

DEATH AND DISEASE IN VICTORIAN HATHERN



Some people hark back to the good old days, but life was hard for Hathern folk during the nineteenth century. This article seeks to establish the kinds of accidents, ailments and other mishaps that affected people living and working in our village. It relies on information from headstones in the Churchyard, Parish Records, School Logs, Newspaper Archives and comments made by The Rev. E.T.M. Phillips and his daughter Lucy. These are all available to view on our history website.

1 The demography of death in our village

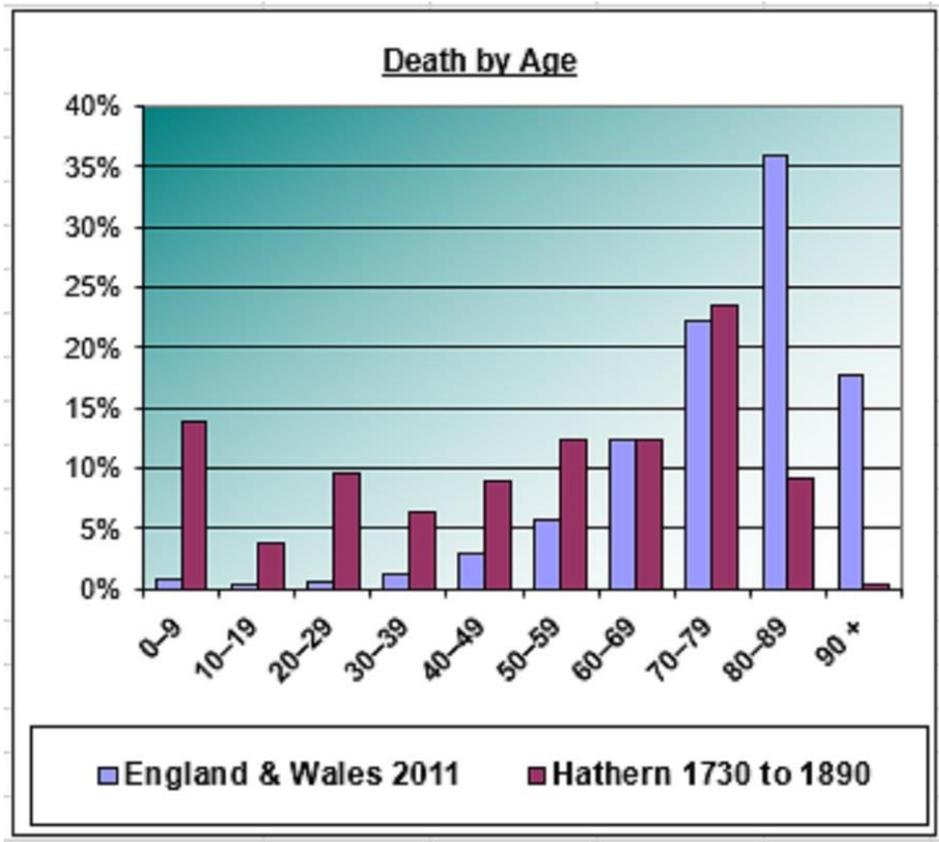
During the early part of the 19th century life expectancy at birth was around 40 years. It was not until the last few decades that there was any marked improvement in mortality rates.¹ Although high infant and child death rates began to decline in urban locations after 1851, no improvement was seen in rural areas until after the 1860s.²

Alan Forsdick composed the following chart of deaths by age among the population of Hathern from 1730 to 1890.³ It reveals a shocking picture of high mortality rates in infants, children and young adults during this period. The age cohort of 0-9 years, for example, accounted for around 14% of all deaths. He compared these figures with data from 2011.

¹ Woods 2000: 4-5.

² Atkinson *et al* 2017: 1337-1338.

³ This chart appears elsewhere in the Hathern History Society website.



Forsdick obtained his evidence from fewer than 200 gravestones in Hathern Churchyard. The inscriptions refer to 301 individuals, many of whom are unnamed, and these cover a 260-year period. The National Newspaper Archive is a valuable source of death notifications provided by bereaved relatives and verdicts from Coroners' Inquests. The most comprehensive evidence, however, is available from Parish burial records (BMD).

