

# Plague of Icy Breath. Cholera and the Gateshead Community 1831–1832\*

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## Summary

The impact of cholera epidemics on communities around the world during the 19th century has generated a vast array of resources for the medical historian. However, the more readily available testimonies of doctors and local boards of health dominate the literature, whilst our understanding of the experience of individuals, particularly the destitute victims of cholera and their families, is sparse. This article analyses a collection of unpublished documents assembled by an antiquary, John Bell, from Gateshead, North-East England, in 1831–1832, in order to reconstruct the experience of the local community as they prepared themselves for the arrival of cholera and how they responded to its devastating effects. The paper concludes by examining the enduring changes prompted by the community reaction to the cholera outbreak of 1831–1832, including the establishment of the Gateshead Dispensary.

*Keywords: cholera; epidemic; Gateshead; dispensary movement*

## Introduction

The Pestilence is nearing  
To England's merry shore:  
A million ghosts appearing  
Beckon a thousand more.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning aptly communicates the nervous anticipation that abounded across England as cholera relentlessly extended its path

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1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1832, "The Pestilence" (McCarthy 1955).