Limited in its scope though the Act was, it afforded nevertheless one great object lesson—the lesson which since that time has been consistently preached by all who had actual experience as regarded the sanitary condition of the people of London—the lesson that the worst of the sanitary and social evils could only be effectually grappled with, on the one side by the supervision and regulation and constant inspection of the houses in which the poorer classes lived, and upon the other side by insistent compulsion of house-owners to maintain a certain standard of sanitation and cleanliness in those houses.

That, however, was a course which Parliament for many years did not think it desirable to adopt, and which, when adopted in a tentative and half-hearted sort of way, suffered the usual fate of sanitary legislation—that of being neglected, opposed, evaded, or thwarted by land-owners, house-owners, middlemen, and by hostile local authorities.

Lord Ashley also originated and succeeded in the same Session in obtaining from Parliament another Act of notable interest, namely, "The Labouring Classes Lodging Houses Act,"\* which aimed at increasing the quantity of houses for working men by facilitating the establishment of well-ordered houses for such persons.

It gave power to vestries to adopt the Act, and thereafter to purchase or lease land, and to erect houses thereon for the working classes, and to borrow money on the security of the rates for this purpose.

In advocating his plan in the House of Commons he enforced the importance of the reform. He said:—

"Until the domiciliary condition of the working classes were Christianised (he could use no less forcible a term) all hope of moral or social improvement was utterly vain. Though not the sole, it was one of the prime sources of the

\* 14 and 15 Vic. cap. 34, 1851.

evils that beset their condition ; it generated disease, ruined whole families by the intemperance it promoted, cut off or crippled thousands in the vigour of life, and filled the work-houses with widows and orphans." \*

He specially mentioned one of the objections urged to this proposal for the construction of better houses—an objection which since then has invariably found expression when any amelioration of the housing of the working classes has been proposed to be done by a public authority.

"It was said those matters ought to be left to private speculation. He should much object to that. Private speculation was very much confined to the construction of the smallest houses, and of the lowest possible description, because it was out of these the most inordinate profits could be made. Private speculation was almost entirely in that direction."

He might have added that "private speculation" had hitherto had a completely free field in the sphere of housing, with all the evil results visible before them, and that it had aggravated and intensified the evil instead of removing or mitigating it.

The debate in Parliament was interesting, as it drew from the Home Secretary an expression of the Government view of the situation.

"After all," said Sir G. Grey, "it was not to the Government, it was rather to the efforts of individuals, and associations of individuals, that they must look for real and general improvement among the great body of the people. All that the Government could do was to remove obstacles in the way, and to present facilities by modifications of the law more useful than direct legislation." \*

An "association of individuals" had already been formed—"The Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes"—and work of this class had to the extent of over £20,000 been carried out by it. The new piles of buildings erected were eagerly availed of by people of the working classes, and in a sanitary point of view they at once demonstrated their very satisfactory immunity from disease.

\* See Hansard, 1851, vol. cxv.

The Act, however, being a voluntary or adoptive Act, was not likely to be adopted and put into force by those by whom a certain amount of financial liability might be incurred as the result. As a matter of fact it never was put in force by any vestry, and it remained a dead letter.

It was memorable, however, as embodying for the first time in legislation the idea that the housing of the people was a public matter with which a public authority might properly concern itself, even to the extent of competing with private enterprise, and pledging the rates as security.

The supply of water to London, both as regarded quality and quantity, had, since the epidemic of 1848-9, been engaging the attention of Committees of Parliament, the belief that the epidemic of cholera had been increased and propagated by the filthy and impure water having given an impetus to the demand for ameliorative measures. In 1852 an Act \* was passed by which the companies taking their water from the Thames were required to remove their intakes to some place above Teddington Lock, where the tide would not affect it, and the sewage of London would not be intermixed with it. This was a considerable step in the right direction, for though the river above Teddington Lock received the sewage of many large towns and villages, it was at least free from contamination by the sewage and filth of the metropolis.

Other improvements were also enacted. Reservoirs within a certain distance of St. Paul's Cathedral were to be covered in, and all water intended for domestic use was to be filtered before being supplied to the consumer; and provision was also made for a constant supply of water by every company within five years after the passing of the Act.

But the companies were given five years within which to effect the removal of the intake from the foulest parts of the river to above tidal reach—and thus for a wholly unnecessary term the cause which had wrought such havoc among the people was permitted to continue its disastrous effects.

\* "The Metropolis Water Act, 1852," 15 and 16 Vic. cap. 84.

## V

The epidemic of cholera in 1849 had failed to produce any lasting effect upon the local authorities or the public opinion of London, and the nemesis of renewed neglect and indifference was once again to fall upon the metropolis.

