

John Buck: Pioneer of Preventive Medicine and the Care of the Mentally Ill

by *Malcolm Elliott*

No other document brought more fundamental changes to life in the Victorian towns than Edwin Chadwick's report of 1842 into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population. Its immediate impact in legislative terms was relatively slight. No new machinery was created to put into effect the gospel of sanitary reform. This was partly due to a widespread dislike of the sort of bureaucratic control that Chadwick had imprinted on the administration of the New Poor Law, eight years earlier. A central body of three commissioners with Chadwick as their secretary was responsible for seeing that the harsh, deterrent philosophy of the Act of 1834 was put into effect. At the local level elected Guardians of the Poor were obliged to enforce its ruthless logic upon those unfortunate enough to be destitute.¹

Nevertheless, it was onto this uniform and ubiquitous pattern of local poor law authorities that Chadwick expected to graft his sanitary revolution. The logic of reducing poor law expenditure by removing the causes of disease and death among breadwinners had been the starting point of the enquiry that led to the Report of 1842. Not surprisingly then, it was the poor law authorities who should carry out the formula for improving the health of towns and the first parliamentary measure to this end was the Nuisance Removal Act of 1846. The act seems to have made little impression on most Boards of Guardians. They were in general loth to venture outside the field of poor relief, but in Leicester and in Nottingham the Act was adopted by the town councils and in both places Sanitary Committees were appointed to carry it out.

Leicester had had an Inspector of Nuisances since 1836 when Frederick Goodyer, the Chief of Police, agreed to use his force to report cases of anti-social behaviour, such as obstruction of the highway, to the Corporation. When Goodyer became head of the new county force, his work as Inspector of Nuisances fell on the shoulders of George Bown, one of the town's veteran radicals who had been arrested at the onset of the French Revolution in 1794.² Following the passage of the Nuisance Removal Act of 1846, Bown submitted a number of specific health hazards which called for immediate remedy. Each of these cases was accompanied by a certificate, confirming the nuisance, signed by two doctors. Bown added the observation that if some means could be found to remunerate the medical men for their trouble, the act might be brought into more effectual operation. Shortly afterwards, in October 1846, Mr John Buck and Dr John Barclay were appointed as Medical Officers to the Corporation for an annual sum of 20 guineas each.³

John Buck was thus one of the first ever Medical Officers of Health in Britain, though the title was not used in Leicester till after the Public Health Act of 1848. W. H. Duncan

1. For the general background see the introduction to Malcolm Elliott, *Victorian Leicester*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1979
2. Elliott 1979, as n.1, p.47
3. Elliott 1979, as n.1, p.48

of Liverpool was the first to be given the precise designation, although he did not assume such an active role as did the two men in Leicester. According to Royston Lambert, the biographer of Sir John Simon, Duncan was 'content with the mere tabulation of statistics'.⁴ No such charge could be levelled at Barclay and Buck. Their first report in February 1847 not only detailed the sort of nuisance described by Bown but argued the vital importance of a proper system of drainage and proposed five new bye-laws to overcome the most obvious dangers to public health. These were to prevent the keeping of pigs within 30 feet of any human dwelling; to prohibit the collection of nightsoil within yards in the borough; to enforce periodic emptying of cesspools and privy-holes; to require proper formation of drains in new streets and to ensure that drains had properly-fitted stench traps.⁵ All these measures like Chadwick's own investigations and reports, were based on a belief in the theory that disease was a consequence of atmospheric pollution—the so called pythogenic or miasmatic theory.

