

DR JOHN STOPFORD TAYLOR, MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH FOR LIVERPOOL, 1877-1893: POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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John Stopford Taylor was born in 1821 in Sheffield. He trained in Sheffield and at St Bartholemew's Hospital in London. He gained his MD from Aberdeen University in 1853. He began medical practice in Liverpool in 1846, working as honorary Medical Officer to St Anne's Dispensary and to the Eye and Ear Hospital.

Stopford Taylor played an active part in Liverpool politics from 1864, when he was elected as a Conservative Councillor. He served as Deputy and Chair of the Council's Health Committee, while his predecessor Dr Trench was Medical Officer of Health. He was accused during this period by *Porcupine*, a satirical Liverpool magazine, of bullying Trench through the Health Committee. He was made an Alderman of Liverpool in 1875, but in the same year he resigned his council seat when he was appointed as a Deputy MOH. After two years as his deputy, Stopford Taylor replaced Trench as MOH, a post he then held for the next sixteen years.

This period witnessed a consolidation in public health progress in Liverpool. National legislation imposed tighter control on buildings and sanitary services, while allowing for the expansion of other public health activities such as public baths and wash-houses and related municipal ventures. By 1892 Liverpool had finally secured a sufficient and safe water supply from the Vrynwy reservoir in North Wales. There was also an ambitious programme of slum clearance and new housing. The Council employed more public health staff, including a Borough Analyst from 1872 (to sample food and drink) and health visitors were appointed from 1897. This sustained period of sanitary reform contributed to a reduction in epidemic infectious diseases such as cholera, typhus and typhoid, and an increase in life expectancy in Liverpool. All this was achieved within a rapidly expanding urban population (from 443,938 in 1861 to 856,483 in 1931).

There was also a fundamental shift in public health ideology during this

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period, from a miasmatic belief of disease causation to the practical application of the new germ theory of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch from the mid-1880s. Stopford Taylor's era straddles these two approaches, and his work highlights some of the controversies around the causation of disease in late nineteenth-century Britain.

Infectious diseases in Liverpool, especially the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1847, had been instrumental in establishing a public health function within the City Council. However, the personal beliefs of the Medical Officers of Health played a large part in the adoption or ignorance of specific policies. Trench for example, as discussed by Rita Scott in her paper, believed that indigence was mainly responsible for typhus.¹ He therefore refused to sanction the provision of municipal isolation hospitals, which he felt would be an unnecessary and counter-productive measure. He judged that the Poor Law authorities should provide for such patients. This professional view pleased the Council, who were reluctant to invest in such facilities. Stopford Taylor, on the other hand, believed that the local authority had a responsibility to provide infectious disease hospital accommodation as a wider measure to protect the community. He thus advised the Council to reverse Trench's policy, and castigated them in his annual reports for their failure to take his professional advice. The matter was taken out of local hands in 1894, when a Local Government Board investigation ordered Liverpool City Council to build an isolation hospital. Facilities were subsequently made available at Netherfield Road Hospital, before the construction in 1907 of Fazakerley Hospital and sanatorium.

The politicisation of public health becomes most apparent at the time of the change in government in 1893 from Conservative to Liberal. Stopford Taylor found that the simultaneous shift in power in Liverpool made his position as MOH virtually untenable. Shortly after the change in leadership, he was required by the Council to resign his post 'having regard to advancing years and increasing duties'. He was seventy-two, and undoubtedly the workload of the MOH had increased considerably during his sixteen years in office, but the manner of his departure was unfortunate. He died in 1901 at the age of eighty.

1 Rita Scott, 'Dr William Stewart Trench, Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool, 1863-1876', in this issue of *Medical Historian*, 13(2003), 12-21. Indigence was a commonly used term in the nineteenth century for poverty, especially self-inflicted poverty.