

" ... absent; sick ... "

Childhood illnesses are still with us, and any close-knit community like a school will be subject to epidemics from time to time. The physical "closeness" of a Victorian schoolroom must have made the possibility of illness even greater: "a great many of the children have heavy coughs and colds". Staff were not immune. Part of the Mistresses' job was to record the absences of their staff, and they did so faithfully. When, in March 1877, Eleanor Lilley saw fit to take "Edith Downs' class two mornings for Arithmetic and <[>found] them very backwards" she later had words with the young Pupil Teacher about the state of her class. She can hardly have been surprised that Edith Downs was then promptly absent for the next week "suffering from "face-ache"". "Neuralgia", "indisposition", "sickness" were regular reasons for staff absence, as well as problems caused by the conditions in which the teachers had to work. However, no member of staff at Glemsford School ever managed to better the excuse of the Mistress of the Girls' School who, on 10 December 1875, recorded that "I have been absent since Wednesday morning on account of illness occasioned by a fright." She does not tell us what the fright was. As early as the 1890's, staff, particularly the Head Mistress, are found to be absent because of "influenza"; children, on the other hand, had to make do with "heavy colds" until the great 'flu epidemic of 1918/19. Rebecca Hewison, a Pupil Teacher in the Girls' School was absent for seven weeks in 1882 "on account of Erysipelas" - St Antony's Fire. With one major exception, however, most staff absence in the Infants' School was limited to the odd day for "the reasons stated" or even for "losing the train at Cambridge".

Hannah Wood came to Glemsford as an Assistant Mistress in the Infants' School on 9 September 1884, having previously been employed at Queensborough Board School. Her salary was to be £2. 18s 4d per month (£35 per year). On Tuesday 13th January, 1885, a day when the village roads were "impassable because of snow", Miss Wood reported sick. By Monday 19th January, she was "ill of smallpox". On the same day, Louisa Bigg (formerly a Pupil Teacher and now Assistant Mistress) was ordered "to be absent from today by ... Dr Waring, she having been to the house where Miss Wood is on Friday". Miss Bigg resumed her duties on 2 February. Miss Wood never returned to the Infants' School. At a Board meeting held on 3 February, the Board "allowed Miss Wood 10/- per week for the next four weeks". In those days before statutory sick pay, at a time when she might well have been left to the mercy of the system of "no work,

no pay", Miss Wood's pay was extended for a further month from 1 March, at the same rate.

The Girls' School log throws further light on the case of Miss Wood. On April 13th 1885 "the assistant from the Infants' School who has been away for three months having had small pox, has commenced duties in this school". The Board accounts confirm her survival with the resumption of her full salary in the May payments. Hannah Wood was treated with a lot of understanding, receiving sympathetic help with the older girls from the Head Mistress, Miss Stevens, "not having been accustomed to teaching girls". Miss Wood eventually left Glemsford in April 1888 (although, intriguingly, in 1891, aged 24 she is recorded as being a visitor lodging at the Crown Inn on Brook Street). The threat and fear of small pox remained. Later in 1885, on June 30th, "Mr Underwood visited the school to request that we should be careful in seeing that the children left the school yard & went direct to their respective homes, as there is a case of small pox near the school."

Small pox does not appear again in the log books. Dramatic and destructive as that illness could be, it is more significant that, by 1885, Miss Wood's illness could result in the survival of the victim and not result in anything approaching an epidemic. No child is recorded as having contracted the disease. Vaccination had been officially compulsory since 1852.

There were enough other serious threats to health which struck more fiercely and more frequently.