Cholera had kept hovering about. In 1852 a number of suspicious cases occurred in various districts. In 1853 suspicion passed into certainty, and the disease assumed the form of an epidemic—as many as 102 deaths from it occurring in the first week in November. Then it died down.

In the following year it again appeared in more severe epidemic form over the whole of the metropolis. On one day—September 4th—there were 459 deaths from it. The climax was reached in the second week in September (almost the identical date on which the epidemic of 1849 occasioned the highest mortality) and there were 2,050 deaths from it.\* In that one month 6,160 persons died from it, and from July 1st to December 16th, when it at last disappeared, there was a total mortality from cholera alone of 10,675 persons.

Every conclusion which had been arrived at as regards the disease during the previous epidemics was confirmed by this third great epidemic, and many previous theories passed into the region of proved facts. Cholera was once more proved to be a filth disease, and in the main confined to filthy localities. The more defective and abominable the methods of drainage, the larger the number of victims. The filthier and more contaminated the water supplied for drinking and household purposes, the more numerous the cases, and the more virulent the disease. This was demonstrated beyond further question.

The mortality on the south side of the Thames was above threefold what it was on the north side; and both as regarded water supply and drainage, South London was in a worse sanitary state than North London. The water con-

\* See P.P. 1854, vol. xlv. p. 22.

sumed by the population there was generally worse than that on the north. Lying lower, too, the drainage had less chance of being conveyed away, and in the miles upon miles of open sewer ditches it was left to rot and putrefy in close propinquity to the houses and to poison the air.

And the most remarkable proof was afforded by the effects of the consumption of water taken from different sources.

In 1849 both the Lambeth and the Southwark Water Companies pumped the water they supplied to their customers from the very foulest part of the Thames—near Hungerford Bridge—with equally disastrous results. In the course of the following years the Lambeth Company removed its source of supply to a part of the river above Teddington Lock—the Southwark Company, however, went on as before. In the epidemic of 1854 the inhabitants of houses supplied with the water by the latter company suffered eight times as much as those supplied by the better water of the Lambeth Company, whilst the number of persons who died in the houses where the impure was drunk was three and a half times greater than that in the houses where the purer water was supplied.

Of all the conclusions arrived at by those who had been engaged in combating the disease during this epidemic, the most important was that where cholera had become localised it was connected with obvious removable causes, and was in fact a preventable disease.

Most unfortunately, and reprehensibly, many of those who could have done most to prevent it failed signally to take action.

Once more, and this time in an accentuated degree, the wide-spread prevalence of the disease, and the frightful mortality, were distinctly due to the inertia, laxity, or deliberate neglect of those local authorities who by law were charged with the duty of cleansing localities and removing some of the causes of disease.

The General Board of Health, of which Sir Benjamin Hall was President, did all that it could do. Medical inspectors were appointed by it to visit all the parishes

most severely affected; and the fullest and minutest instructions were issued to the Boards of Guardians as to the course they should pursue, and the action they should take.

But several of the Boards of Guardians took no notice of the instructions sent them; others sent unsatisfactory replies. In not one of the parishes in which the epidemic was most fatal was the preventive machinery, sanitary and medical, organised in accordance with the instructions; and although some parishes did more than others, yet, speaking generally, the administration of the sanitary and medical relief measures by the Boards of Guardians was inefficient in character and extent, except in some of the larger and more healthy parishes where they were least wanted.\*

At Rotherhithe, the Guardians declined to proceed with the removal of nuisances as entailing a useless expense. At Deptford, where cholera was at the worst, no Inspector of Nuisances was appointed, even for the emergency. Nor did Greenwich, where it was also bad, appoint one. In Bethnal Green, where memories ought to have been bitter, the authorities practically did nothing, although promising almost everything.

In Lambeth, the parish was left without any adequate protection against the epidemic; and it was only after urgent remonstrances by the Medical Inspector, and after his threatening to place himself in communication with the coroner in any cases of death occurring in localities where the proper cleansing measures had not been carried out, that he succeeded in obtaining the adoption of measures even to a limited extent.\*

In Clerkenwell, the Guardians utterly disregarded the recommendations of the Board of Health, and from the first there was an openly expressed determination not in any way to be interfered with by the Board.

And the disastrous state of affairs was, that the Nuisances, &c., Removal Acts gave the Board of Health no power to enforce upon the Guardians the execution of the regulations made.

\* See P.P. 1854-5, vol. xlv., Reports of General Board of Health.

