

Notes on the Kildwick Typhoid Epidemic – 9

How people reacted to the epidemic

It's very difficult to be certain how the people of Kildwick and Farnhill reacted at the time to the arrival of typhoid in their midst. However, we can reasonably assume that it began with a large degree of sympathy for J. J. Brigg, sick in Kildwick Hall; this being magnified when the first cases were reported in the village itself; and resolving into a combination of misery, bewilderment and fear as the extent of the epidemic became clear. There must also have been a number of questions that formed in their minds: "Why us?"; "How did this happen?"; and, the most difficult of all to answer, "Who is responsible?"

In this note, we will look at how people reacted to the authorities during the period of the epidemic, January to March 1899. Separate notes will examine how people reacted to the landlord of the Kildwick estate, Major Wilson; and how they continued to pursue the authorities for satisfactory answers to their questions after the epidemic itself had subsided.

Reactions to the authorities

Skipton Rural District Council held four meetings during the course of the epidemic: on January 21st, February 1st, February 18th and March 18th.

Each of these appeared designed to show that the local authorities were in no way responsible for the outbreak and that they were doing all that they could. But, in fact, they raised so many questions that were left unanswered, that they only served to result in increasing calls for a full public inquiry.

A summary of the reports of these meetings – along with the press comments on them – will show how, despite protestations that they wanted to provide a full explanation of the outbreak that would satisfy the people of the Kildwick, the council quickly split into two factions: those that supported calls from the village for a full public inquiry and those who, for whatever reason, were opposed.

Note: The following pages repeat some of the material used in previous Notes; particularly with regard to the RDC meetings on January 21st and February 1st. Unfortunately, this is necessary in order to provide a context to what happens later.

RDC meeting – January 21st 1899

By the time of this meeting there were 8 confirmed cases of typhoid in the village (two reported that day), in four separate households, and one death (Stanley Baldwin had died on the 15th).

This was the meeting at which the medical officer, Dr. Atkinson, reported the first cases of typhoid in the village and also that the initial diagnosis that Mr. Briggs was suffering from pneumonia had been changed to that of typhoid. Nevertheless¹:

... he had a letter from Dr. Scatterty [Mr Briggs' doctor], mentioning that in view of the other typhoid fever cases in the village, every precaution had been taken at the Hall, so that there could be no suspicion of the cases in the village being the result of infection from the Hall.

The council chairman expressed his doubts about this, and Dr. Atkinson continued:

There is nothing absolutely positive, but the probability is that the water supply has been contaminated.

Note here that Dr. Atkinson at no time said where he thought the contamination may have originated. Neither did he express any doubts as to the effectiveness of the precautions taken by Dr. Scatterty at Kildwick Hall.

The discussion ended with the council referring the matter to the surveyor to investigate.

There is no reaction to this meeting from the village reported in the press. This is very likely to be because the meeting took place on Saturday 21st and was, consequently, reported in the Craven Herald on Friday 27th and in the Keighley News on Saturday 28th. By the time the following issues of these newspapers were published (on February 3rd and 4th) events had moved on so far that any comments on the January 21st meeting were rendered purely academic.

From here on, however, the views from the villages were to be made very clear.

Special RDC meeting – February 1st 1899

This special meeting of Skipton RDC was convened specifically to discuss the worsening situation in Kildwick.

By this time the council's sanitary surveyor, Ascough Rodwell, had confirmed that the drains at Kildwick Hall were connected directly to the water supply for the village, and the water to the village had been cut-off.

Morton Banks isolation hospital was full and the authorities had been notified that no further cases could be accepted for the time being.

The epidemic had claimed five lives and there had been a total of 29 cases, in 13 households. In particular, John Barritt, the Kildwick stonemason, had seen the death of two of his children, with a further three remaining seriously ill. Mr. Barritt was by no means a poor man and his decision to instruct a solicitor to attend this RDC meeting was to produce some interesting reactions.

It is at this meeting that the two factions on the council start to adopt their positions, as reported in the Craven Herald² and Keighley News³.

Early on in the meeting one of the council members, Col. Maude tried to have the press excluded. This suggestion was dismissed by the chairman.

