

History repeats itself with virus lockdown

Alison Munro, author of *The Royal Burgh of Dornoch: A Brief History*, relates how cholera historically plunged Dornoch into lockdown

DORNOCH is currently in lockdown along with the rest of the country as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but we have been here before.

Almost 200 years ago, the town faced a similar crisis and reacted in a similar way, cancelling events and barring access to the area.

That was in 1832 and the lockdown at that time was because of a deadly outbreak of cholera which killed 6000 people in Scotland.

A highly infectious illness, cholera affects the small intestine and is caused by eating food or drinking water contaminated with a bacterium called vibrio cholerae.

Sufferers lose body fluids through diarrhoea and vomiting, leading to severe dehydration and, in some cases, death within a few hours if untreated.

Epidemics spring up quickly, especially in areas where water and sewage systems are primitive or non-existent.

In 1832, it swept in from India, through the Continent and into England and then Scotland.

Very little was known at the time about the causes of cholera. People believed you could catch it from a foul-smelling vapour or miasma, like the steamy stench that hangs around manure heaps.

Public health officials were paid to rid towns of bad smells – they cleared dung



An infant lay grovelling on the body of its mother, wailing feebly.

hills, cleaned and white-washed houses and tied up wandering animals.

In Dornoch, the town council took urgent steps to reduce the risk of infection. Quicklime was used to cleanse houses of infections.

Bedding and clothing of those killed by cholera were burnt and furniture removed from the homes of sufferers, with homes quarantined for 10 days, according to accounts.

Access to the town was restricted and guards were posted to prevent the entry of anyone from infected areas. The town's St Barr's Fair was cancelled.

Anyone caught trying to enter would be taken before the nearest magistrate and dealt with according to the law.

The council also ordered "all pigsties, ashpits and manure of every description be removed from within the Burgh against Wednesday next under certification that any quantity of manure found after that date will become confiscated to the Burgh as public property".

Dornoch's isolation and lack of a harbour probably did more than anything else to save it from infection. Sadly, nearby villages with busy fishing fleets fared less well.

In July 1832 there was

a severe outbreak in Helmsdale, 30 miles away. It was brought by a boat from Edinburgh and quickly spread to other small ports.

In Portmahomack, one fifth of the population died, and in its neighbouring village of Inver, nearly half the villagers died within two days.

The Cromarty stonemason and writer,



A cholera guard drawn by artist Sally Wild.

Hugh Miller, described a typical but no less heartbreaking scene.

He wrote: "Whole families were found lying dead on their cottage floors."

"In one instance an infant, the only survivor, lay grovelling on the body of its mother, wailing feebly among the dead."

"Two young persons, a

lad and his sister, were seen digging a grave for their father in the churchyard of Nigg, and then carrying the corpse to it on a cart, no one venturing to assist them."

As far as we know there were no cholera deaths in Dornoch so the measures clearly worked.

The guards were soon back at work and no doubt the dung hills reappeared in the streets once again!

A small enclosure at the town's boundary, on a little hill at Earl's Cross Road, close to the Royal Dornoch Golf Club, was used as a burying ground for those thought to have cholera.

Only one stone remains dated 1833 and known as the Cholera Grave. It marks the spot where a man thought to have the disease is buried, although it is not known if he actually carried the disease.

The inscription on the gravestone is unreadable now, but an information board reveals that "eminent (sic) medical men" suggested cholera was not the cause of the unfortunate man's death.

■ This article was initially written by Alison Munro for inclusion in a Dornoch heritage walking trails booklet under production by volunteers the town's museum, Historylinks.



The Cholera Grave on the boundary of Dornoch.

Selling or Renting Property?



Lockdown 2020: Dornoch town square, normally bustling at this time of year, lies empty.