

PUBLIC HEALTH IN MARKET HARBOROUGH

by **David Holmes**



Following closure of the Cottage Hospital on Coventry Road early this year and transfer of all its facilities to the new Patient Treatment Centre on Harborough Road, it is a good opportunity to consider briefly how society, and in particular Market Harborough, has looked after the health of its residents over the centuries. How this should be done, by whom and how it should be financed has been a source of controversy for many generations and remains so today.

Public health is a relatively modern concept, originating in the early eighteenth century. From establishment of the parish system in medieval times when local power transferred from the lord of the manor to the parish rector, who then passed responsibility to the vestry, later called the select vestry, public health was limited to each individual parish being responsible for its own poor, infirm and elderly. In 1601, an Act for the Relief of the Poor permitted vestries to levy a rate on parishioners to fund relief of the poor. Many local charities were set up between the 14th and 17th centuries by wealthier members of most parishes to give assistance to the poor either by providing housing for the elderly or gifts in cash or kind to destitute parishioners.

By the end of the 18th century, the national population had expanded to such an extent that local rate payers began to complain about the increasing burden of rates. Though scientific knowledge was limited, the increasingly unsanitary conditions in which more and more people lived meant that leaders, both national and local, gradually recognised things would have to change. In 1815, a dispensary was opened in Market Harborough, supported by public subscription. Ill-health caused by unsanitary conditions caused a poster to be issued in 1831 by the Market Harborough Overseers of the Poor in conjunction

with surgeons and other gentlemen of the town which 'encouraged all people to clean their houses by white-washing with lime and removal of filth. Overseers will remove relief from those that ignore this advice.'

Introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834 was another attempt to reduce the burden on rate payers. In 1842, Edwin Chadwick published 'The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain'. Chadwick was convinced that if the health of the poor were improved, it would result in less people seeking poor relief and money spent on improving public health would save money in the long term. As a result of much lobbying and following a serious outbreak of Cholera, the first Public Health Act was introduced in 1848. The main limitation of the Act was that it provided a framework that could be used by local authorities, but was not compulsory. Where the death rate was more than 23 per 1000 of the population, a local Board of Health was supposed to be established.

A major survey into the general health of residents of Market Harborough and the Bowdens was undertaken in 1849 by William Lee. His main recommendations were that the town and villages should have a supply of clean drinking water, improved drainage of surface and waste water, cesspits and stagnant pools should be filled in and streets be paved and cleaned. He also recommended that the Welland be deepened to allow water to better flow through the town and thus reduce the level of flooding. Work on all these was painfully slow. In 1863, the church wardens were considering a proposal to construct a sewer to take refuse to an outfall below the town. Nothing had been done to widen the river by 1877 and in 1886,

analysis of 33 wells in the town revealed that 20 were unfit to drink, 12 were drinkable with care and only one was passed for drinking. However, improvement was afoot for, following creation in 1887 of a Water Supply Committee, a new water supply was brought to the town in 1890 by pipe from wells at North Kilworth. This had a dramatic effect on general health in the town; the death rate dropped from 23.2 per 1000 of the population in 1881 to 12.5 in 1901.

The dispensary developed slowly, gradually employing more nurses and treating more patients. However, the majority of health treatment for all, except those who could afford to pay, was provided by other means. For the elderly or infirm in the workhouse, its infirmary provided basic care. For most citizens, Oddfellows and Friendly Societies offered a form of basic health insurance. In 1880, Dr Frederick Grant was appointed the town's first Medical Officer of Health.

In 1853, parliament passed an Act that made it mandatory to vaccinate infants over 4 months old

against smallpox. This was only one of many scientific and technical developments that brought about general improvements to health during the second half of the century. In 1896, the Sanitary Inspector was working with dairies to improve cleanliness and so help to eliminate tuberculosis and typhoid.

Further developments followed in the 20th century, such as employment of a Health Visitor in 1910, opening of the Cottage Hospital on Coventry Road Hospital in 1914 (financed by voluntary subscription) and of the Infant Welfare Clinic in 1919. In 1935, a maternity ward was opened at the Cottage Hospital. Creation of the National Health Service in 1948, financed by taxation, brought together all the various individuals and organisations into a centralised organisation to provide a service for the whole population. Closure of the Cottage Hospital and opening of the new Treatment Centre on Leicester Road brings together all the medical services on one site.

HISTORY'S ODD SHORTS

HOUNDS KILLED BY A TRAIN

A serious accident befell the Woodland Pytchley hounds whilst cub hunting early on Monday morning, three valuable hounds being cut to pieces on the Midland line between Desborough and Market Harborough.

Hounds were in full cry after a fox which safely crossed the railway from Waterloo Gorse.

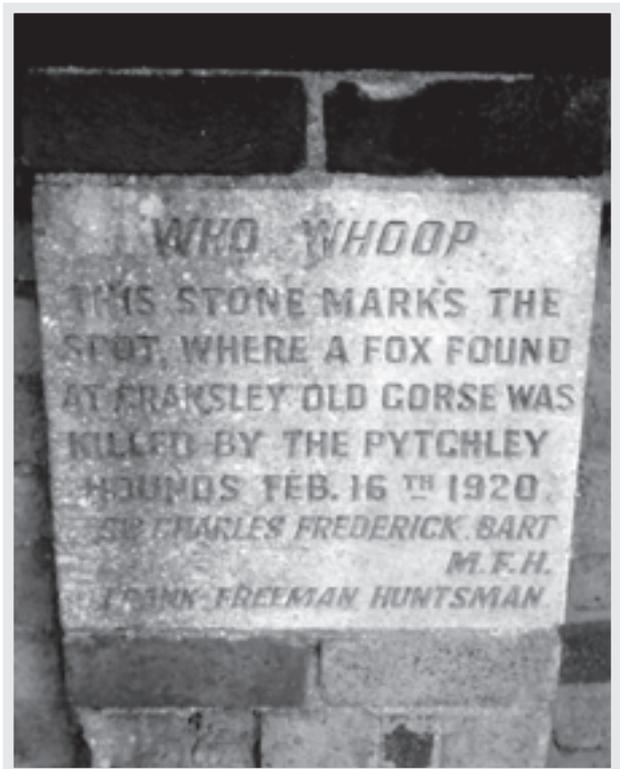
They were temporarily checked as a fast passenger train dashed by, but, on attempting to cross the line, were caught by a mineral train, with the result that two valuable hounds were cut to pieces; a third was so badly maimed that it was immediately destroyed, and others were seriously injured.

The Rhos Herald, 2nd October, 1909

THE QUICK BROWN FOX WAS TOO SLOW

A fox which was seen to be crossing the railway on Sunday, with a rabbit in its mouth, about two miles from Market Harborough, was caught by an express train and killed.

The Aberdare Leader, 18th April, 1903



This tablet is located on Coventry Road

Does anyone have any further detail of the incident?