

# The Hong Kong Plague Medal

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The bubonic plague of 1894 was a horrific scourge of Hong Kong that affected over 5000 victims and caused more than 3500 deaths. To deal with such a deadly epidemic, the Sanitary Board passed by-laws on 11 May 1894 that permitted house-to-house searches to discover and isolate as soon as possible persons suffering from plague and to clean the houses in which plague was present. Initially the work was carried out by the local European police inspectors and sergeants accompanied by Chinese constables and detectives, but as the epidemic spread like wild fire, the work soon exceeded the capacity of the local police. The help of officers and men of the Royal Engineers and other army units was then enlisted from the Military Authorities. When this also proved to be inadequate, volunteers were called in from the First Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry regiment that was stationed in Hong Kong at the time, and they commenced work on 18 May.

At that time there were about 1000 houses in the central district, 1170 houses in the eastern district, and 1865 houses in the western district. The aim was for 15 teams to inspect every house every day. Each team comprised 10 men and 10 coolies. Eight teams each with two officers were assigned to the Taipingshan area, which was in the western district and the epicentre of the plague epidemic, four teams each with two officers to the rest of the western district, and three teams with one officer each to the central district. No special arrangements were made for the eastern district as few cases of plague reported there. The men worked from 7:30 am to 10:30 am and from 1:30 pm to 4:30 pm.

The work consisted of (a) conducting house-to-house searches; (b) collecting bedding and clothing from the rooms or cubicles from which plague patients had been removed to hospital; (c) fumigation; (d) cleansing; and (e) burning of infected clothing, bedding, and rubbish. Patients were identified during the house-to-house searches and from the Tung Wah Hospital and a register of patients with their correct addresses was compiled. A notice was usually given by the police to all occupants of the house where the patient lived and they were warned to move their furniture onto the street. The following day the cleansing party proceeded to the house. The floors of the houses were first sprinkled with a disinfecting

fluid and chlorinated lime and all old paper was torn off the walls and partitions, and the dirt and rubbish removed by shovels and brooms. The walls and partitions were then lime washed and the floors washed down with disinfectant. All furniture and clothing outside the houses were overhauled, and old and worthless clothing burnt. A few buckets of lime-wash were thrown over the furniture to ensure it was washed. As soon as a house had three plague patients, all occupants were removed and the house closed.

During the months of May and June, 14 officers, four colour sergeants (a colour sergeant is a non-commissioned title in the Royal Marines and infantry regiments of the British Army, ranking above sergeant and below warrant officer class 2), 52 other non-commissioned officers, and 438 privates of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry were involved with the cleansing and disinfection process. The work was extremely unpleasant and avoided by the local Chinese. Four men of the Shropshire Light Infantry in two shifts of two each took responsibility for driving a large wagon, which could hold eight to 12 coffins and was drawn by two pairs of ponies, to remove dead bodies as soon as possible for burial from Tung Wah Hospital Mortuary. In addition, when part of Taipingshan was cordoned off and the houses declared uninhabitable, the Infantry men were responsible for the eviction of the residents to temporary houses leased for them by the government and for boarding up their houses.<sup>1</sup> (The area cordoned off was resumed by the government under the Taipingshan Resumption Ordinance passed on 15 October 1894, which was probably the first piece of resumption law with a retrospective effect that made resumption effective as from 1 June 1894 thereby authorising government's speedy action to access and clear affected streets and houses in the best interests of the public.)

The volunteers of the Infantry lived in quarantine in separate tented camps and were given extra rum rations to help them cope with the terrible tasks. Remarkably only one officer, Captain GC Vesey, and nine men of the regiment fell ill with the disease and only the Captain and one other actually died of plague.<sup>2</sup>

A plague medal was issued by the Government of Hong Kong as a tribute for services rendered



**FIG.** Replica of a silver medal (front and back) awarded to AH Godbehear, a private of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. Engraved on the front is the picture of a man warding off descending 'death' with one hand and with the other holding onto a victim of plague being attended to by a woman. On the reverse is engraved "Presented by the Hong Kong Community for Services Rendered during the Plague of 1894". The medal was donated by Mr Keith Poon to the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences in 2016

during the plague of 1894. The manufacture and presentation of this special 'plague medal' was paid for by the grateful community of Hong Kong and awarded to all who had volunteered their services to overcome this scourge. To date, no official list of medal recipients has been found despite thorough searches by several interested parties, one of which was the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. According to the authors of the book, *The whitewash brigade, the Hong Kong Plague of 1894*,<sup>3</sup> there were two types of medal: gold and silver. They estimated that of the 183 gold medals that have been traced, 46 were awarded to the officers of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry; and of the 819 silver medals, 605 were awarded to all military units including the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. The remaining medals were awarded to other military personnel (Royal Engineers, Royal Artillery and Hong Kong companies of the Royal Artillery, Army Medical Service, Medical Staff Corps, and other army) and civilians (doctors, nurses, policemen, and colonial administrators). The authors also compiled a biographical index of 189 persons associated with

the Hong Kong Plague of 1894.<sup>4</sup>

According to this index, the silver Hong Kong Plague Medal awarded to private AH Godbehear of the Infantry was sold twice,<sup>5</sup> but this did not include the auction by Bonhams in March 2014 at which it was sold again. The silver plague medal shown in the Figure, which was purchased by the donor from a memorabilia shop in a coins and stamps arcade in Mongkok in the 1980s, is likely to be a replica: under careful scrutiny, the quality of engraving on the medal is slightly inferior to the one shown in the catalogue by Bonhams.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless from the point of view of the museum, the medal remains of immense interest and value as testament to this special chapter in Hong Kong medical history.

Although the cleansing of houses was not a 'cure' for the plague epidemic, this practice of house cleansing was carried out even more vigorously and stringently twice yearly during the Japanese occupation, even though no plague had occurred in Hong Kong since 1929. The ritual known as "洗太平地" or "cleaning the environment" continued after the War well into the 1950s.

## References

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