

Childhood Diseases

In the early log books of Port Isaac school the headmaster regularly reported outbreaks of illness amongst the schoolchildren. For the most serious epidemics, medical officials required the school to close so the spread could be slowed or halted. The current older generation may not think the type of reports he made would be out of place in a British primary school of the 1950s or 1960s. Before the introduction of modern antibiotics and mass immunisation, highly contagious childhood diseases like Measles, Mumps, Rubella (German Measles), Whooping Cough, Diphtheria and Scarlet Fever spread like wildfire, especially in crowded living accommodation or the confined space of a schoolroom.

In the summer of 1884 a measles outbreak at the end of June reduced attendance, not only from those directly affected but the older girls were required at home to look after the sick children. The contagion is such that the vast majority (*around 90%*) of those without immunity who share living space with an infected person will catch the disease, so it is not surprising that it quickly started to spread.

As late as the 1950s, catching measles in childhood was regarded 'as inevitable as death and taxes'

By 11th July, the medical advice was to close the school at once. When the school reconvened on 11th August, measles was still about but the worst was over and the school could continue. Attendance was reported to be still very small, but this time the children were missing out on schooling to help with the harvest. This practice was presumably rife throughout rural England, and governments eventually bowed to the inevitable by adopting long school summer holidays to coincide with harvest time.

Scarlet Fever (Scarletina) is a bacterial disease particularly affecting young children around 4 to 8 years old. Before the advent of antibiotics it was a very serious disease and could be fatal.

In 1886, there was an outbreak of Scarlet Fever (Scarlatina) which closed the school from 4th June to 12th July, when presumably it had abated, although it was still present in late August. Before the advent of antibiotics Scarlet Fever was most serious and could be fatal, although the headmaster reported no deaths at the school.

Whooping cough ... an extremely debilitating disease with severe uncontrollable coughing fits interspersed with a high-pitched 'whoop' as the child struggles to breathe in.

Later that year, December brought Whooping Cough to weaken the children further. This disease can last 6 to 8 weeks before subsiding. If you have experienced an annoying tickly cough for a couple of days, this was a cough that was much worse and lasting for a couple of months. Think of the great anguish and fear of a young mother having to watch her child go through this day after day in the knowledge there was nothing she could do. Even if she was able to afford to pay for a doctor (*most likely not*) there was little the doctor could offer other than sympathy. There was a further outbreak of Whooping Cough in April 1911 when the school was closed for three weeks, and more illness later that year as Diphtheria broke out in November.

Diphtheria is a highly contagious disease that can prove fatal.

A serious outbreak of Diphtheria occurred in December 1917 when the Medical Officer of Health ordered the school closed in December. The whole school was disinfected in January, but remained closed until February 1918.

In 1894, Typhoid Fever struck Port Isaac

This bacterial disease is caused by the supply of drinking water being contaminated with sewage, and is invariably associated with poor sanitation and hygiene. In February, the headmaster reported that parents were afraid to send their children to school and on 21st February, 14 year old Francis George Brewer died. The following week there were seven cases in the village, three of which were schoolchildren. The medical authorities closed the school at once, not reopening until March 19th. On 15th March a second boy had died, 9 year old James William Leathlean. The epidemic carried on through April and May, with parents still afraid to send their children to school.

BODMIN RURAL SANITARY AUTHORITY.

THE MEDICAL OFFICER CENSURED.

Bodmin Rural Sanitary Authority on Saturday re-elected Mr. F. J. Hext, J.P., chairman, and Mr. J. Lewarne, vice-chairman. Several matters arising out of the enteric fever epidemic at Port Isaac were considered.

