

Resources

120 YEARS AGO AUGUST 1893

Floating protection

Fear of infectious disease in the 19th century led to the use of ships as isolation hospitals. Roy Kaye explains

Exactly 120 years ago, on 11 August 1893, in a modest civic ceremony, Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority unveiled its latest, state-of-the-art, health protection measure. Moored in the river Humber, the *Earl of Marr and Kellie*, a retired Dundee whaler, had cost £3,600 and accommodated 20 cholera patients.

In 1832, 276 people from a local population of 56,000 had died during Britain's first large epidemic of Asiatic cholera. This had caused widespread panic across the country. The authority asked the government to provide a hulk to act as a hospital.

Instead, the government sent a 42-gun frigate, HMS *Salette*. A quarantine station was set up off the Lincolnshire Humber Bank and HMS *Salette* was used to 'persuade' unhelpful ships' captains to submit to inspection. A steam tugboat, *Messenger*, towed the ships to the station.

In July 1849, cholera again visited Hull, causing the deaths of 1,860 people, or one-in-43 of the population of about 80,000. Some thought that cholera was caused by an invisible gas associated with decaying matter (the 'miasma' theory), while others believed that 'contagion' caused it. It was not until 1882 that Robert Koch discovered the bacterium that caused the disease.

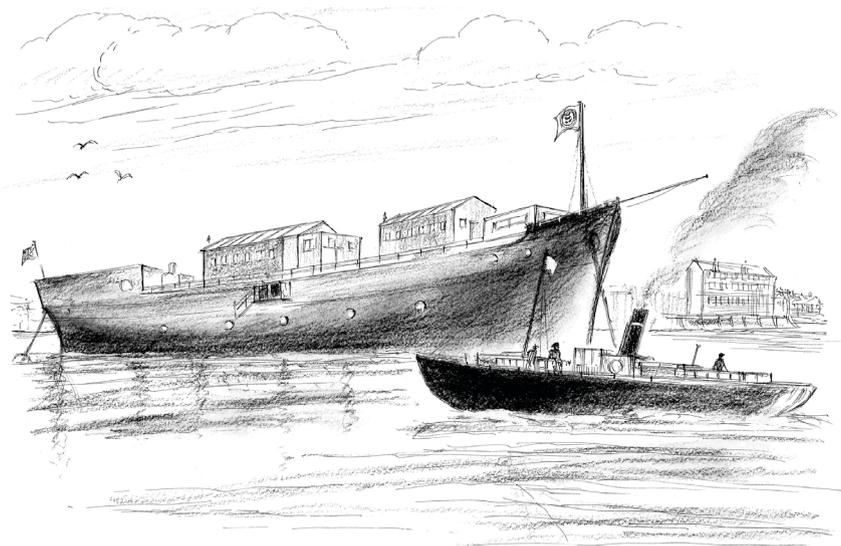
Before the hospital ship, cholera-infected emigrants had been treated in a small hospital, the Garrison Hospital, but because it contained smallpox patients, it could not now be used for cholera victims.

A cholera epidemic in Egypt in 1883 caused alarm and the Port Sanitary Authority tried to purchase an old warship from the government to act as a hospital ship. But the asking price of £9,000 to £10,000 caused a rethink.

By 1892, it had been decided to purchase and convert an old whaler, the *Earl of Marr and Kellie*, instead. The middle deck was removed and deck houses erected. This made a large airy ward in the centre of the ship. There was

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Sketch of the Earl of Marr and Kellie by Bertram Hammond



a gallery, a heating and disinfecting stove and bathing facilities. A steam launch, the *Harter*, was also purchased to visit arriving ships, many carrying Jewish and other emigrants.

In 1893, there were 46,553 emigrants. In this year, eight virulent cases of cholera were found on ships from Hamburg. Infected patients were taken to the floating hospital using the launch.

The hospital ship was moored in the middle of the Humber, between William Wright Dock and New Holland Pier. A full civic ceremony was arranged for the launch. The Lord Mayor of Hull flew his flag as Admiral of the Humber and the Commodore of the Pilots supervised the anchoring. In 1894, floating ice in the river made it necessary to move the ship into a dock to avoid damage.

The staff of the ship comprised the master and his wife (he had been a total abstainer from drink for two years), a mate and a matron. The master was paid two guineas a week whilst he was on board, reducing

to 30 shillings week when patients were present – less because food was provided (the fact that he could have contracted cholera and died does not seem to have entered his employer's calculations).

The hospital ship was a constant drain on resources, due to the need for repairs. It was advertised for sale in 1901, and eventually sold for £400 and replaced by a new infectious disease hospital, the Evan Fraser Memorial Hospital, named after the chairman of the Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority.

Many port sanitary authorities had floating hospitals. For example, in 1881 on the Thames, the Metropolitan Asylums Board installed a trio of smallpox hospital ships: HMS *Atlas*, an unused wooden man-o-war; HMS *Endymion*, a 50-gun frigate (which had been built at Hull) and the iron paddle steamer *Castalia*. They were moored at Deptford Creek near Greenwich. Over their 20 years' service, the London ships accommodated 20,000 smallpox sufferers. ■

Roy Kaye was the chief port health inspector of the Hull and Goole Port Health Authority

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