During the 21-year period between 1846 and 1865 alone, there were 524 burials in Hathern churchyard. The following indicates the percentage of deaths within equivalent age cohorts:

Age cohort	Total deaths	Percentage of all deaths
0-9 years	231	44%
10-19	37	7%
20-29	48	9%
30-39	2	0.3%
40-49	28	5.3%
50-59	25	4.8%
60-69	38	7.3%
70-79	70	13.3%
80-89	40	7.6%
90+	5	1%

Most noticeable of all is that 44% of all recorded deaths in this period occurred in infants and children under the age of ten. This appalling statistic equates to the situation in ancient Rome during the first two centuries AD. There, 25% of babies did not survive their first year and around half of all children failed to reach their 10th birthday.⁴ Clearly, there had been no improvement in this respect during the best part of two millennia.

There are several reasons for differences between Forsdick's data and the latter figures. Firstly, his figures related to headstone inscriptions alone. It is likely that many, if not all, stillborn or unbaptised infants were excluded from interment in sacred ground. This could account for an underestimation of deaths in the young. Another reason is that Hathern was a relatively poor village, and many families would have struggled to afford headstones for adults, let alone infants and small children. The latter survey is based on the Parish Records (BMD) which probably includes virtually all deaths occurring in Hathern. The relatively narrow window from 1846 to 1865 was not a random choice. The burial records did not necessarily include causes of death.⁵ There were, however, periods within this time frame when the burial registers cited the causes of all deaths. This was especially the case when killer infectious diseases ravaged the village.⁶ Another consideration is that most of the epidemic diseases listed below were especially lethal to infants and small children, and this might have accounted for higher death rates in the 0-9 years cohort between 1846 and 1865.

2 Accidental Deaths

Attention now focuses on a selection of accidental deaths reported in local Newspaper Archives in a variety of contexts.

Road accidents

Horses provided an important means of road transport for Hathern folk during the 19th century. Problems could occur when riders or drivers were careless or even drunk, horses stumbled, or their harnesses broke. Several children were killed when they ran out in front of horses and carts.⁷ In 1829 a boy of 8 years fell from wagon and died as a result. Adults also received fatal injuries when they fell or were thrown from carts. One unfortunate youth of 17 years fractured his skull and died when he fell onto the road in 1859. There were many other examples.⁸ A particularly distressing case was that of a woman who was kicked by a horse in the proximity of the Toll Gate in 1851. She sustained a compound fracture of a leg which subsequently became gangrenous; she refused to have it amputated and later died at home.⁹

⁴ Bagley, A. 2016: 61.

⁵ In 1845 doctors were provided with printed pads of death certificates stating the date and cause of death, although they were not formally required to issue them until 1874: Welcome Library.

⁶ For example, 1846-1851, 1858-1860, 1862, 1873-1974, 1880, 1887-1888. This may reflect the interest and diligence of individual compilers of burial records.

⁷ For example, a child aged 2 or 3 years was run over and killed in 1839 and in 1841 two boys died after being knocked down by a horse and cart. In 1851 a boy aged 5 was crushed to death by a horse-drawn omnibus near Hathern Turn. These deaths are recorded by Coroners and in the Newspaper Archives.

⁸ See News Archive 1851.

Newspapers repeatedly drew attention to the accident blackspot at the bottom of Shepshed Hill that joined the main road through the village. Many accidents occurred there involving both horse-drawn vehicles and bicycles.

Domestic accidents

Home was not necessarily a place of refuge and safety in Victorian England. One of the commonest causes of death was the fireplace. News Archives record the names of seven Hathern children and a woman aged 41 years who sustained fatal burns between 1838 and 1890 when their clothing caught fire. Hot liquids placed within the reach of toddlers were also a source of danger. In 1842 a small boy died from scalds when he dragged a pan of hot water onto himself.

Staircases and windows were also a source of danger. In 1865 a man of 36 died when he fell downstairs, and in 1900 a woman of 78 suffering from dementia died after falling from her bedroom window. An unusual and tragic case of drowning occurred in 1890. A toddler fell into a zinc bath full of water; he presumably had been left unattended at the time. A bizarre and fatal accident occurred in a rear garden in Hathern in August 1889. Two brothers were struggling to clear a water pipe blockage outside the house. One of them climbed over a wire fence that was propped up by a metal spike, two feet in length. He tripped and became impaled on the spike. The doctor called but could not help him, and he died the following day.