The Infants' School had not been open 6 months when, on 4 September 1874, Annie Forbes made this sombre entry in her log book: "One little girl - Ellen Underwood , died this week of Scarlet Fever." A week later "one little boy - Albert Butcher , died...": again, the cause was Scarlet Fever. Throughout the first thirty years of operation, the school faced epidemics of Scarlet Fever of frightening regularity. The 1874 outbreak continued throughout the autumn and winter. No more deaths are recorded, but on October 30th "a great number of children are ill with fever". The Girls' School suffered at the same time. In December, many pupils were still absent, according to Miss Forbes, "from fever". Unfortunately, Miss Forbes' successor, Eleanor Lilley, is less forthcoming about the causes of absence, but even she notes that, on 1 December 1876, attendance had been "... bad chiefly owing to sickness in the village ... I sent several children home whose brothers and sisters have the Scarlet Fever". There was another mild outbreak in the summer of 1881 but the Harvest Holiday

intervened after the first cases were reported, and no further cases are reported in that year. The next outbreak is first noted on 5 December 1882, in the Girls' School, with the death of Euphemia Salter. "Very few children are present" in the Infants' School on 11 December "owing to fever in the village". On December 15th "School closed for three weeks by order of Dr Holden <[>the Medical Officer of Health] in consequence of Scarlet Fever among the chn: ..." Apart from maintaining this form of quarantine, Dr Holden insisted that the "Schools ... be fumigated before the chn. reassemble" . School duly recommenced on 8 January 1883 but there were "many chn. still absent owing to fever" and a fortnight later "several chn." were still absent for the same reason. Two or three months then seem to have passed without further cases. Not that all was quiet. The end of what seems to have been a fairly mild winter was greeted by a major epidemic of whooping cough. Then, on 7 May 1883, there were "several fresh cases of Scarletina in the Parish" . On 15 May, there were again "Several fresh cases of fever. Attendance is badly affected."

Four years later, on 4 October 1887, "Sydney Fitch was sent home on account of Scarlet Fever in the family" . By 17 October, one half of the Girls' School was absent, either with the fever or because of illness in the family, and absences were still being recorded the following February, both in the Girls' and Infants' Schools. Further outbreaks occurred in July 1890, December 1893, June 1895 and November/December 1896.

The 1896 outbreak inevitably carried over Christmas into the New Year. December had been wet and stormy, and January began similarly wet, before heavy snow set in in mid-month. The Mistress by this time was Eleanor Bowrey, and it is worth looking a little more closely at her log entries for a devastating six weeks:

1897 January 4th School reopened this morning after the Christmas Holidays. Attendance very poor to-day, much sickness being still prevalent among the children. ...

January 5th School visited this morning by Mr Clarke. Received notice that Katie Pleasance, aged 4 years, who was present on Dec. 18th, died yesterday afternoon of Scarlet Fever. January 7th A very rainy morning reduced the attendance to 69, the greater number of absentees being the lower classes. ...

Friday January 8th Another very wet day bringing the numbers in the morning down to 83, and in the afternoon to 75... Three fresh cases of Scarlet Fever are reported by the Attendance Officer today.

January 11th Received notice that Elizabeth Boreham, aged 6 years, died on Saturday last of Scarlet Fever. The numbers are still very poor indeed owing to the prevalence of sickness in the village.

January 14th The attendance is still very low and fluctuating.

January 18th ... The heavy fall of snow on Saturday evening has revented many of the little ones from attending. ...Received notice that Florrie Watts aged 3 years, will not be able to return during the winter months.

January 19th ...Gertrude Hartley aged 6 years is obliged to remain away from school as her brother is suffering from Scarlet Fever. Attendance today a little improved being 67 this morning and this afternoon.

January 20th Weather still very severe, and numbers consequently much lower than the amount of sickness which is prevalent would account for....

January 21st Received notice that Nathan Webster is suffering from Scarlet Fever.

January 22nd ...The inclement weather still continues and the attendance keeps very low in consequence. ...

January 25th The weather still being very severe, very few of the younger children could get to school today. Numbers 56 a.m. and 55 p.m..

January 27th The attendance has improved a little today, the numbers being 60 in the morning, and 65 in the afternoon.

