

DISEASE AND DEATH IN NINETEENTH CENTURY MARKET HARBOROUGH

by Maurice Turton



Market Harborough in the 19th century would have been the same as other country market towns. Pictures and photographs show Market Harborough, especially on market days, as crowded and dirty. There would be the all pervading smells of cattle sheep and horses and their excretions. Personal hygiene would not have been a high priority for people and impossible without the facility of running water.

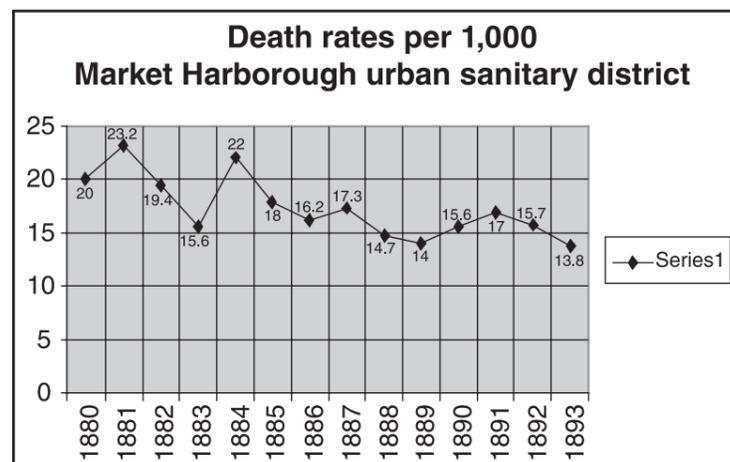
With no clean water supply or sewage system, infectious diseases would have been common. It was not until 1884 that the sewage works were completed, and not until 1891 that the water works in Market Harborough completed. Over crowded and poor housing would also have been a breeding ground for disease.

An inadequate diet for the majority of the population also made people more susceptible to disease. During the South African war 1899 -1901 40 per cent of the volunteers were unfit, many had rickets (vitamin D deficiency) skin diseases and chronic bronchitis, and a number had teeth too rotten to chew properly.

Even in the First World War almost half of the conscripted men were considered unsuitable, many were classed as Grade 111 which meant they had marked physical disabilities and were fit only for clerical work.

Also prevalent were the many infectious diseases that we rarely now encounter in this country:-

- Tuberculosis both pulmonary and bone**
- Measles and German measles**
- Smallpox**
- Chicken pox and shingles**
- Typhus infection caused by lice and flies**
- Typhoid caused by contaminated food and water**
- Cholera caused by contaminated food and water**
- Poliomyelitis**
- Diphtheria**
- Meningitis sometimes called spotted fever**
- Mumps**
- Whooping cough**
- Venereal diseases**



In the 19th and early 20th century there were no anti-biotics or sulphonamides. The only remedies were treating the accompanying fever with fluids, tepid baths, and good food if it was available, and clean fresh air. What we forget today is that many of the infectious diseases caused permanent and sometimes fatal complications.

In 1884 the town was re-sewered and the sewage works were completed. The water works were completed in 1891 and from the graph it can be seen the death rate per 1,000 started to fall from a peak in 1881 of 23.2 per 1,000 to 13 per 1,000. In 1893 life expectancy also increased,

but in 1899 an outbreak of typhoid occurred which was traced to a milk purveyor's well and caused 80 cases with 12 deaths.

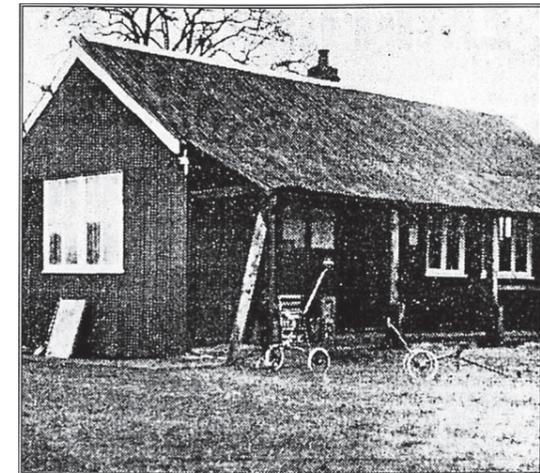
105 houses were connected to the mains water supply in 1891 and 547 were connected by 1892. It is easy to forget that clean water, decent sanitation and an improvement in diet greatly improved the health of the general population.

There were few hospitals at this time, but a smallpox hospital had been set up on the Dingley Road and in 1903 a small fever hospital for diphtheria and scarlet fever was built on the Northampton road.

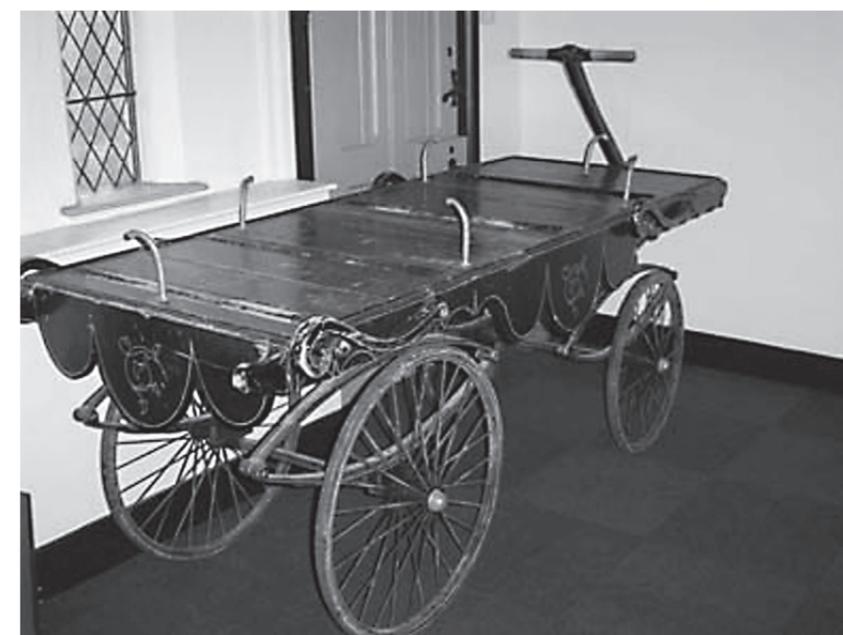
There were no trained nurses in the middle of 19th century. The first Nurses Act came into force in 1919 when the General Nursing Council was established, with the responsibility of setting up a register of trained nurses and approved training schools. In Market Harborough a nursing association was set up in 1885 with the object of supporting a trained nurse to visit the sick amongst the poor.