Work-related incidents

In 1834 the Coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death of a gamekeeper when he was accidentally killed by his own gun. Another tragic loss occurred in 1854 when a man of 38 died of his injuries at Hanfords sawmill. An unspecified farm accident also resulted in the death of 13 -year old boy in 1876.

A curious verdict was delivered by the Coroner in 1846 when a labourer died of heat stroke working in the fields. He ascribed it to a "Visitation of God." In 1900 a man aged 66 suffered a fall loading hay onto a wagon. His spine was paralysed, and he died a short time later. In 1899 a young worker at Burrow's timber yard sustained serious injuries when a horse kicked him in the ribs. The following year a man working at the same timber yard accidentally sawed off the tips of three fingers while working with a circular steam saw.

The railway between Hathern Station and Loughborough was also the site of many accidents. Workers maintaining the line were particularly at risk and several lost their lives when hit by trains. In 1870 A well-respected young porter was struck and killed when he crossed the line on foot at Hathern Station. He had failed to notice an express train approaching from Leicester. In 1899 a 68-year old man had his foot crushed by the wheel of a wagon while he was working in the sidings.

Carelessness and Gross neglect of children

Nowadays childcare experts warn of the danger of small babies sharing their parents' beds. The deaths of two newborn infants are recorded in the Newspaper Archives of 1857 and 1892. The accidental suffocation due to "overlying" of infants was not an uncommon occurrence in Victorian Britain. A

leading academic investigated this phenomenon and attributed such tragedies to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome rather than infanticide.¹⁰

Medicines containing laudanum were easily available from pubs and shops in the nineteenth century. They were cheap to buy, and there were no restrictions on their supply until 1868. They subsequently could only be obtained from licensed chemists, although their use was not monitored. One of the most popular preparations was Godfrey's Cordial which contained opium, treacle, water and spices. It was a favourite means of calming restless or crying babies.¹¹ Infants under the age of one month received a teaspoonful, but the dose could be increased to two or three spoons. The prolonged administration of opiates made children too docile to feed and put them at risk of death from starvation. Coroners' verdicts tended to attribute such deaths in infants to convulsions and other natural causes rather than incriminating parents or the drug itself.¹²

In 1846 an inquest was held on a Hathern child who died at the age of three months. He had been receiving Godfrey's Cordial for several weeks. The Coroner entered a verdict of death caused by a seizure, aggravated by the cordial. Another case in November 1851 involved a female infant of 14 months. In this instance the verdict was "poisoned by laudanum." No further details are available.

Two cases of child neglect came to the attention of the authorities. In 1899 the local NSPCC inspector was called to a house next door to one of the pubs in Hathern where a widowed father of two children spent most of his time. Neighbours complained that the boy and girl were ill fed, poorly clad and verminous. An adult brother also claimed that his father often beat his teenage sister. The father was bound over in court to make improvements regarding his drunkenness, cruelty and neglect.

An even more serious case was heard at the Loughborough Petty Sessions in August 1900. A Hathern labourer and his 30-year old wife were charged with gross neglect of their four children. The youngest was under the age of two, covered in vermin, grossly malnourished and near to death. He was taken from them and placed in the care of staff at the Workhouse. He later made a full recovery. The mother pleaded guilty; both she and her husband were sentenced to six months' hard labour.

3 Infectious diseases

Many serious illnesses such as smallpox have been eradicated today and others are rarely encountered in the UK. Others, like Covid 19, have recently appeared and may remain with us for a time yet. In Victorian times several potentially lethal infectious diseases swept through Hathern. The Rev. Edward Thomas March Phillips and his daughter Lucy commented on these epidemics and references appear in contemporary newspapers and School Logs. There now follows a discussion of some of the most dangerous diseases.

Typhoid fever

Typhoid is caused by infection with *Salmonella typhi* bacteria from contaminated food and water. The disease produces a high fever, severe headaches, cough and constipation or diarrhoea, and a rash. Untreated, one in five victims die.

