

From this period may be said to date that great social and sanitary movement which has tended so largely to ameliorate the moral as well as the physical condition of the people of this island, and which forms one of the most prominent features of the Queen's reign.

The Poor-law commissioners were directed to report upon the condition of the laboring classes: and the direct evidence of much preventible disease, which the record of disease and death furnished from all parts of the country, formed the basis on which the commission founded their recommendations...

The general conclusions at which the Poor-law commissioners arrived in their report on the condition of the working classes were that disease originating in or propagated by means of decomposing refuse and other filth, and damp, close, and overcrowded dwellings, prevailed generally among the working classes in all parts of the kingdom; and that while these disasters could be abated by improved sanitary conditions, they were not removed by high wages and abundant food, if sanitary conditions were absent. They also pointed out that owing to the defective water-supply cleanly habits were impossible.

In illustration of the loss caused to the nation by these preventible diseases, they mentioned that out of 43,000 widows and 112,000 destitute orphans relieved from the poor-rate, the greater number had lost their husbands or fathers from preventible diseases; and that the youthful population of either sex brought up in crowded unwholesome dwellings, and under the adverse circumstances described, were deficient in physical strength and moral conduct, and grew up improvident, reckless and intemperate, caring for nothing but sensual gratification.....

The commissioners then went on to

state the conditions required for improving the sanitary condition of the laboring classes.....The conclusions of the commissioners, and the general interest awakened in the subject led to various sanitary investigations, both by royal commissions and committees of the Houses of Parliament.....

The near approach of the cholera epidemic in 1848 led Parliament to the conclusion that: "Further and more effectual provision ought to be made for improving the sanitary condition of towns and populous places in England and Wales, and it is expedient that the supply of water to such towns and places, and the sewerage, drainage, cleansing, and paving thereof, should, as far as practicable, be placed under one and the same local management and control, subject to general supervision."

An Act was passed creating a General Board of Health. The main feature of this Act was that when the Registrar-General's returns showed that the number of deaths on an average of the preceding seven years exceeded 23 per 1,000, the General Board of Health were empowered to send an inspector to make a public inquiry as to the sewerage, drainage, water supply, burial grounds, number and sanitary condition of inhabitants, and local sanitary acts in force; also as to natural drainage areas, the existing local boundaries, and whether others might be advantageously adopted. The General Board were empowered to issue provisional orders, creating a system of local administration by means of local boards of health, consisting partly of municipal authorities, and partly of elected members. These local boards were empowered to appoint necessary officers, including medical officers of health, surveyors, and inspectors of nuisances.