

# ADVERTISER 150: Mildmay Mission is born into East End's typhus epidemic

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## East London Advertiser

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One Halfpenny.



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Reporter

Today we begin a nightly series looking back at some of the big issues of the day covered by the East London Advertiser to celebrate today's 150th special anniversary edition. The newspaper is born on Saturday, November 17, 1866, amid the typhus epidemic sweeping Bethnal Green, the same year the Mildmay Medical Mission opens in the slums to tackle the outbreak...

1866: The typhus epidemic in Bethnal Green is caused by unsanitary and overcrowded slums like the notorious St Leonard's Buildings in Globe Town. The outbreak follows on the heels of the Cholera epidemic that year.

The jury visits to find typhus rampant in the courtyard with nine houses consisting of two rooms each. There is no water-but of any kind, just a tap from which water flowed in dribbles—which inhabitants “supply themselves with the means of cooking and cleanliness”.

The jurymen notice a peculiar smell and are told by a medical man, “that is the fever”, with discoloured skin and brownish hue of the inhabitants. Some of the alarmed jurymen cut short the inspection.

Infant George Potter's mother, father, grandmother and four siblings are all taken ill of fever. They are denied a doctor unless they obtain a medical order from the parish workhouse first, the rule of the Board of Guardians.

George Clarke can't get a doctor without the medical order. His stricken wife Mary is waiting for a doctor who refuses to come without a workhouse order.

A surgeon eventually attends 18 cases in four houses in St Leonard's-buildings, but too late to save Mary Clarke who dies from “the mortal effects of disease of the brain, accelerated by overcrowding, want of sufficient water supply, defective drainage, dirty and unhealthy premises and general neglect of sanitary arrangements”.

The coroner remarks: “To pull down and rebuild such places would be a social blessing. To erect proper buildings on the site of the present wretched tenements would be a benefit to the poor of Bethnal Green.”

Things begin to change when Catherine Pennefeather, widow of Irish evangelist William Pennefeather, recruits 11 women to open a medical mission to treat victims, in a converted warehouse at Cabbage Court in the Old Nichol slums behind Shoreditch Church.

She administers a personal approach with dignity to everyone who comes into her care, from families in the most deprived conditions.

By 1892, Pennefeather's mission moves into its first purpose-built property, the Mildmay Mission Hospital.

By the 1930s it gets the nation's attention when Queen Mary visits to see the work of the hospital.

The Queen is mobbed by crowds packing the narrow, cobbled Austin-street behind St Leonard's Church as she is met by the Mayor of Shoreditch.

The hospital serves the East End well for the next half-century before being closed by the Thatcher government in the 1980s.

But 'The Mildmay' comes back from the dead in 1985 on voluntary funding, serving the nation today as the world's first dedicated HIV-Aids hospital. It receives more royal attention in a visit in the 1990s by Princess Diana.