¹⁰ De Hanson 1979.

¹¹ Other preparations included Baby's Mixture, Soothing Syrup and Child's Cordial Seaton 2017.

¹² Wohl 1983; Anderson 1993: 24-25.

The author of an obituary to the Rev. E.T.M. Phillipps recorded that in 1846 "Hathern suffered dreadfully from typhoid fever. There were 260 cases among a population of around 1200. The Rector visited and treated them all." During an epidemic in 1858 the disease claimed the life of a female aged 26. Nowadays travellers to endemic areas are vaccinated beforehand and antibiotics are effective in most infected individuals.

Typhus bears no relationship to typhoid fever, although the names sound similar. It has also been known as murine fever or gaol fever in the past, but it is rarely encountered today in the UK. Most cases are contracted from bites of insects infected with a Rickettsia bacterium. In the 19th century it was generally associated with overcrowded living conditions, reduced levels of immunity to disease, poor hygiene and exposure to affected lice. Symptoms occurred between one and two weeks after being bitten. They included headaches, cough, nausea, vomiting, flu-like symptoms, confusion and difficulty in breathing. Nowadays the early introduction of antibiotics is usually effective.

There were several deaths in Hathern from typhus. These included a widow in 1829 and an 18-year old girl in 1826 (see Churchyard Stone 101). In 1846 there were 17 fatalities in individuals ranging from 5 to 64 years. Two adults died in 1848, one male in 1851, a boy of 14 in 1873, and two women during the following year.

Smallpox

In recent times this killer disease has been eradicated thanks to strenuous worldwide vaccination campaigns. The Variola virus caused high fever, headaches, limb and back pain, disfiguring pock marks, blindness and death.

Edward Jenner developed a vaccine in 1796, although epidemics continued to sweep across the country. In 1872 a Hathern father refused to allow his child to be vaccinated, but compulsory enforcement proceedings were put into place. The overall death rate from smallpox was around 30%, but children were especially vulnerable: around 80% of them died. This was clearly a disease that picked out those under the age of 10 years.

In 1846 an adult and four children died at the ages of 2 months, 3 months, 1 year and 6 years. A later epidemic struck the Loughborough area in 1872 and a smallpox hospital was set up in Moor Lane.

Measles

Measles is caused by the highly infectious virus, Rubeola. Its features include upper respiratory symptoms, fever, red eyes, white spots on the inner surfaces of the cheeks, and a red blotchy skin rash. It is a serious condition because it can lead to encephalitis, otitis media, deafness, pneumonia and seizures. The prognosis of the disease is worse in babies below the age of one year. Nowadays it can be successfully prevented by immunisation with MMR vaccine.

The School Log notes that many cases of measles occurred in 1863, 1872 and 1876. The Newspaper Archive also reported that an epidemic struck Hathern in 1895. There were some

fatalities from the disease. In 1858 a 3-year old child died, a 6-year old in 1859, a boy of 3 in 1862, and girl of 2 in 1889. Measles was clearly another disease that killed young children.

Diphtheria

Corynebacterium diphtheriae is responsible for this disease. Its name is derived from the Greek word for leather, referring to the appearance of the membrane that forms in the throat. The organism produces a deadly toxin that can cause great difficulty in breathing, heart failure, paralysis and death. It is rare in the UK now owing to the introduction of a combined vaccine for diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough (pertussis). A source of confusion occurs because Victorians sometimes referred to the disease as croup. It was a deadly disease for around 10% of adults, but the mortality rate in children was between 20% and 40%. For this reason, it was often known as The Strangling Angel of Children. Diphtheria was often associated with poverty and overcrowded living conditions. The rich, however, were not immune as Queen Victoria's own daughter, Princess Alice, died of the condition in 1878.

Several cases are recorded in the School Log in 1858; there were 7 cases under children up to the age 5 and a girl of 10. In 1859 a baby of 20 months fell ill and died. Three cases occurred in children and one in an adult in 1862. There were several more cases during 1887-1888 and 1896.

Whooping cough

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is an infection caused by the highly contagious bacterium, *Bordetella pertussis*. It most commonly affects children and presents as an upper respiratory infection. Shortly afterwards it produces severe paroxysms of coughing. Even today around 1 in 200 of infants under the age of one year die in Britain of the disease. It was more lethal in the pre-antibiotic era and before routine vaccination was introduced in the 1950s.

