

Book review

Malpass, P. & Whitfield, M., 2015. *Public Health in Victorian Bristol: the work of David Davies, Medical Officer of Health* (Bristol, Avon Local History & Archaeology Books 19, 2015). 43pp., 10ill. Cardcovers, £3.50.

This is the first booklet written jointly by these two seasoned contributors to the Avon Local History and Archaeology. Michael Whitfield, who has retired from being an academic General Practitioner has written three previous pamphlets on doctors in Bristol and Peter Malpass, as professor of housing and urban studies and written two on the fabric of the city. As might be expected this is a well referenced work, drawn from local reports, newspapers and other sources and covers both the medical actions of Bristol's first Medical Officer and his [lack of] action on improving housing.

In the 1840's Bristol was claimed to be one of the unhealthiest cities in the country. Fortunately the development of safe drinking water with the Bristol Water Company in the 1840's and the start of Sewer building in the 1850's set the path for an improvement in health. David Davies grew up in Wales and his first medical apprenticeship was there but he further trained in London and became house surgeon in Loughborough, where he met his future wife. He then set up his Trade in Bristol in about 1848. Here he developed his career until he became chairman of the local Medical association.

Bristol Corporation was not a council who expended money willingly. It had held out for 20 years in refusing to build a new Lunatic Asylum, until it was eventually built at Stapleton in 1865. They similarly did not appoint a Medical Officer of Health until a typhus epidemic had raged for over 6 months, when amidst mounting criticism they hurriedly agreed to create the post in 1865 and invited David Davies who accepted it immediately.

Dr Davies believed the germ theory of disease, which was not fully accepted in medical practice. Though some of his repertoire of treatments may have been lethal he worked mainly with isolation of ill people, disinfecting properties, and stopping contaminated sources. The booklet details the effect of his work on Cholera, Typhus, Scarlet fever, Typhoid and Measles – some of the cases described illustrate well the obstacles he faced and how controlling he could be. He was pleased to declare that by 1883 Bristol had the lowest mortality rates of the 28 largest towns of England.

The second half of the book considers Dr Davies' lack of action in reforming the slum housing of Bristol. Councils had been given permissive powers to demolish insanitary housing, but Dr Davies' did not use these powers to further improve the lot of the poor, despite expensive pressure to do so. It is clear he had limited expertise in this area, but it also seems that he probably knew his masters, and knew it not wise to engage the council with taking on the housing stock.

This is one of few studies of the work of a Victorian medical officer of health and gives a good insight into conditions at the time. A dry but interesting and informative read.

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