

Asiatic cholera reached Britain in 1831, with the main epidemic occurring during 1832. There was widespread public fear, and the political and medical response to this new disease was variable and inadequate. In the summer of 1832, a series of cholera riots occurred in various towns and cities throughout Britain, frequently directed against the authorities, doctors, or both. The city of Liverpool, in the northwest of England, experienced more riots than elsewhere. Between 29 May and 10 June 1832, eight major street riots occurred, with several other minor disturbances. The object of the crowd's anger was the local medical fraternity. The public perception was that cholera victims were being removed to the hospital to be killed by doctors in order to use them for anatomical dissection. "Bring out the Burkers" was one cry of the Liverpool mobs, referring to the Burke and Hare scandal four years earlier, when two men had murdered people in Edinburgh in order to sell their bodies for dissection to the local anatomy school. This issue was of special concern to the Liverpool citizenry because in 1826, thirty-three bodies had been discovered on the Liverpool docks, about to be shipped to Scotland for dissection. Two years later a local surgeon, William Gill, was tried and found guilty of running an extensive local grave robbing system to supply corpses for his dissection rooms.

The widespread cholera rioting in Liverpool was thus as much related to local anatomical issues as it was to the national epidemic. The riots ended relatively abruptly, largely in response to an appeal by the Roman Catholic clergy read from church pulpits, and also published in the local press. In addition, a respected local doctor, James Collins, published a passionate appeal for calm. The Liverpool Cholera Riots of 1832 demonstrate the complex social responses to epidemic disease, as well as the fragile interface between the public and the medical profession.

Source: Wikipedia