The School logs of 1863 and 1869 referred to several cases of whooping cough among schoolchildren. In 1890 local newspapers reported an epidemic in Hathern children. Further outbreaks occurred among children from September to December 1900.

Scarlet fever

Scarlet fever, or scarlatina is caused by a Group A Streptococcus bacterial infection. Its features include high fever, swollen glands, a swollen red tongue, a sore throat and a rash. In rare cases it leads to abscesses in the tonsils and throat, toxic shock syndrome, heart disease and other serious disorders. It usually affects children in the five to fifteen age group.

The School log and local newspapers mentioned many cases occurring in schoolchildren during 1893. The Medical Officer of Health closed the School from August until the end of October. According to the School Logs there were also outbreaks of the disease in 1900 and 1901.

Mumps is a viral disease that usually affects children and young adults. It produces fever and painful glandular swellings. On rare occasions serious complications can occur, and so

childhood MMR vaccination is essential. The Infant School Log recorded several cases occurring in 1893 and throughout 1901.

Hydrophobia

Hydrophobia is very rarely encountered these days in the UK thanks to strict quarantine laws and the introduction of 'anti-rabies passports' for animals travelling to and from the country. Even today there is a high death rate among victims of the disease. In the final stages of hydrophobia sufferers exhibit extreme fear and difficulty when trying to swallow water.

There were two incidents in our area 1887 involving rabid dogs. A fox terrier was spotted on Derby Road, Loughborough, one January morning. It ran off in the direction of Hathern after biting a young girl's finger. A man chased after it and shot it dead with his gun in the vicinity of Bishop Meadow. The girl was fortunate in that she suffered no ill effects. Two months later another dog with unmistakable signs of rabies wandered into Hathern from the direction of East Leake. There it bit a boy aged 13 years. His father killed the animal, but the poor lad died a prolonged and distressing death.

4 Chronic infections

Tuberculosis or phthisis.



The Brontë sisters: portrait by Edwin Landseer

Tuberculosis can affect any organ and many different parts of the body. One example is scrofula, where lymph nodes in the neck become infected after drinking milk from cattle with bovine TB. Another is Pott's Disease of the spine. When the disease affected the lungs it often proved fatal during the Victorian era. The late stage of pulmonary TB was generally referred to as Consumption because it led to fever and profound wasting of the body.¹³ During the 18th and 19th centuries the disease was fatal in a fifth of sufferers. Risk factors for consumption include overcrowding, malnutrition, poor sanitation and unfavourable working conditions. The three Brontë sisters and their brother, Branwell, famously died of consumption. They were all buried in Haworth Churchyard apart from Ann who was laid to rest in Scarborough where she died in 1849.

Cases of TB lung infections affected young adults in Hathern during the nineteenth century. In 1846 there were five deaths among 19 to 35-year olds. The following year three adults and a child of 9 were lost. From 1848 to 1859 the number of deaths ranged between one to four each year. Cases continued to occur in Hathern in the latter part of the Victorian period and during the 20th century. According to a School Log from 1904, a boy stayed off school with consumption.

Sanatorium care, first described in 1854, proved beneficial to many sufferers.¹⁴ A major advance was the discovery of the responsible organism, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, by Robert Koch in 1882. This was followed by tuberculin testing, vaccination and the antibiotic drug streptomycin. Nowadays patients receive various combinations of drugs in order to combat drug resistance in the bacterium.¹⁵

5 Uncertain medical conditions

During the 19th century Coroners were usually lawyers who had had no medical qualifications. They usually did not have the benefit of autopsy evidence to rely on when pronouncing causes of death. It was not uncommon for them to employ imprecise or confusing terms that no longer appear in modern medical literature. These included effusion of the brain, low fever, mesenteria and acute inflammation of the bowel. Apoplexy is occasionally mentioned as a cause of death in older Hathern residents in the News Archives. It generally signified a cerebrovascular accident or stroke caused by a clot or bleeding in the brain.

