Public Health

Did life expectancy improve in Britain between 1800 and 1900?

In the 19th century the size of many British cities increased rapidly as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Over the century public health gradually improved but it took a long time to change the lives of people in the slums.

Factory towns became more and more crowded as they got bigger and houses were built as closely together as possible. They were damp and overcrowded and dirty; people had to cook, eat and sleep in filthy conditions. There were no sewers and there were piles of waste everywhere. Disease was a major problem. In 1865 there was an epidemic of cholera that killed 14,000 people in England and Wales. Conditions were so bad that many people's lives were cut short.

In 1842 a government report into the living conditions of the poor was published. It recommended organising drainage and refuse collection, providing a pure water supply and appointing health officers in towns.

For 30 years town councils and the government argued about who should improve conditions, although some of the larger cities like Liverpool and Manchester did start to build sewers and to supply water themselves. Eventually in 1875 the government passed the Public Health Act to force towns to build effective sewers and appoint medical officers. By 1900 the government accepted some responsibility for public health as well, and each city and town had a proper water supply and sewage system.
Think about this:

- How slum living conditions encourages diseases
- How governments massively improve public health
- How scientific discoveries have helped convince successive governments that they can improve public health.

**Thomas Crapper**

Early Victorian cities were warrens of filth. Toilets were no more than holes or cess-pits, shared by whole streets. In heavy rainfall they would overflow into the street. Slaughter-houses would throw animal remains into the street till they ran as a liquid stream of slime.

In the mid-19th century people began to realise that there was a link between human waste and cholera. Inventors and manufacturers rushed to produce the best toilet. One of the most successful was Thomas Crapper, who had a factory in Chelsea. His state of the art W.C. (Water Closet) cost the princely sum of £6.50. When invited to install his water closets for the royal palace of Sandringham, he reached the peak, rather than the bottom, of his profession.