The cemetery opened in January 1878 and the first burial was on the 9th January of that year when Louisa Dunkley, a 19 year old female factory worker, was interred in consecrated ground in a ceremony conducted by Rev. I.E. Stocks. The 1871 census lists Louisa as a scholar of Great Bowden aged 12, living with her parents, her father William aged 43 a coal porter, her mother Elizabeth aged 41 and brothers William aged 14 and James aged 10. There is no memorial stone in existence if ever one was erected, because burial was not cheap. The Burials Act of 1852 set the fees as following:-

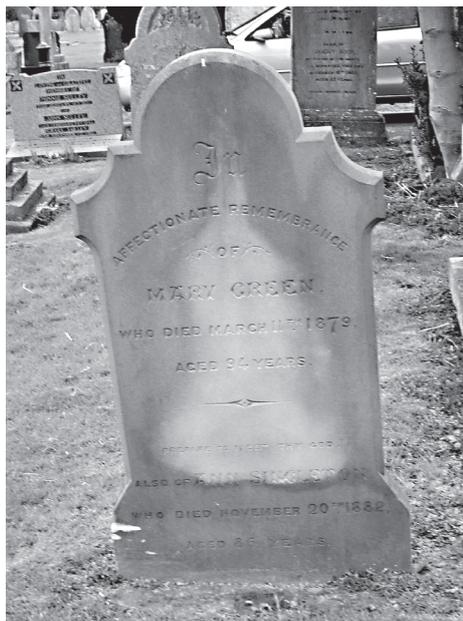
- A stillborn child or if the age of the child at the time of burial did not exceed one month - £1 fee.
- The body of a child exceeded one month but did not exceed 12 years - £3 fee.
- Of the body of a person whose age exceeded 12 years -£6 fee.



The old clubhouse – which started life as a fever hospital



CEMETERY BIER FOR CARRYING THE BODIES



GRAVESTONE MARY GREEN DIED 1882

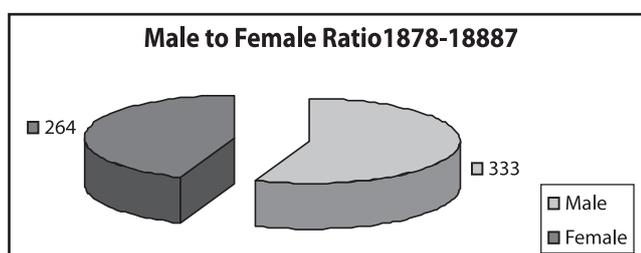
GRAVESTONES

An addition of a gravestone or a memorial added considerably to the cost as the charges below reveal:

- A flat stone not exceeding 7 feet by 3 feet - £3.
- Exceeding either or both of these lengths for each additional foot - £1.
- A Headstone or footstone not exceeding 3foot 6inches in height - £3, and exceeding that height - £4.

The youngest person to be buried was 20 hours at time of death and the oldest was 96 years.

Between 1878 and 1887 there were 597 burials 333 males (56%) and 264 females (44%) which averaged 60 burials a year.



In 1881 the Local Board minutes record the 'prevalence of smallpox in May, scarlet fever and typhoid prevailing in September.' The number of burials in this year was 77, an increase of 28% on the previous year.



GRAVE OF WILLIAM HENRY SYMINGTON 1841 – 1900, ONE OF THE MORE EXPENSIVE TOMBSTONES

In 1884 there were 85 burials a 42% increase on the previous year. The Local Board minutes state:

'in July outbreak of Scarlet Fever 35 cases 4 deaths principally from over crowding. Schools to be closed, compensation paid for clothes destroyed on six occasions.'

Over the decade the largest number of burials was of babies under one year of age 149 and 1to5 years 96 burials. Dr. Durrant the medical officer was very concerned about the number of deaths of children which amounted to 22 in 1895, 17 in 1896, 18 in 1897 and 24 in 1898. He said this was due to wrong feeding and treatment and urged the council to help disseminate the proper knowledge especially amongst the poor. Eventually the council gave annual grant to augment the salary of a Health Visitor, but it was not until 1915 before deaths fell to 5 or 6 per year.

Females burials show 34 entries representing 12 different types of work; 8 were for factory hands, 7 housekeepers, and 6 servants. Among the males there are 89 different occupations listed in the burial register. The greatest number were 36 labourers, followed by 13 grooms. It is interesting to note the changes in occupation from the coaching days to the beginning of the railways.

With the introduction of clean water and a sewage system health did start to improve but life expectancy was still low. In 1849 life expectancy was 33years 10 months in Market Harborough and 45 years 9 months in Great Bowden The death rate fell from 20 per thousand in 1880 to 15 per thousand in 1895. Life was still harsh for the majority of the population even after these improvements and from a health perspective remained risky well into the 20th century.