One of the most unsatisfactory verdicts was "died of teething." Such children would probably have died of acute infections or other severe illnesses that often occurred around the time of dentition. On the other hand, certain medical conditions were obvious to Victorian doctors. One example was the

¹³ In former times many terms applied to tuberculosis. Scrofula was known in the Middle Ages as The King's Evil because it was thought that a king's touch could cure the condition. Pulmonary TB was also referred to as The White Disease due to the pallor of sufferers, The Robber of Youth and The Captain of all Diseases Barberis *et al* 2017.

¹⁴ It was not until 1932 that a dedicated sanatorium was built near Markfield in Leicester. It had 6 wards and 203 beds. Fresh air, rest and good food grown on site were of paramount importance, and patients generally stayed for two years. It was in operation until the 1970s.

¹⁵ Barberis *et al* 2017.

diagnosis of hydrocephaly which would have been very evident in the case of a toddler who died aged two years in 1846, and that of a boy of 5 in 1851.¹⁶

6 Medical care for the sick in Hathern

There was no National Health Service in Britain until 1948. Various worthy Hathern folk helped to set up two organisations that provided the cost of medical care, various benefits and sick pay in times of crisis. These were the Hathern Equitable and Provident Friendly Society, together with the Old Sick Club which was later replaced by the New Sick Club. Payments to members were made on the production of a doctor's certificate. A more direct source of help was the Rev. Phillips who served as Rector from 1808 until his death in July 1859. He had received medical training in his younger days and used his skills for the benefit of all Hathern residents. He visited the sick and provided them with suitable medicines at his own expense. He was often supported by the village leech woman.¹⁷ Patients could also be taken to the Loughborough Dispensary on Baxter Gate, and victims of accidents in the home, workplace or the highway were occasionally examined and treated by the duty surgeon in the Loughborough Union Workhouse.¹⁸

7 Conclusion

This study has omitted details of the names of sick or injured persons from our village as a mark of respect for their families, past and present.

Churchyard inscriptions, Newspaper Archives and Parish burial registers are invaluable sources of information about death and disease in 19th century Hathern. Between 1846 and 1865, 44% of all recorded deaths occurred in infants and children under the age of ten. Various factors might have accounted for this staggering statistic. It is important to understand that most fathers earned meagre wages as agricultural or hosiery workers. It is likely that good, nourishing food would have been in short supply for their families. Another problem was the large size of Victorian families; in the absence of effective birth control women often bore eight or more children. A large proportion of such mothers would have been malnourished and worn down from frequent childbearing and domestic duties, and their babies would have had a poor start in life. Even today, stillbirths and maternal deaths are more common in women bearing five or more children.¹⁹

¹⁶ If untreated, increased pressure of the cerebro-spinal fluid within in the brain causes marked enlargement of the head.

¹⁷ Forsdick 1997. The term leech often signified a physician in ancient times. Specially raised leeches were named as such because of their medical function. They were traditionally used to extract blood that was supposed to contain malignant humours in sick patients. Since the 1970s they have had a place in modern medicine, most notably in microsurgery.

¹⁸ The Baxter Gate Dispensary later became known as Loughborough General Hospital. The latter was demolished after the opening of the new Loughborough Hospital on Epinal Way. The Loughborough Union Workhouse was built in 1840 close to Regent Street. After workhouses were abolished in 1930 it eventually became a care home and hospital for elderly patients and was known as Hastings House Hospital. It was later renamed as Regent Hospital. As a GP, I worked in this hospital for a few years, where I treated elderly males and females. Some patients were admitted there direct from the community or were transferred there from the three main Leicester hospitals.

¹⁹ Effective contraception was not available until the late 19th century Cook 2004: 11-12.

Disease was ever present in Victorian Hathern. Malnutrition, overcrowding and poor sanitation were major risk factors for acute and chronic infectious diseases. Infants and children were especially vulnerable to death from diphtheria, smallpox and measles. Pulmonary tuberculosis, on the other hand, was a chronic condition that generally affected young adults. Newspaper reports from the 19th century record an alarming number of domestic, workplace and road traffic injuries and fatalities among Hathern residents. They affected all age groups from newborns to elderly persons.

Altogether, it may be said that Victorian times were not the 'Good Old Days' for the people of Hathern.

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