

## Teaching Public Health to Nurses: the public health walk.

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The mouth of the Liverpool – Leeds Canal

### *Introduction*

Teaching matters relating to public health can be challenging for both the teacher and the student. The progress of epidemic diseases and the landmarks in public health history which stopped these diseases can appear dry and dusty. To enhance the experience of teaching these aspects of the nursing curriculum it is possible to use the built environment of the city to great effect. I have organised public health walks through the city to illustrate aspects of our city's history, to underline public health achievements and to advocate public health strategies for the future. The idea of a public health walk is not new. There has been one in Liverpool intermittently for many years. A book which outlines the stopping points on such a walk has been published<sup>1</sup>. The School of Tropical Medicine has organised walks to engage people attending conferences. The idea of organising walks to deliver the public health aspects of a nursing curriculum is however, relatively new. Liverpool has an unrivalled resource in its streets for illustrating public health issues and much of it is within walking distance.

The notion of a walk to deliver the curriculum has much to recommend it. At the most basic level, it is a healthy activity and allows students out of their stuffy classrooms and out into the fresh air. It is easy to engage student attention in this way. A walk around the familiar sites of a student's own town and the retelling of facts about the public health conditions in the Victorian period can leave students very impressed, and transforms the student's view of their own town.

The disadvantages of organising one of these walks are obvious. The weather for instance can be inclement and may ruin the attempt. In a down-town environment the noise and the traffic can be disruptive. With large groups especially, open air speaking with a background of traffic noise can be taxing on the voice and cause students to strain to hear. Another problem is that the public health walk requires that the student exercise some feat of imagination to conjure up the enormous problems of public health in the Victorian period. Currently Liverpool is in a period of very rapid modernisation and it is sometimes difficult to imagine the

unrelenting, grinding poverty in the same streets as the cranes are erecting shops which appeal to the wealthy and the privileged. One last problem with the walk as a teaching approach is that requires a high level of personal fitness as the walk is rather long and rather uphill.

### ***The Journey to the Walk.***

The walk itself involves taking students by coach into central Liverpool from the suburbs. This enables us to stop on the way to view items of historical interest. One of the first of these points must be the mouth of the Liverpool-Leeds Canal. This site could be regarded as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. Taking finished goods from Yorkshire to the coast and returning imported goods onto the hinterland sparked the industrial revolution and caused explosive growth in Liverpool's population. The opening of the canal is flanked by a huge tobacco and a tea warehouse. At this point evidence is read from the report of the Highway Committee in 1845<sup>2</sup> which details the appalling state of water supply in Liverpool. Verbatim accounts of the water shortages among the city's poor illustrate the simple but important necessity of a decent water system to the maintenance of the health of urban populations.

Reports are also read out relating to the dire predicament of the city's sewerage system in the 1840s. Many of these reports relate to the dumping of toilet waste into the canal<sup>3</sup>. All of the contemporary reports refer to the stench emanating from this part of town<sup>4</sup>. These streets were the epicentre of the cholera epidemics of the Victorian period, the last one of which cost some 1800 lives in 1866. It is easy to understand why, during the 1866 cholera outbreak the Medical Officer of Health referred to this area as the city's largest "fever district"<sup>5</sup>. From here students are driven to the Water Tower on Everton Brow. This structure is a tribute to the seriousness the Victorians took the problem of water supply.



This is a huge grade II listed building which stands overlooking the city and contained an enormous amount of clean water. It is only one of Liverpool's reservoirs, but is the most obvious because of its height and prominence. Here the source of Liverpool's water supply can be outlined and the problems and disputes which the expansion of Liverpool's water supplies caused.

### ***Stage One: the dock area***

After the students are deposited in the centre of the city, walk proper begins. The students are transported to Liverpool's Albert Dock, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Here the historic nature of Liverpool as a centre of world trade can be described and easily imagined. It is not difficult to believe that during this period a full forty per cent of the world's shipping went through Liverpool and during the early part of the Victorian period, this trade intimately and extensively involved the slave trade. From here it is a short walk to Paradise Street where sailors could easily be relieved of their wages in bars, pubs and brothels. Paradise Street was a stew of violence, crime and disease. At this point, extracts are read from the book 'Redburn' written by 'Moby Dick's' author Herman Melville<sup>6</sup>. As a thirteen year old boy Melville came to Liverpool in the late 1830's and spent six weeks here. He saw a woman and her three children die in the street from starvation.

The students are invited to reflect on the history of Liverpool's sexually transmitted service which was situated on Paradise Street until the 1970's and was known locally as the 'Seaman's Dispensary'. The proximity of the Seaman's Dispensary to the dock indicates how seriously this problem was taken. From Paradise Street it is a short walk the bottom of Duke Street. Some of the oldest merchants' houses in Liverpool are situated here marking the urgency of the merchants' need to oversee the collection and storage of goods after importation. These houses adjoin many Victorian warehouses. While proximity to the docks might have suited the wealthy merchant class at the start of Liverpool's growth, the development of the myriad social problems: the violence, the disease, the sheer smell forced those who could afford it to move uphill to a more ventilated part of the town. To reinforce the point about the extreme conditions and the lawlessness of the Paradise Street area, students are taken to view an old Bridewell Gaol which has now been converted to a café and bar where one can eat and drink in the very cells used to lock up the unruly citizens of the Victorian period. The Bridewell carries a plaque informing the reader that Charles Dickens spent a night as a special constable there in the 1840's.