There was then a discussion as to whether Mr. Peacock, Mr. Barritt's solicitor should be allowed into the meeting. Councillor Fletcher moved a motion that Mr. Peacock be admitted, a position seconded by Councillor Smith. This motion was put to the vote and carried.

Towards the end of the meeting Mr. Peacock asked some questions of Dr. Atkinson, but one of the most critical – Why no visit was made to Kildwick between the 24th of December and the 16th of January ? – was ruled out-of-order by the Chairman.

There was then a short exchange between Mr. Peacock and Col. Maude:

Mr. Peacock said that he was desired by his client, Mr. Barritt, and other residents of Kildwick, to say that they wished the fullest investigation to be made of this epidemic and that he would ask on behalf of Mr. Barritt that the board should direct a local inquiry into the whole of the circumstances of the case.

Col. Maude: Does Mr. Barritt think there will be any advantage in a local inquiry, over an inquiry where we have all our officers ?

Mr. Peacock: You see, there are persons implicated in this issue whose interests are affected by what has gone before the council today and who might be able to give information and material assistance.

This final comment is clearly a reference to Major Wilson, who as landlord would have been responsible for maintaining the drains at Kildwick Hall and the water supply to the village.

The request for a wider inquiry was rejected.

The council did not consider an inquiry, such as had been suggested, necessary. They had every information before them, and everything that was possible was being done to alleviate the suffering of the patients and to prevent the spread of the disease.

At the end of the meeting:

Col. Maude thought the subject had been thoroughly ventilated. He had confidence that Dr. Atkinson had taken every precaution, and there was no doubt about the origin of the disease, and now that it had been dealt with they could only hope that the epidemic would soon subside. The only question was the future water supply of Kildwick. Nothing had been kept back.

Councillor Amcotts Wilson [the brother of Major Wilson] assured the council that Major Wilson, the owner of Kildwick Hall, was very anxious to do everything that was required of him.

But if they thought this would be the end of the matter, they were mistaken.

With the source of water contamination closed down on January 22nd, Dr. Atkinson had calculated that the last cases in the epidemic would present themselves by February 11th at the latest. Thus the epidemic would be over before the next RDC meeting. He was wrong.

RDC meeting – February 18th 1899

At this regular meeting of the RDC, the Kildwick epidemic again formed a major part of the agenda.

By this time there were 44 confirmed cases, in 22 households; the death toll was 8.

After an initial statement in which Dr. Atkinson said that he had hoped that epidemic would already have run its course, there were short discussions about setting up a temporary hospital in Kildwick – which was approved – and the supply of water to the village. Dr. Atkinson then went on to bring the council up-to-date with the latest developments.

It was after this that the meeting started to get a little heated. Coun. F. J. Wilson (presumably no relation to Major Wilson or Mr. Amcotts Wilson, his brother) said⁴:

No report that had been presented to them had been as alarming as the one they had heard that day. They had been thinking that they were out of the woods, having had no further cases since February 6th, and yet on the previous day there was a batch of five reported. One of the patients had actually been walking about [the village] a fortnight, trying to shake off the illness. What had become of the excreta in that case, and how would they know they would ever be through with it unless the excreta had been properly treated. The epidemic might go on until Kildwick, in addition to being decimated, was depopulated.

Then:

Councillor Fletcher asked if there was any likelihood of a local inquiry being held by the county council or the Local Government Board. Many people did not think the council had gone far enough in the matter. Personally he favoured a very strict inquiry into origin and culpability, if any. Only last week he saw that some body of men had been passing a vote of censure on the council for neglect. Of course that was ridiculous, but such rumours were afloat. No one but those who had heard them could have any conception of the ideas that were afloat in Kildwick and the neighbourhood.

This is the first public indication of any general feeling of discontent in Kildwick.

Needless to say, Dr. Atkinson was sticking to his position:

The Medical Officer replied that at the end of epidemic he should prepare a special report, copies of which would be sent to the County Council and Local Government Board, who would judge as to the necessity of an inquiry. He did not think anything could be gained by an inquiry. As to the origin of the outbreak, that was as plain as a pikestaff.

