

After Hours

The museum, housed in a former workhouse, attracts 75,000 visitors a year.

The Thackray Museum offers visitors a journey into the social history of medicine.

BY MEGAN HOWE



Medical time warp

It's 1842 and I'm stumbling through dank, narrow alleyways in the industrial town of Leeds, northern England. The stench of sewage, rotten food and filth is overpowering.

I pass the butcher, where carcasses hang in the street. Alongside is the sewage heap, where the night soil collector is working.

He'll survive typhoid, but die of cholera seven years later.

A young dressmaker lies on her deathbed, coughing up blood. Around the corner, I come across the woeful sight of 11-year-old Hannah Dyson — just one of 23,000 children employed in the factories of Leeds at that time. Hannah's bloodied leg has been crushed in an accident at the mill.

I'm at the Thackray Museum in Leeds — itself a vibrant, modern city. But here, visitors travel back in time for a trip through medical history.

The journey starts in a reproduction of a Victorian slum, complete with authentic sights, sounds and smells. It's crawling with germs and infested with disease.

In 1842 Sir Edwin Chadwick's report *The Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* was released and, for the first time, a direct link was made between squalid living and working conditions and illness and disease.

The ruling classes — warned that disease would not respect class boundaries — were shocked into action, resulting in the *Public Health Act 1848*. Slowly, the lives of working people were transformed — by 1860, 95% of all houses in Leeds were supplied with clean drinking water from main water supplies.

Thackray senior curator Mr Jim Garretts says the museum aims to present medicine from a social-history perspective.

Visitors follow the tales of eight Victorian characters, including Hannah's gruesome ordeal. If you can stomach it, you enter the operating theatre before the introduction of anaesthetics and antiseptics. As Hannah is held down by force, the surgeon prepares to amputate her leg with his two tools — a knife and a saw.

Thackray is the brainchild of Mr Paul Thackray, former director of one of Leeds' earliest medical supply companies. It opened in 1997 in the heritage-listed former Leeds workhouse, where the poor and destitute were put to work to earn their keep from 1861 until the 1940s.

It now attracts about 75,000 visitors a year, from school children to tourists, medicos and historians, with a mixture of

permanent and temporary exhibits and a popular series of Medicine & History lectures. Recent topics include Bogus Doctors and Medical Imposters, and Alcohol and Illness: The Wrath of Grapes.

The medical history tour leads you out of Victorian Leeds, past iron lungs, trepanning equipment and the earliest forceps, and on to the accidental discovery of anaesthesia.

Medical myths prevailed in an era when "fringe" medical practitioners spruiked their cure-alls on street corners — for tuberculosis, try swallowing live snails to eat the phlegm off your chest; for whooping cough, you must ride a donkey seven times in a circle.

The "from bugs to drugs" gallery looks

at the discoveries that changed the face of medicine and the health of populations — the development of vaccinations and of penicillin.

And you can see how the medical management of birth has evolved in the past century, with Queen Victoria's use of chloroform during the birth of her last two children in the 1850s paving the way for widespread use of pain relief during labour.

The journey finishes in a child-friendly, interactive gallery called the Body Zone, which explores how the body works, including an exhibit in which you can follow a pea on its 24-hour trip through the digestive track.

But back to little Hannah Dyson. Amazingly, she survived the surgery. ●



Visitors get a glimpse into hospitals and pharmacies of the past.

FACTFILE

Getting there: The Thackray Museum is adjacent to St James's Hospital in Leeds, UK.

Admission: Adults £5.50 (\$12.25); children £4.00 (\$8.90).

The museum also has a free medical history resource centre.

Further information: www.thackraymuseum.org