

## Why were Victorian cities so unhealthy?

### Today I will practise:

- Identifying different types of **consequences** (effects) of Victorian living conditions
- **Teamwork skills:** working well as a member of a group

### Parliamentary enquiry into Public Health, Leeds, 1845

You are James Smith's teams of men who must go out into Leeds to research Public Health and Living Conditions. You must go out into Leeds to interview men about how and where they live. The point of the enquiry is to get something done about the terrible living conditions of many people who live in Leeds.

*How will you ensure that something is done? What will you do to make sure that the report is shocking – so shocking that Parliament will be forced to take action?*

**Task:** In groups of four, you will write and then conduct interviews of people living in Leeds. In your groups, you will have:

- **An interviewer**
- **3 'interviewees' living in poor parts of Leeds.**

Firstly, you will need to **write** 5 questions and answers for **each of the three interviewees**. You can then practice the interviews. Write the Questions in **two** books (so you can both have them in front of you). Remember to include:

- *Leading questions*
- *Shocking evidence*
- *Authentic language*

#### **The three interviewees**

- 1:** A man living in a back-to-back house
- 2:** A woman who shares drinking water and toilet facilities
- 3:** A chimney sweep who lost his family due to disease

You are interviewee **number 1**. You are a 33- year-old man called James Taylor who lives in a back-to-back house in Leeds. Use the information on this sheet to create five questions and answers to reveal how **awful your HOUSING is**. Remember the answers should be **shocking** and the questions should be **leading**!

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more people moved to towns and cities to find work. Houses were needed – and fast. The factory workers had to live as close as possible to their place of work. There were no cars, buses or bicycles and people started work at six o'clock in the morning. The houses of the labouring poor were therefore crowded together in narrow, terraced streets.



Some of these houses were well-built, but many were not. The builders often wanted to make a quick profit. The houses they put up were small, cheap and soon became very nasty. In the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there were no rules to make sure that houses were properly built. Many builders took advantage of this. Some of the worst houses were built in terraces which were joined to the row behind. We call these houses 'back-to-backs'.

In the 1850s, Edward Hall, a missionary who helped the poor people of Leeds, described what it was like to live in one of these houses:

*They are built with no possibility of ventilation. Cellars are used for storing coal and food. In the coal department there are often kept hens, rabbit and pigeons. The families do all their cooking, washing and other work in a room ten feet by fourteen feet. There is another room this size for sleeping.*

In the middle of towns, land was very expensive and builders squeezed in as many houses as they could. Many poorer houses in Leeds were built around **yards**. These were entered by a narrow alley from a street:

*By far the most unhealthy places of Leeds are yards. Some of these are airless from the enclosed structure. They are unprovided with any form of drainage or convenience [toilet] or arrangements for cleansing and are one mass of damp and filth. The ashes, garbage and filth of all kinds are thrown from the doors and windows of the houses upon the streets.*

Some of the poorest people in Leeds could not even afford to rent a back-to-back house in a yard. Instead, they crowded below ground in the cellars of other people's houses. Robert Backer, a surgeon, described the cellar dwellings he visited in the 1830s:

*Every drop of wet and every bit of dirt have to be carried up into the street. There are two beds covered in sacks for five people. There is hardly anything to sit on but a stool and a few bricks. The floor is wet in many places and a pig is kept in the corner.*

You are interviewee **number 2**. You are a twenty-nine year old woman called Kate West who lives in a poor district of Leeds. Use the information on this sheet to create five questions and answers to reveal how **awful your WATER SUPPLY and TOILETS are**. Remember the answers should be **shocking** and the questions should be **leading**!

Today, we take clean water for granted. Local councils make sure that new houses have piped water, drains and sewers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this did not happen. It took years for councils to accept that it was their job. And the builders just wanted to put up houses quickly. Very few people had clean water piped to their houses.

- Some people queued for water at stand-pipes in the street and carried it home in buckets, pans and kettles
- Some bought clean water from water-sellers
- Some collected rainwater in barrels
- Some carried it in buckets from the river.



**What they did not know was that dirty water could kill them.**

Most streets in Leeds were built without drains to take away waste water. Poorer houses were built on boggy land by the river where it was hard to lay pipes. In the poorer districts, pools of stinking water filled the yards and alleys. This is what Robert Baker wrote when he visited the house of a poor Leeds man:

*He has very bad health and his wife has rheumatism. The water in front of the house has collected from various sources. The yard has never been dry. There is a sump-hole, of very great depth in one corner, made by the landlord, to take away the water, but it is full of rubbish. The stench is often so bad that he and his wife cannot bear it.*

The terrible smells came not only from waste water but also from the **privies** (toilets) which poor families shared. This is how one observer described the Leeds privies in 1845:

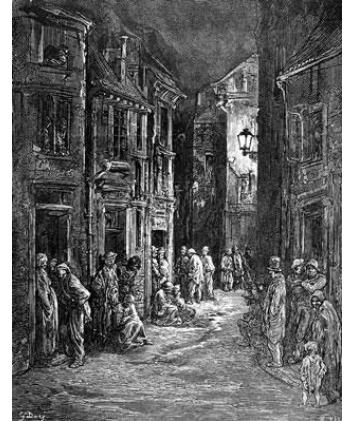
*The privies are few in proportion to the number of inhabitants. They are open to view in front and rear and are inevitably in a filthy condition. They often remain without any removal of the filth for six months.*

The privies were not connected to sewers. Instead, the sewage collected in cesspits under the ground. From time to time night-soilmen cleaned out the cesspits. But some landlords did not like to pay night-soilmen and cesspits were left to overflow, getting into the water supply.



You are **interviewee number 3**. You are a 13-year-old chimney sweep called Stuart Kirk who lives in a small cul-de-sac called Blue Bell Fold in Leeds. Use the information on this sheet to create five questions and answers to reveal how **awful DISEASE is and how it has affected your FAMILY**. Remember answers should be **shocking** and questions should be **leading**!

Blue Bell Fold was a small cul-de-sac of twenty houses in one of the poorer parts of Leeds. The houses were built next to a stinking stream which flowed into the River Aire. On 26 May 1832, a two-year-old child who lived in one of the houses suddenly began to vomit and have diarrhoea. Within a few hours, the child's body had turned a blue-black colour. The eyes sank into the head. The skin went cold. Family and neighbours watched in horror as the child struggled for breath and died.



The child from Blue Bell Fold was the first recorded person in Leeds to die during the terrifying cholera epidemic which hit the city in the summer of 1832. Within a few months, over seven hundred people had died of the disease.

In 1831 and 1832, Britain's first cholera epidemic killed 31,000 people. The disease returned again in 1848, 1853 and 1866. Cholera was just one of the killer diseases which people feared in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Other diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid, typhus, scarlet fever and measles killed tens of thousands of people in the 1830s and 1840s.

Today, we can prevent these diseases. But in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, people did not have our medical knowledge. They knew that there was a connection between dirt and disease, but no one had shown that germs were the cause of the disease. Many doctors believed that the sewers and dirty streets gave off a poisonous gas called 'miasma', which caused illness.

Even when doctors showed a connection between dirty drinking water and cholera, many councils were slow to take any action. Providing the labouring poor with clean water and sewers would have cost money. Many middle-class rate-payers in Leeds did not want to see their money spent on such schemes.

