

ROLE OF INSPECTOR OF NUISANCES

Although laws have existed since the days of Edward II and Richard II penalising those who sold spoiled meat or contaminated water courses, it was an Act for the improvement of towns passed in 1847 which made provision for the appointment of inspectors of nuisances, and this was further enforced by the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Acts, 1848 & 1849.

A paper in 1871, entitled the *Training, Qualification and Duties of Nuisance Inspectors* (which would have just been familiar with urban inspectors at that time) suggested that the inspectors should have either been vaccinated against (smallpox) or experienced many of the diseases they were likely to encounter (including scarlet fever, measles, maculated typhus, and ideally enteric fever), to provide them with some immunity. It stated the Inspector '*should be largely endued with good health and the natural courage arising from good digestive powers*'. Among the skills the author thought was needed was '*a great deal of human nature*', acquiring the confidence and respect of the local clergy and ministers, the relieving officers, and the district's doctors. '*He should make himself acquainted with the owners of all the small tenements... and their character. His eye should watch every doctor's carriage, every closed shutter, every funeral procession. In friendly conversation with people, he should find out all that is going on*' but '*not waste his time in listening to the querulous statements of rich old maiden ladies who think they perceive "a smell"*'.¹

In addition to these people skill, the author opined that the inspector should '*thoroughly understand the construction of a good eject or gas-trap; the management of a heat disinfecting apparatus; the nature and application of disinfectants..... and acquainted with.... The mode of propagation of the principal zymotics and be thoroughly acquainted with all the sewers and drains*'.²

It was the Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875 that also required the appointment of rural inspectors. England & Wales were divided into urban or rural sanitary districts. Urban districts were controlled by the Council officials or the Local Board. Rural districts were under the authority of the guardians of the unions. In addition to the inspectors of nuisances the sanitary authorities also appointed professionally qualified medical officers of health (who could direct the actions of the inspector of nuisances when thought necessary), and the urban districts could also employ a surveyor. The responsibilities of the inspector of nuisances, as laid out by the 1875 Act (which would have been pertinent at the time Henry Portsmouth was in this role), are summarised in a contemporary publication: *A Practical Guide for Inspectors of Nuisances*.²

- Attend Sanitary Authority meetings, reporting nuisances found, requesting instructions and results of inquiries made into reported nuisances, and any difficulties encountered.
- By regular inspection, keep himself informed of the any nuisances existing in the district. Choosing when to visit could be important (e.g.: slaughterhouses on killing days, checking for proper receptacles for offal, manure, garbage and its correct disposal, and channels for blood off-run).
- When informed of a new potential nuisance, visit the site and make enquiries. This often related to water supply, sewage, offensive smells, damp cottages, ashpits and manure heaps, offensive animals. Some discretion was required in disputes between neighbours or with landlords, to determine whether the issue was the responsibility of the Authority.
- Report to the Authority any '*noxious or offensive businesses, trades of manufactories*', and any breaches or non-observance of the Act's regulations or local bye-laws. This could include smells, smoke, potential of causing fires or explosions, and also, if they have damaged or

polluted the water supply used for domestic water, or are wasting water. There was much concern that improperly fitted sanitary ware (without correctly installed traps) could lead to cross contamination of drinking water with waste water and sewage gas, thus causing diphtheria.

- To inspect, from time to time or after complaint, any premises where food is kept or used for the sale of meat, fish, poultry, vegetables, corn, bread, flour or milk. Also, if used as a slaughterhouse; and to examine the fitness for human consumption of these foodstuffs (if spoilt, or infested with parasites etc.). He could seize suspicious items, and report them for further investigation to the medical officer of health.
- When directed by the Sanitary Authority, procure and submit foodstuffs and drugs for testing for adulteration, correct weights or measures, etc.
- Inform the medical officer of health of occurrence of contagious or infectious diseases, of domestic overcrowding, or other nuisance which could damage health. Also, follow instructions of the medical officer of health to implement measure to prevent the spread of diseases, including smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, cholera and influenza; and remedial actions could involve vaccination, disinfection, destruction of bedding and clothing, improved ventilation, etc.
- Keep records, for the Sanitary Authority (in a book provided by them), of the details of inspections made, and actions taken, and any other records required. These included forms used to serve notices, and their counterfoils, account books for petty cash and expenses. These records had to be readily available when requested by the medical officer of health, to assist him with enquiries.
- As directed by the Sanitary Authority, superintend and see to the execution of any works required for the suppression or removal of the nuisances. This could involve laying of drains and sewers, drainage and damp courses to prevent dampness in cottages, sanitary work (water/earth closets), improving water supplies, knowledge of various disinfectants, etc.

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¹ Davies, David, MRCS (Inspector of Health for Bristol), The Training, Qualifications and Duties, of Nuisance Inspectors, *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 567, 11 Nov 1871 (accessed via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25230755>)

² Wilson, Frederick Richard A *Practical Guide for Inspectors of Nuisances*, William Clowes & Sons, Ltd 1881, accessed via Google Books.