After the passage of the Public Health Act in 1848 Leicester became one of the first towns to seek its adoption. Samuel Stone, the Town Clerk, asked the General Board of Health in London to approve the appointment of Buck as Medical Officer of Health but he met with the mild rebuke that this was 'premature' as the General Board had not yet prescribed the relevant duties. It was the beginning of a sad saga of deteriorating relations between the General Board and the authorities in Leicester.⁶

We know little about John Buck's early life. He was born in 1816, trained in London, and came to Leicester in his early twenties as an assistant to Dr Macaulay, a cousin of the historian. Macaulay was one of the doctors who acted as a Medical Officer to the Poor Law Board and it was doubtless through assisting in this aspect of his work that Buck became interested in public health. Buck began his duties as Medical Officer of Health in July 1849 when he was thirty years old at a salary of £100 a year. The post was not a full-time appointment and did not become so till 1880, but it is hard to imagine that Buck or his successors had time for much private practice.

The whole question of public health was given prominence and immediacy at the time by the threat of cholera which killed about 55,000 in the epidemic of 1848-49. Leicester had escaped the earlier visitation of 1832 and Buck was able to report that once again 'not a single death' had occurred in the borough.⁷ In his second report in December 1849, he again expressed his relief at the town's immunity. He did not claim that environmental measures were responsible for this deliverance, but he implied this by proceeding to list the returns of complaints for which notices of entry and examination had been made during the year from October 1848 to October 1849. The list is a fair indication of the volume and nature of Buck's activity:

For foul and offensive and badly constructed privies and soil pits	814
Filthy dwelling houses	443
Swine keeping	278
Foul and offensive drains	90
Foul cesspools and ditches	29
Various undescribed nuisances	35

4. Royston Lambert, *Sir John Simon, 1816-1904, and English social administration*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963, pp.113-14

5. Elliott 1979, as n.1, p.50

6. Elliott 1979, as n.1, p.56. See also A. S. Wohl, *Endangered lives: public health in Victorian Britain*. London: Dent, 1983, chap. 7

7. LRO: Leicester Corporation Records, CM1/5. Council Minutes (9 Nov. 1847-20 Mar. 1850), 5 Sep. 1849

465 of the above had been summoned before the magistrates.⁸ It was several years before the town was to enjoy an effective sewerage system and in consequence the profusion of open cesspools, 3,500 of them, were a matter of active concern: 'This acre and a quarter of percolating and evaporating filth is indeed a black item in one Sanitary debtor account and is one which we must strive greatly to diminish until we accomplish their entire abolition.'⁹ Some idea of the noisome smell and unsightly appearance of the town can be gauged by his description of open sewers at the side of Belgrave Road opposite the place where St Mark's church now stands. Buck described the method of cleaning these: 'The custom hitherto has been to spread the mud and filth of which the bottom of these ditches consists on the neighbouring banks, a procedure which is fraught with great danger to the health of persons in the neighbourhood'. He advised that the contents should be 'at once lifted into proper carts and conveyed away to the common depot'.¹⁰

Equally important as defective drainage was the lack of a proper water supply for the town. Buck described a yard in Sanvey Gate where 'the wretched inhabitants of this really extensive property possess few means of cleaning their persons, their dwelling houses or their yards, as they have now no right to any water of any kind'.¹¹ With regard to public baths, the Town Council had concluded a deal with J. P. Clarke, a cotton-reel manufacturer who had private baths on New Walk, for their being made open to the public at a penny, which included the cost of a clean towel. Buck evidently felt the need to exercise some more control over the baths and suggested that they should come under the Highways and Sewerage Committee rather than the Town Improvement Committee.¹²

Buck constantly pressed on the council the need for municipal action in other spheres also. A public slaughter house to replace the multiplicity of back-yard abattoirs was much needed but did not materialise until the coming of the new cattle market in 1872. Buck noted with relief in December 1849 that Leicester had recently escaped an influx of 'gut dressers or sausage envelope manufacturers . . . from the Surrey side of the metropolis'.¹³ Some indication of why he was so relieved at their departure is given by the following description of the process of gut-cleansing carried on by a Mr Hill in Wood street, where Charles Keene College now stands. 'The trade', wrote John Moore in 1859, 'consists of placing animal intestines in cold water until such an amount of decomposition takes place as to enable them with a piece of wood to scrape off the interior layer and with it the foecal matter: The intestines when received are frequently in an offensive state, so much so as to be complained of by persons as they are passing along the street, the maceration to produce decomposition, is necessarily the same and the process of scraping, with the refuse from it, and the after preparation of the gut are all calculated to augment the nuisance'.¹⁴