Mr. H. SYMONS said the committee had not yet secured a place for a public convenience, and the only one they knew of was on property of Mr. Guy, but his permission had not yet been sought.—The Inspector, Mr. Jenkins, submitted a bill of £2 19s. 6d., the cost of making bedding and conveying it to and from Port Isaac for the proposed temporary hospital. The inhabitants objecting, the hospital was abandoned. The original account was for nearly £8, but the goods had been returned to the maker. It was resolved to pay the amount now claimed. Other accounts were—Dr. George for notifying eleven cases of enteric fever, and two of erysipelas, £1 11s. 6d.; Dr. Oxland, Plymouth, and Mr. B. Kitto, London, for analyses of water, £2 2s. and £1 1s. respectively, and they were ordered to be paid.—In reply to Mr. Lewarne, the Clerk (Mr. Wallis) expressed the opinion that these amounts are chargeable to the district fund and not separately to the parish.—The analyses of the water were read. Mr. Kitto considered the water quite unfit for drinking purposes. Dr. Oxland stated: "The water is bright and clear, of good colour, taste, and odour. The solids are principally carbonate of lime, hardness 12. It is free from poisonous metals. It is a good sample of water."—Mr. SYMONS explained that the samples were taken from the same well, but between the date of Mr. Kitto's sample being taken and that sent to Dr. Oxland the well had been cleaned out. Whether that was sufficient to account for the disparity in the analyses or not he could not say. He himself considered the water was good, and would suggest that the well be cleaned oftener.—In reply to Mr. Lewarne, Mr. SYMONS said there were some fresh cases, but it was remarkable that three-fourths of all the cases were relatives.—The Medical Officer (Dr. Mudge), reporting upon the analyses, stated that they showed the water to be unfit for drinking purposes. Very probably from occasional pollution from this and other varying causes the quality of the water may vary considerably, and be at one time better than at another. It certainly could not be considered under its present conditions a water for drinking.—Mr. HORE proposed that another sample be analysed by Mr. Beringer.—Mr. BESWETTERICK seconded, and it was adopted, Mr. E. POLLARD remarking that they wanted to prove to the world that the Authority was doing its duty—(hear, hear).

The CHAIRMAN called attention to the remarks made by the medical officer (Dr. Mudge) in his monthly return to the County Sanitary Committee as follows:—

Positive refusal to use rooms temporarily provided for the better nursing and isolation of typhoid cases at Port Isaac. Public analyst condemns the principal water supply, and says he considers it quite unfit for drinking purposes. In face of this, and also of my previous examination and condemnation of the water, the Authority has declined to take any action. I have given private warnings to the medical practitioners and relatives of patients.

Mr. HORE said the Authority had a complete answer to the charge of indifference.—Mr. LEWARNE said they had done everything they could and it was rather strong on the part of Dr. Mudge.—Mr. SYMONS said the doctor was not analyst. He challenged any person to shew there was any sewerage emptying or draining into the well. It was most unfair for Dr. Mudge to say they had done nothing.—The CHAIRMAN said it was a totally incorrect report, and should be repudiated. It was most unjustifiable for Dr. Mudge to send such a report.—On the motion of Mr. W. H. FELLAM, seconded by Mr. E. POLLARD, the clerk was instructed to send a resolution to Dr. Mudge expressing indignation at his action.

It was resolved to extend the drainage at Port Isaac to connect nineteen additional houses.—The Medical Officer reported a case of membranous croup at Trekidick, due probably to atmospheric influences, and at Tregillie, St. Kew, a fatal case of diphtheria: The sanitary condition of the house and premises is fairly good. The child attended the public elementary school the closets of which were not altogether satisfactory.—The Guardian said this had since been attended to.—At Port Isaac Dr. Mudge reported that nine cases of typhoid fever have been notified during the present month, the last two on April 19th. Consideration of the water supply was urgently needed.

THE HEALTH OF THE COUNTY.

The monthly report of the Sanitary Committee of the Cornwall County Council for April is as follows:—

But for one specially late return, this would have been issued a week earlier. One district breaks the continuity of the statistics; hence the reason why even the tortoise is waited for. Launceston Rural falls out of line because the very fair comments of its own medical officer were reproduced in this return, in regard to the spread of infectious disease in their district for want of notification and an isolation hospital. They also laboured under the mistake that the County Council could, by law, pay them half of the inadequate salary at present paid to a conscientious medical officer (though not certified by the Local Government Board) possibly after doing considerable harm to their district they will see the error of their ways, and fall back into line as others before them have done. But being composed mainly of the agricultural element, it may take longer than in the case of places that are directly interested in the promotion of summer traffic.

The only other district in the county that refuses a return is the rural district of Penzance, which in the same way prejudices its urban neighbour of the same name. The County Sanitary Committee view with great satisfaction the steps being taken in Parliament by Mr. Bolitho, M.P., upon the matter of compulsory notification.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that the returns for April enable us to report that the health of the county has improved to the extent of 2.09 per 1000 per annum upon what it was in March; and of no less than 7.44 per 1000 upon what it was in January. If we progress at the same rate for May, we shall get back into our proper place of being once more the healthiest county in England.

