How London triumphed over killer cholera

03/08/2011

Documents held by Westminster City Archives and in other London locations will be brought together and made available online for the first time. They will reveal the work of Dr. John Snow and Revd. Henry Whitehead who succeeded in isolating the cause of a cholera outbreak in Soho in 1854 and thereby confirmed that the disease must be waterborne.

The project takes place during the 120th anniversary of the death of engineer Joseph Bazalgette, creator of the London sewage system. It also coincides with the re-opening to the public of the restored Crossness Pumping Station in Bexley.

Westminster Archives stands in an area whose squalor in Victorian times led author Charles Dickens to name it the Devil's Acre. Outbreaks of cholera were originally believed to be caused by impure air but it was Dr Snow who traced the cause of a particular outbreak in Broad Street, Soho, to the water pump used by locals to provide their drinking water. Detailed parish records compiled by Revd. Whitehead, then vicar of St Luke's Church, helped confirm the theory.

The project will recruit volunteers to digitise original documents produced by the London City Mission and which up to now could only be viewed by appointment. These, together, with other documents and illustrations, held by Westminster Archives, are seen as being of great value to scholars studying Victorian London. Westminster University students will help to create a computer game which will challenge players to update's Bazalgette's sewage scheme for the 21st century.

The website will also include a short animated film telling the story of Old Father Thames, which will be made at family workshops during the summer. An exhibition featuring the film will be held early next year in central London and will also tour local libraries in Westminster and Bexley.

Local schools in both boroughs will get involved in the project to show how the building of the sewage system had an impact on the communities in both areas. A play and a Father Thames artwork created by the Bengali community are planned and the project will also work with the international charity Water Aid to explain how cholera, although eliminated from Britain, is still afflicting many people in countries across the World.

Sue Bowers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "This is a wide ranging project that will engage people of all ages in the history of a vital public health breakthrough, a major piece of civil engineering and an appreciation of ongoing issues. It will convey its findings by a variety of imaginative means."

Adrian Autton, Archives Manager at City of Westminster Archives Centre, said: "This exciting project allows people of all ages to learn more about how a breakthrough in the understanding and treatment of a terrible disease was made in the heart of Westminster by Dr John Snow and the subsequent creation of a clean and safe water supply for the capital".

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF

has supported 33,900 projects, allocating £4.4billion across the UK, with £868 million of that in London.

Further information

Vicky Wilford, HLF press office, on 020 7591 6046 / 07973 401 937 or vickyw@hlf.org.uk or Phil Cooper on 07889 949 173.

Peter Daniel, Westminster Archives, on 020 7434 4479.