Perhaps the most important concern of the council after provision of sewerage and water was the control of housing. Overcrowding was not in general a problem in Leicester since, as all the contemporary reports point out, the town occupied a relatively large area for its number of inhabitants. Nevertheless there were occasional back-to-backs with no means of through ventilation and Buck was already urging the Board to prohibit

8. CM1/5, as n.7, 20 Dec. 1849

9. CM1/5, as n.7, 20 Dec. 1849

10. LRO: Leicester Corporation Records, CM22/1. Highways and Sewerage Committee Minutes (13 Aug. 1849–17 Apr. 1850), 14 Sep. 1849

11. LRO: Leicester Corporation Records, CM22/2. Highways and Sewerage Committee Minutes (24 Apr. 1850–18 Jun. 1851), 24 Apr. 1850

12. CM22/2, as n.11, 3 Jul. 1850

13. CM1/5, as n.7, 20 Dec. 1849

14. LRO: Leicester Corporation Records, CM22/13. Highways and Sewerage Committee Minutes (1 Apr.–11 Nov. 1859), 26 Aug. 1859

their erection in 1851. He suggested that a regulation be introduced 'requiring that no houses be built back-to-back or without such means of ventilation as shall be satisfactory to the local Board'. The Board soon began to act on his advice and disallowed any such plans from the early 1850s. National legislation on the subject had to wait until 1909.¹⁵

It is clear that Buck's breadth of vision not only helped define the responsibilities of future Medical Officers of Health but also to an extent enlarged the role of the Council itself. But he was evidently an able and ambitious man for in June 1853 he resigned in order to take up the duties of Superintendent of the County Lunatic Asylum. Buck thus began an entirely new career in which again he left his imprint upon the institution in his charge. Fortunately, the records of the old County Asylum have survived almost intact. Among the volumes of annual reports and minutes of visitors is a handwritten notebook in which Buck recorded his observations.

In their history of the Asylum (then on the site now occupied by the university), Orme and Brock tell us that Buck received a starting salary of £200, twice what he had been paid for the onerous, if officially part-time, post of M.O.H. 'Buck's tenure', they write, 'coincided with a period when numbers began to rise very noticeably and when consequent building extensions were often made'.¹⁶ Buck did not simply watch over the extensions as the means to affording more room for patients but seized every opportunity to utilize additions and alterations to the building to provide a more humane and pleasant environment. Aware of the need to improve the laundry facilities he suggested that the old laundry be turned into workshops for what might be called occupational therapy. Evidently he persuaded the Commissioners of Lunacy to his way of thinking and in October 1853 they wrote: 'that before expense is incurred in erecting any additional buildings, a comprehensive plan should be made to embrace not only the erection of a new Wash-house but also workshops, stewards office and rooms, Store Rooms, Bakehouses, Farm Buildings, and a Chapel'.¹⁷ Buck noted the progress of work on conversion of the old laundry in 1854 and the Chapel and Recreation Hall were completed in 1858.

Perhaps the dominant theme in the history of mental health care in the nineteenth century is the move away from physical restraint and harsh custodial treatment towards a more sympathetic understanding of the mentally sick. William Tuke's regime at the York Retreat spread gradually throughout the system and Buck was a keen advocate of more enlightened policies. In January 1854 he wrote: 'One of the first matters which engaged my attention was the abolition of mechanical restraint in the Asylum: this has been anticipated, and I am happy to say that all vestiges of such modes of coercion have for some months disappeared'.¹⁸

In March the same year he notes the gift of a piano from Mrs Simpson of Launde Abbey and immediately toys with the idea of raising 'a small brass-band amongst the attendants and patients'.¹⁹ By September the band had materialised and furnished 'music to which the