The whole sanitary administration—so far as any existed in London—was in a state of chaos, and the various local authorities were able, with absolute impunity to themselves, to ignore and even defy the General Board of Health. Of these authorities, as has been already said, there was a multiplicity, and it was no infrequent occurrence to find the administrative authority of some of them in the hands of parties directly interested in the continuance of the existing state of matters, evil though those were. In fact, the “vested interests in filth and dirt” were a power in local administration in “greater London,” and the practical result was that the great majority of the population of the metropolis were left without any protection against the ravages of epidemic or other preventable diseases.

The indifference of Parliament, moreover, had left London without any effective or systematic sanitary supervision; and in no part of it, except the “City,” was there any officer conversant with the effect of local influences on the health of the population, or who could advise as to the sanitary measures which should be adopted.

The Board of Health having had it brought home to them that, with their limited powers, they were unable to introduce order into this chaos, or to enforce even the most elementary precautions against the spread of the disease, their President addressed a letter on the 29th of January, 1855, to Lord Palmerston, the then Home Secretary (and a few weeks later the Prime Minister), in which he set forth the exact state of affairs as ascertained by his own observation and by the experience of some of the best and most well-informed medical men in London.

In this letter he summarised the main causes of the insanitary condition in which the people of London were forced to live.

He wrote:—

“The evidence on the localising conditions of cholera given in the report of Dr. Sutherland points to the following as among the more prominent of the removable causes of zymotic disease.

“Open ditches as sewers. Want of sewers. Badly con-

structed sewers accumulating deposits and generating sewer gases.

“The pollution of the atmosphere in streets and within houses from untrapped drains, from sewer ventilating openings in streets, and from cesspools, whereby the air was contaminated and the sub-soil saturated with filth.

“Want of house drainage.

“The absence of any organised daily system of cleansing, and the consequent retention of house refuse in or near dwellings.

“Bad water, badly distributed. Unwholesome trades. Unwholesome vapours exhaled from the Thames. Cellar habitations.

“Neighbourhoods, the houses of which are closely packed together with narrow overcrowded streets, alleys and courts so constructed as to prevent ventilation. Houses structurally defective, filthy, unventilated, and overcrowded—absolutely unfit for human habitation.”

And several others which need not be here enumerated.

“Lastly, and applying to all these—multiplicity of local authorities, and the want of sufficient powers in such authorities to deal with these evils.”

“Great as these evils are in London,” he wrote, “. . . there is not one among them that cannot be remedied if proper steps be taken.

“The first and most obvious necessity in the metropolis is to sweep away the existing chaos of local jurisdiction.”

Included in that chaos were two Boards with great powers of taxation over which the ratepayers had no control.\*

One of them consisted of the persons appointed under the Metropolitan Building Act of 1844, who, at a cost of £24,000 a year, entirely neglected their work. The other, the Commissioners of Sewers, who had demonstrated their utter incapacity, the cost of whose establishment was “something extraordinary,” and who in the five years of their existence had only attempted one great work—“the

\* See speech of Sir B. Hall in 1885 in House of Commons, Hansard, vol. cxxxvii. p. 715.

Victoria Sewer”—which cost a large sum, and which not many years after fell to ruins.

The great epidemic of cholera, its attendant panic, its gruesome accompaniments, its revelation of the actual condition of the masses, and of the rottenness of the local authorities, and the growing outcry against the iniquity of such a state of things in a civilised and Christian country, brought matters to a head.

The state of the Thames had also become a greater danger than ever to the community, and a more unbearable nuisance.

As described by *The Lancet* in July, 1855:—

“The waters are swollen with the feculence of the myriads of living beings that dwell upon the banks, and with the waste of every manufacture that is too foul for utilisation. Wheresoever we go, whatsoever we eat or drink within the circle of London, we find tainted with the Thames. . . . No one having eyes, nose, or taste, can look upon the Thames and not be convinced that its waters are, year by year, and day by day, getting fouler and more pestilential. . . . The abominations, the corruptions we pour into the Thames, are not, as some falsely say, carried away into the sea. The sea rejects the loathsome tribute, and heaves it back again with every flow. Here, in the heart of the doomed city, it accumulates and destroys.”

And the Government, compelled at last by the force of events to take some steps for the better sanitary government of the metropolis, and for remedying some of the evils the people suffered under, decided on taking action.

Acknowledging the necessity for giving local government to “greater London”—the “City” of course already had its own—it proposed the creation of a central authority which should deal with certain matters affecting London as a whole, and local authorities which should deal with local affairs affecting their own localities.

And, in 1855, a group of measures giving effect to these views, and containing also what amounted to a sanitary code similar to that in the Public Health Act already for years in force in England, was passed by Parliament.

Those most important measures marked the end of one great period in the sanitary history of this great metropolis.