And that was it.

Except it wasn't.

Letter from John Barritt to the Craven Herald – February 21st 1899

Having already lost two children before the Special RDC meeting on February 1st, John Barritt lost his eldest daughter on February 8th. By the time he heard details of the February 18th meeting of the RDC, John Barritt was unable to remain silent any longer. His letter to the Craven Herald, dated February 21st and printed in the same issue as the report of the February 18th RDC meeting⁴, is a mixture of barely controlled anger and grief.

This letter is over 100 years old, but the feelings it expresses are crystal clear despite the passage of time:

THE TYPHOID EPIDEMIC AT KILDWICK

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CRAVEN HERALD

...

Whether any blame attaches to Skipton Sanitary Authority or not, it is universally acknowledged in this neighbourhood that the misery and suffering experienced at Kildwick during the past few weeks is largely due to the neglect on the part of the medical men in charge of Mr John Brigg, and the medical officer of health for the district.

It seems strange to us that Mr Brigg should be ill for three weeks, and attended by several of the cleverest doctors available, and yet the case was not notified to the medical officer of health as typhoid until December 24th.

It is also strange that Dr. Scatterty should tell Dr. Atkinson that there was no need for investigating the drains &c, at Kildwick Hall, as the case was an imported one. Yet Mr Brigg had been ill three weeks. Where is the proof that it was imported ?

According to Dr. Atkinson's own words, he received a full account from Dr. Scatterty of the manner in which the stools were being disposed of, and the precautions that were being taken to prevent the spread of the disease to the village below, yet (judging from his own words again) the means adopted by Dr. Scatterty were not reliable, for when asked before the Council he says "that the stools should be cremated where possible, or disinfected with a stronger disinfectant than carbolic then buried."

In the face of this conviction, and although he knew that the excreta were being put down the drain, the destination of which he did not know, he never investigated the matter, and never visited Kildwick until January 16th. The suffering of the people at Kildwick has been bitter indeed, but the bitterest thing about the whole affair is the thought of how much suffering might have been spared, and how many lives might have been saved, if Dr. Atkinson had promptly visited Kildwick as soon as the case was notified to him on December 24th.

...

And now as a last result of somebody's neglect, I have had six of my children stricken down by one blow. Three – my eldest son (27), principal manager of my business, my eldest daughter (23), her mother's right hand in everything, and another daughter, 20 years of age, have all been buried within 10 days, and the other three are still in the doctor's hands.

I think, Mr Editor, if you had looked at the other side of the picture you would have been better advised and shown more sympathy with the bereaved and suffering ones at Kildwick in this the most dreadful calamity that has been known in the country in ratio to population.

The dead, I know, cannot be brought back, but I think that the least that can be done is to hold a public inquiry and have the whole thing investigated in order to bring home to all concerned the fact that "neglect" is a cardinal sin, and that the weak-kneed shilly-shallying performance of duty on the part of those employed to safeguard the health of the district is little short of manslaughter.

Yours, &c.,

John Barritt

Kildwick, Feb. 21st, 1899

This letter was the start of John Barritt's personal campaign for a public inquiry. By the time of the next RDC meeting, he would have considerable support – including from two unlikely sources.

Letters from Drs. Dobie and Scatterty to John Barritt

Following his letter of February 21st, John Barritt must have been gratified – and possibly surprised – to receive letters of support from Mr. Brigg's two doctors.⁵

From Dr. Scatterty:

Sir, - My attention has just been drawn to your letter in the "Craven Herald" of the 24th inst., and, although I do not wish to refer to the judgement you pronounce, allow me to say that I am as anxious as you are that there should be an independent inquiry into the causes of the Kildwick typhoid epidemic.

Weeks ago I wrote to the medical officer of the Skipton Rural Sanitary Authority, and also to the medical officer of the West Riding County Council, stating my desire that a proper investigation should be made, and offering to give all the information I could regarding the subject of inquiry.