15. Elliott 1979, as n.1, pp.106-07; LRO: Leicester Corporation Records, CM22/3. Highways and Sewerage Committee Minutes, 16 Jul. 1851

16. H. G. Orme and W. H. Brock. *Leicestershire's Lunatics: the institutional care of Leicestershire's lunatics during the nineteenth century*, p.43. Publication 87, Leicester: Leicestershire Museums 1987. I wish to thank my daughter Rebecca Elliott for introducing me to this material which she used in a personal study, undertaken as part of her A-level history course at Wyggeston and Queen Elizabeth I College. I am also indebted to Mr P. Birkett, Divisional Manager at Carlton Hayes Hospital, for allowing me to consult the papers in his care. These papers, including Buck's notebook, mentioned above, have now been transferred to the Leicestershire Record Office (DE 3533), but remain unsorted.

17. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 10 Jan. 1854

18. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 10 Jan. 1854

19. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 9 May 1854

patients frequently dance with evident enjoyment'.²⁰ The following January he recorded that the band now numbered nine performers and 'contributes very materially to the general cheerfulness'. Buck also noted that on these occasions 'it has been the custom with certain limitations to associate both sexes and in my judgement with the best possible results'.²¹ Trips outside the Asylum were encouraged. 'Frequent excursions', wrote Buck in January 1855, 'have been made by [patients] in parties of from ten to twenty accompanied by their attendants into the neighbouring villages and the more accessible portions of Leicester Forest'.²² In August the following year he noted that: 'eleven of the male patients went to London by the special train and spent four hours in the Crystal Palace and returned to the Asylum in comfort and security'. He also notes that: 'sixteen female patients [had been] to Bradgate park accompanied by the matron, three of the ladies of the independent class, the servants employed in the laundry and two of the kitchen servants'.²³

Orme and Brock note two other respects, apart from his belief in occupational therapy, in which Buck's tenure of office represented a precedent for the Asylum. It was in 1863 that an official locum was appointed to allow him leave of absence for three months after ten years' 'official residence in the asylum'. This was the first time such an appointment was mentioned in the records.²⁴ The other precedent was the creation of a full-time Assistant Medical Officer. This was a post that Buck apparently resisted for some years, only agreeing to it on condition that he had a separate residence built for himself in the grounds. Thus it was in 1872 that he moved into his new home alongside the Asylum in the building that currently houses the University Chaplaincy, the Careers Office and the Urban History Centre.²⁵

John Buck died on 29 December 1880 aged 64, after twenty-seven years at the Asylum. The Chairman of the Visitors, Henry St John Halford, paid tribute to the improvements in the general treatment of patients and the management of the institution for which he had been responsible: 'These were recognised time after time in the reports of Lunacy Commissioners at their periodical visitations, and it cannot be denied that the high reputation that the asylum has for many years past borne amongst kindred institutions was owing in great degree to the management of the deceased superintendent'.²⁶ According to Orme and Brock, Buck had become increasingly immersed in management details and administrative policy in his later years, though even as late as 1873 he was pressing the desirability of such novel therapeutic methods as turkish baths for his patients.²⁷ It is hardly surprising that the revolutionary zeal of his earlier years dimmed somewhat and, in viewing his career as a whole, one cannot escape a sense of anticlimax. If he had stayed in the field of public health he might have contributed more materially to its progressive development, perhaps by moving to a larger and more important town. Instead he chose, at a crucial point in his life, to devote his energy and talents to what was inevitably a more limited and unpublicised sphere of action. Nevertheless, if we view his life as a whole, there can be few people who contributed so much to the welfare and happiness of his fellow citizens as did John Buck.

20. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 11 Sep. 1854

21. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 1 Jan. 1855

22. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 1 Jan. 1855

23. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 11 Aug. 1856

24. Orme and Brock 1987, as n.16, p.44

25. Orme and Brock 1987, as n.16, p.44

26. Minutes of the Visitors, Jan. 1881

27. Buck's notebook, as n.16, 29 Jan. 1874