During the same period (from January) our zymotics have receded from 21 to 11. This is a good sign, but more remains to be done, especially at Mousehole, Newlyn, Fowey, Mevagissey, Port Isaac, Saltash, and Bodmin.

Complaints arrive from several districts of the insanitary condition of the closets of elementary schools, through neglect. The detailed references of this return will specify some of them. After all the circulars and special efforts made by the present head of the Education Department for improvement in this matter, this seems to be inexcusable.

In the matter of isolation hospitals it is suggested that Penzance Urban and Rural should co-operate; also Newquay Urban and St. Columb Rural; St. Austell Urban and Rural; Launceston Urban and Rural; Liskeard Urban and Rural; Truro Urban and Rural; Redruth Urban and Rural; Redruth Rural and Camborne Urban. This committee will soon deal with the subject. It awaits the final decision of the General Purposes Committee under the Local Government Act, 1894, as to the delimitation of local governing areas, &c.

It is reported that the Newquay and District Water Co. are progressing with the work for the betterment of their water supply. They are reminded that we are now at the middle of May, and the population of Newquay is already materially increasing, which promises to be largely augmented during the coming month. If there be another water famine in that district, this water company will be alone responsible.

The highest disease rate during the month has been at Saltash, and from small pox. A special report has been made by the medical officer to both the Local Government Board and the County Council. The spread has been from unrecognised cases. Precautions appear to be taken against further dissemination.

Scarlatina continues in the Redruth and Helston Rural Sanitary Areas. Ten cases of typhoid are reported in the Bodmin Rural Sanitary District. These are at Port Isaac, where the medical officer still reports "bad and defective drainage, and contaminated water supply." The writer of this is not surprised at the comment after a personal inspection of the place on the 14th instant. There has been an outbreak of diphtheria at St. Stephens by St. Austell, of five cases with three deaths.

At Launceston Urban, now under the Notification Act, there has been no case of infectious disease for four months.

Calstock, Lostwithiel, Padstow, and Hayle have been particularly healthy during the month; but Stratton, Helston Rural, and the Isles of Scilly, have been much above their normal death rates for the month.

The gentleman who suggests that a cheque should be forwarded by the County Council for the monthly returns is reminded that his salary has recently been raised, and of which the county pays half. It may also be remarked, that the smartest M.O.H.'s supply the monthly returns not because of the pay they receive for doing their duty, but because of their love for the work, and the service it renders to our common humanity.

The weather during the month of April has been most seasonable, with a rather more than average quantity of rainfall and sunshine. For these observations taken at 9 o'clock every morning by thirty volunteers, no payment is made by either district or county.

(Signed on behalf of the Committee),
SILVANUS TREVAIL, Chairman,
Truro, 18th of May, 1894.

The Royal Cornwall Gazette of 26th April 1894 reported on a meeting of the Bodmin Rural Sanitary Authority. The medical officer, Dr. Mudge, stated that analysis showed the well water was unfit for drinking purposes, and noted previous checks had condemned the water but the authority had not acted. The well was undoubtedly where the old pump in Middle Street – formerly Well Street - now stands. A proposal to site a temporary hospital in the village to provide better provision for the sick was positively refused by inhabitants and had to be abandoned. With the clarity of hindsight it is all too easy to criticise such inaction or ignorance, but at the time the causes of disease were by no means universally acknowledged. In the Royal Cornwall Gazette of 24th May the chairman of the Sanitary Committee of Cornwall Council, Silvanus Trevail (*the architect who designed the old school*) reported ten cases of Typhoid in Port Isaac and backs up the medical officer's reports of 'bad and defective drainage and contaminated water supply' from his own experience when he inspected the village on 14th May.



The gravestone of Francis George Brewer
A victim of the 1894 Typhoid outbreak

The inscription reads –

In Loving Memory of
NATHANIEL BREWER
(Master Mariner)

of Port Isaac in this Parish

who died at sea June 24th 1884

Aged 39 Years

In the midst of life we are in death

Also
FRANCIS GEORGE
Youngest Son of the above

Died February 21st 1894

Aged 14 Years