Up the hill from the Bridewell the students are taken to Wolstenholme Square. This is one of the most ancient of Liverpool's squares and is clearly visible on maps of Liverpool in the 1760's. Though badly damaged in the war the elegance of the square can just be perceived. Of public health interest here is the venue of the Liverpool nightclub Cream. This club, an institution in the 1990's was the site of the first accident and emergency 'outreach' service to night clubbers employing a 'rave doctor' to take care of the young people who became ill as the result of taking ecstasy.

### ***Stage Two: the Seel Street area***

Around the corner from Wolstenholme Square is Seel Street. This is a good place to describe a number of diverse phenomena and events. The first is the problem of infectious diseases in Liverpool. One doctor writing in the 1830's put forward the notion that Liverpool would always have a high incidence of premature mortality despite its many advantages. Among these advantages was the proximity of the sea and of ventilation from the sea. Also, the fact that much of Liverpool is on hilly ground provided drainage. He theorised that the excess mortality in Liverpool was due to the high number of Irish people in the population. A short walk from here is Seel Street. Seel Street was the birthplace of Dr Duncan. He was appointed medical officer of health in Liverpool and was the first to hold this post in Britain. There is a society dedicated to public health still in existence in Liverpool called the Duncan Society. His birthplace is the site of a famous nurse's night club in Liverpool. Frequently many of the students have attended the night club, though it is rare that even regular attenders of the club notice the plaque on the wall dedicated to his memory.

Another stopping point just off Seel Street is an old pumping station which belonged to the Liverpool and Harrington Water Company. This was a source of Liverpool's water supply in the 1840's and tapped into a well in Berry Street close by. Liverpool at the time had water from two sources. The Liverpool and Harrington Company supplied water from springs and wells and the Bootle Water Company piped water down hollowed out elm trees to the City. In 1845 it was not uncommon for swathes of the most populated, and poorest parts of the city to receive a water supply for 30 minutes two or three times a week!<sup>7</sup> On the other side of Seel Street there exist Liverpool's last examples of back to back housing. These have recently been gentrified and are desirable homes. In the Victorian period they represented overcrowding and disease.

Seel Street opens on to Berry Street. On Berry Street hangs a Victorian wall plaque which marks out a stopping point of the Cycle Touring Club. This organisation hails back to the late Victorian period when a cycling craze swept the nation contributing to public fitness and female emancipation. Berry Street in turn leads toward upper Frederick Street. Upper Frederick Street takes us back to the 1832 cholera outbreak. Poor water supply, filthy streets, cess pits in the place of sewerage systems all conspired to spread the disease especially in the poorer areas. Kitty Wilkinson and her husband Tom allowed neighbours the use of their cellar to boil their laundry. As a public health measure this innovation, the first public wash house in the UK, has been rightly remembered by the citizens of Liverpool. A window dedicated to Mrs Wilkinson was put into a chapel of the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral which overlooks Upper Frederick Street.

### ***Stage Three: the Rodney Street area***

Walking up Duke Street to Rodney Street, the Anglican Cathedral rises on the right hand side. In the Oratory Building of the Cathedral stands a statue to a woman who played a key role in the history of nursing in Britain, even if her name is not widely known. Agnes Jones volunteered to work in the Brownlow Hill

Workhouse Infirmary in the mid 1860s. She was one of the first nurses to be trained in the St Thomas Hospital established by Florence Nightingales fund in 1860. One of the brightest of the schools students she was asked to come to Liverpool to head an experiment in bringing trained nurses to the inmates of the workhouse infirmary.

Along Rodney Street (Liverpool's "Harley Street") there can be found a plaque commemorating the life of Arthur Clough who was a relation of Miss Nightingale and acted as her sometime secretary. He penned the advice to junior doctors that:

- "Thou shalt not kill,
- But needst not strive,
- Officiously to keep alive"

Also on Rodney Street is the birthplace of William Gladstone who went on to become Prime Minister.

### ***Stage Four: the Georgian Area***

The Georgian Area represents the final stage of the health care walk. It is an area of outstanding architectural beauty and is a conservation area. The elegance and style of the area contrast sharply with that of the "fever district". Dr Trench in his 1866 report noted the inverse relationship between cholera incidence and geographical elevation. These houses overlook the city and the incidence of cholera , typhus and smallpox was low. It seems to be an iron law of public health that pestilence favours the lower orders disproportionately.

Apart from the grandeur of the houses there is a further item to observe. At the edge of the Georgian Area and at the very centre of the place where the Toxteth riots took place in 1981 there is a building which housed the Queens District Nursing Association. Although this building was erected in 1900, it houses a Liverpool institution which dates back to the 1850's, that is to say the first and oldest district nursing scheme in the world. This too was established under the direct influence of Florence Nightingale who advised local philanthropist on the scheme and established a lifelong friendship with him.



The Queens District Nursing Association

Close by this building is a monument to Florence Nightingale, one of only five in the country, which was established by public subscription in 1913, three years after her death.



At this point I usually take photographs of the students by the monument and email them later to anyone who wants one. At this point the walk is finished.



Florence Nightingale monument

### ***Conclusion***

The items on this list are not exhaustive. There are many many more sites of interest which could serve as the basis of many more walks relating to health. This is just one of many possible options.

Most conurbations will have just as many venues which could serve as the basis for similar tours, with minimal historical research. It is as enjoyable and invigorating a method of teaching and is possible to imagine and leaves students apple cheeked and rosy as well as informed and exercised.

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