Permit me also, with all sincerity, to express my deepest sympathy with you in your terrible bereavement. I am, yours truly,

Wm. Scatterty

North Terrace, Keighley

28th February, 1899

From Dr. Dobie:

My dear Sir, - Although yours is a grief with which a stranger cannot intermeddle, I make free to say how much I feel for you and the other sufferers in the terrible calamities which have occurred. I will further take leave to say that your request for a thorough inquiry seems to me most reasonable, and I shall be glad to give any help to secure such a result. – Faithfully yours,

William Dobie

Townhead House, Keighley

28th February, 1899

Support from Parish Councils (except Farnhill)

The campaign started by John Barritt also received support from a number of the local parish councils at meetings held in the week before the Skipton RDC meeting on March 18th.⁵

Full support to the calls for a public inquiry was given by Bradley, Cononley, and Glusburn councils. Rather surprisingly, the only parish council which supported the RDC's position was Farnhill (which also covered Kildwick). At a special meeting of Farnhill Parish Council on March 15th convened specifically to discuss the call for a public inquiry into the outbreak it was recorded:

After long consideration and talk on the subject it was decided with all due respect and sympathy with the sufferers that this meeting feels disposed to give the Skipton District Council proper time to ventilate their case and then if not satisfactory the case can be reconsidered.⁸

However this was not the view of the majority of villagers. Just two days later a residents' meeting took place; as reported in the press:

Last night [March 17th] a public meeting of residents in Kildwick and Farnhill was held in the Kildwick National Schools in support of the movement for an independent inquiry into the typhoid epidemic. Mr. F. E. Slingsby, of Farnhill Hall, occupied the chair and there was a large gathering.

The Chairman said that the object of the meeting had his deepest sympathy. It was almost incredible that on the eve of the twentieth century such a terrible visitation should have been possible. There must have been carelessness somewhere, and carelessness in a case like this amounted to a crime.

Mr. F. A. Howard proposed the following resolution: "That this meeting views with disapproval the official action of the Farnhill Parish Council in refusing to urge the necessity of a public inquiry into the outbreak of typhoid fever in this district, and takes this opportunity of expressing its emphatic opinion that there should be a thorough investigation into the whole melancholy affair, and respectfully appeals to the Rural District Council to institute proceedings to obtain such."

The motion was seconded by Mr. William Sunderland, supported by Mr. T. R. Williams and, after some discussion, carried unanimously.

Note: Fred Howard was headmaster of Kildwick School. Both William Sunderland and T. R. Williams would subsequently become parish councillors.

RDC meeting – March 18th 1899

By the time the Rural District Council convened for its meeting on March 18th it will have seen:

- Mr Barritt's letter to the Craven Herald
- Letters from Dr. Scatterty and Dr. Dobie
- Motions in support of an inquiry from Bradley, Cononley, and Glusburn Parish Councils, and from the public meeting of Farnhill and Kildwick residents

With all this before them, surely they couldn't continue to refuse the request for an inquiry ?

In addition, Mr Barritt had also sent a letter to the chairman of the RDC which was read at the start of the meeting^{6,7}:

Kildwick, March 15th 1899

Gentlemen, - No doubt you will have seen an appeal made by me through the Press for a public inquiry into the cause or causes of the typhoid epidemic at Kildwick. I gather from the report of your last meeting that neither you nor Dr. Atkinson are favourable to such an enquiry. I enclose you copies of letters received by me from Mr. Brigg's medical attendants, saying that they are anxious for and willing to support such an inquiry.

Surely a Board that is entrusted to carry out the laws of health for the benefit of the people should be the last to withhold their support from a searching inquiry into the horrible calamity which has befallen this neighbourhood.

If you do not think it proper to support me in this matter, you may rest assured that I and many others will do our utmost to push it before the highest authorities. This feeling is shared by the entire population within a large radius from the little village of Kildwick.

This is a serious and solemn affair for me, ruining my own health, household and business, and it feels hard that a gentleman like Mr Amcotts Wilson (brother of the owner of the property) should take an interest in the Board's meetings since this affair happened, and, although a county councillor, still withhold his support from getting to the seat of the trouble. I am surprised at Dr. Atkinson treating this as an ordinary outbreak of typhoid.