Of that period it is to be said that there is none in the history of London in which less regard was shown for the condition of the great mass of the inhabitants of the metropolis; no period when the spirit of commercialism recked so little of the physical condition and circumstances of those upon whom, after all, it depended; no period when the rights of property were so untrammelled by any consideration for the welfare of human flesh and blood; no period when private individuals not alone so strained, for their own advantage or aggrandisement, the utmost rights the law allowed them, but far exceeded those rights, and too often successfully filched from the public that to which the law gave them no right.

Never had there been a time in which the rights of property had been more insisted upon and exercised. Never a time in which land-owners, house-owners, and builders did as freely as they liked with their own, regardless of the injury or damage inflicted upon others; nor in which manufacturers carried on, without interference, trades for their own benefit, which were not merely offensive, but actually death-dealing to their neighbours.

And throughout this period the people in their daily lives and circumstances were absolutely unprotected by any public authority, or by any local governing body. There was no one to help them to contend against the extremest exercise of real or even assumed rights.

In this period London, the metropolis, had grown up, and had not merely been permitted by the Government and the Legislature to grow up practically without government, guidance, supervision, or restraint, but it had been absolutely denied any system of local government, and so been denied all provision for the sanitary needs of the community.

In 1835 a large and liberal measure of municipal self-government was given to all the cities and towns and municipalities large and small of England and Wales—many of them not a tithe so populous as the great parishes of London—and a governing body, elected by the rate-

payers, and with almost all the essential powers of local government, was instituted in each. But the Municipal Corporations Act expressly excluded the great towns which surrounded the walls of the "City" and which constituted the metropolis, and the law continued to recognise them only as rural parishes.

Twelve years later, namely in 1847, the Towns Improvement Act was passed, by which towns of much smaller size were given facilities for obtaining considerable powers of local government. By its general sanitary provisions were framed, which, with the sanction of Parliament, might be applied in any town for the management by the local authorities of the supply of water, of drainage, of the paving, cleansing, and lighting of the streets, and the prevention of fires; and for the regulation of buildings, of slaughter-houses, of public baths, and of the interment of the dead.

But even this more limited but still liberal system of local government was not extended to London, and once more the metropolis was excluded.

The "City" did not wish to extend its own borders, and the authorities of the "City" viewed with dislike the idea of the creation at their very gates of local bodies which might develop into formidable rivals.

And so "greater London" was left by successive governments and by Parliament to scramble along as best she could, and to suffer.

And just as there was no local government so were there practically no laws safeguarding the sanitary condition of the people except the temporary and imperfect ones provided by the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Acts of 1848, and such very limited protection as the common law afforded.

The Public Health Act of 1848—a sanitary code in itself—was an Act for England and Wales alone. The benefits it conferred were refused to London; and, as a consequence, the masses of her people were doomed to continue in circumstances of the utmost misery; year by year tens of thousands of her citizens were sent to an



unnecessarily early death, and ten times their number were made to undergo diseases which even then were recognised as preventable.

And all the time that she was thus left without a local government, without any permanent sanitary laws, other forces were at work inflicting ever-widening evil, and intensifying already existing evils.

The population had increased by leaps and bounds, and the increasing trade of London had brought great numbers of workmen to the metropolis. The necessity for offices and warehouses had led to the substitution of such houses for houses previously used as residences.

And so the growing population was forced to herd ever closer together, houses were packed thicker and thicker, and, in the central districts, every available spot of ground was built upon. And the overcrowding of human beings in those houses, and all the attendant ills, increased countless-fold. And the result was unparalleled, indescribable, unspeakable misery of the industrial and working classes, and of the lower and poorer orders.

Not merely years, but generations of neglect and indifference on the part of the governing classes had multiplied and intensified in London every evil to which the poorer classes of a nation are liable.

For long the great process of social and economic change at work in "greater London," and all that it entailed, was let go its own way—a way which, in default of the regulation and the alleviation a government should have given it, was beset with creakings and groanings like those of some badly constructed piece of machinery; only instead of machinery, inanimate and insensitive, they were the groanings, the agonies, of suffering thousands and tens of thousands of sick and perishing people, sinking annually into the abyss.

All through the earlier half of the nineteenth century, in fact, London, the great metropolis, was left to evolve itself so far as regarded the public health and sanitary condition of the people.

The tremendous import of such deliberate inaction by Parliament, and by successive Governments, is even now only partly comprehended. But the nemesis has been truly a terrible one. The injury wrought was in many ways irreparable, and we are still reaping the crop of evil sown by such seed—are still far from the end of the appalling consequences such a disastrous policy has entailed.