The three [children] of mine to whom it proved fatal were literally poisoned; this was plain to be seen before death and after. The state of the water supply before it was [contaminated ?] with either typhoid or poison was a disgrace to both owner and authorities; in fact, a sewage farm for Kildwick Hall.

Hoping that you will give this your serious consideration I remain yours &c.

John Barritt

So, faced with this, how did the RDC respond ?

Dr. Atkinson distributed copies of his report which, he said:

... was the one that the Council had been awaiting for some time because it could not be completed until the outbreak was finished. It was a complete history of the epidemic from beginning to end. It was, moreover, a complete answer to any request for an inquiry.

In fact, this report (not reproduced here) was simply an extension of the report presented to the special meeting of the RDC on February 1st, bringing the details up-to-date. It didn't contain anything that was new; it didn't offer any explanation of how the infection moved from Kildwick Hall into the village, nor how it had been allowed to progress to such an extent.

One of the councillors was having none of it, and made his views clear:

Mr. A. Fletcher said that he did not agree with the medical officer when he said that all the particulars were contained in the report. He had carefully perused the report, and, as far as the medical officer was concerned, he dared say it did contain all he knew, but there was no information as to how the drainage from Kildwick Hall got astray, and as to whether the owner or occupiers of the hall were at fault, or the medical attendants of Mr. Brigg, and many other circumstances which the public in Kildwick and surrounding neighbourhood would like to be cleared up.

Here, then, we have the basis of the argument for a public inquiry: even though the Medical Officer's report was a comprehensive description of what had happened, that was no longer the major concern in the village. What the people wanted to know were why and how had it happened ?

Another councillor tried to take the sting out of Mr. Fletcher's comments:

Mr. Greenwood suggested that they should pass a resolution asking the Local Government Board to hold an inquiry into the epidemic if they thought fit after reading the report.

This was simply dodging the issue; but it was a wagon that other members of the council were only too willing to jump on to:

The Chairman: Don't you think the best way would be to leave this over for a month until we have read the report, and other people have read it, and then decide what to do ?

And:

Mr Tottie said that they were not in a position to express an opinion on the report at present.

But Mr Fletcher pressed with a resolution that, although delaying the matter, still committed the council to supporting the calls for a public inquiry:

That is probably correct as far as it goes, but this report contains no information, with the exception of the few extra cases that have occurred since the last meeting, beyond what we had already been put in possession of. He proposed, "That, in the opinion of the meeting, an official inquiry would be of public service, but, in view of the fact that a report had been prepared and forwarded to the Local Government Board and County Council, it is expedient to await their observations on the matter."

But the council closed ranks and this resolution wasn't even put to the vote. The long grass beckoned and the chairman of the committee helpfully kicked the ball in that direction:

The Chairman: Couldn't you put off your resolution for a month ?

Mr. Fletcher intimated that he was willing to be guided by the feeling of the council.

Mr. B. Smith proposed that further consideration of the epidemic be delayed for a month.

Mr. Fletcher seconded this motion, which was unanimously approved.

And so the issue was put to bed. However the calls for a public inquiry would simply not go away, and at the next RDC meeting the mask of genteel politeness would be discarded altogether and extremely angry words would be exchanged over the council table.

But by then the epidemic was over.

Details of the meeting, held on April 15th 1899, and other aspects of the aftermath of the epidemic will form that basis of a separate note.

What next – can you help ?

Do you or your family have any additional information on the Kildwick typhoid epidemic ? If so, the Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group would like to hear from you. Please email history@farnhill.co.uk.

Alternatively, if you are interested in any aspect of the local history of the two villages, why not come along to one of our monthly meetings ? See the website for details.

References

- 1 Craven Herald, January 27th 1899
- 2 Craven Herald, February 3rd 1899
- 3 Keighley News, February 4th 1899
- 4 Craven Herald, February 24th 1899
- 5 Keighley News, March 18th 1899
- 6 Craven Herald, March 24th 1899
- 7 Keighley News, March 25th 1899
- 8 Farnhill Parish Council; minutes of special meeting 15/3/1899