January 29th [End of School Year]

February 1st ... Several children who were kept away by the severe weather returned to school today.

February 2nd School closed this afternoon, the room being required for examination purposes; - also from today by order of the Sanitary Authorities, for disinfection and cleaning.

Even for Miss Bowrey, it is unusual to find so many daily entries. Normally the log was completed weekly. When the school reopened on 22 February, children were still noticeably absent. The total on roll before February 1st had been 145; transfers to the Upper Departments brought it down to 99. Fresh cases of "Scarletina" were reported in March, and one further death is mentioned on 12 March; although the cause is not given, it is probably safe to blame the long-lasting scourge of that winter. Miss Bowrey thus had the sad task of

recording the deaths of three of her pupils in the space of three months. Whatever the traumas of the present day, it is hard to imagine the sorrow this must have caused a dedicated teacher, even if we accept the fact that times were harder then.

Scarlet Fever broke out again in September 1902, in a mild form, but serious enough for the Medical Officer of Health to visit the school on 23rd to "see children individually in order to find if any symptoms of Scarlet Fever were prevalent".

It would be wishful thinking to imagine that Scarlet Fever were the only serious illness in children with which the parents and teachers of Glemsford had to contend. Seven months after the 1897 outbreak, Measles appeared. Even today, the medical authorities emphasise how serious this common childhood ailment can be. Between October and Christmas of that dreadful year, it ran through Glemsford School like wildfire. On 30 November "Charles Copsey returned ... after being absent through Measles for six weeks". Although it was not always so serious, Measles took its toll on attendance, as in 1901, when "the spreading of a very mild form" of the disease "pulled the attendance down considerably" to an average of 72.3 in the week ending 8 March, from a total "on books" of 140.

But Measles could be savage. May 1903 presents the worst outbreak recorded in the 30 years. "Several cases" were notified on 20th; by 25th May only 114 infants were present out of 171. 48 of the 57 absentees were "notified as cases of Measles. The epidemic has apparently developed amazingly during the last four days" . That day, the school received a notice from Dr R.N. Waring of Cavendish to the effect that: "Owing to the prevalence of Measles in the Parish ... of a severe type, I would advise that the Board Schools be closed for three weeks from the above date."

Over a month later, on June 29th, the school re-opened. Miss Bowrey reported that the epidemic had proved "more obstinate than was first anticipated". A further certificate from Dr Waring supports this in more stark detail, describing the "Measles of a severe type" which had been "accompanied by many cases of pneumonia...". However serious that outbreak was, it was only an echo of many similar occurrences.

The log books reveal five previous epidemics, in 1878, 1886, 1891, 1894, and again in 1896. The outbreak of November 1886 persisted until at least the end of January 1887. On 8 December 1886, the afternoon register was "not marked until 2.45 p.m. - having to wait

the decision of the Chairman of the Board as to whether the children were to be dismissed or not, 136 being absent <[>out of 167] most of whom have Measles or sisters or brothers ill with it". School was closed that afternoon, by order of the Board. It did not re-open until 24 January - a closure of six weeks, and attendance did not pick up for another month. On 29 January "79 children have been absent for the whole week". This entry also mentions in a matter-of-fact way that "two names <[>have been] taken off registers on account of death". No cause is mentioned, but since this whole series of entries concentrated on the Measles outbreak, it is likely that any other cause would have been mentioned by name.

In the summer of 1894, after a very high average attendance of 160 in the week ending 7 June, numbers had slumped to 50 by 11th, and to an all-time low of 12 by the afternoon of 18 June. Hardly surprisingly, the school did not re-open after the week's holiday at the time of the Village Fair. In fact, the school stayed closed until 16 July. No deaths are reported, but attendance took another three weeks to recover.

A typical pattern of illness in the village is shown in 1896, when Measles formed part of a two-pronged assault on Glemsford, its partner being Whooping Cough. Attendance was badly hit, but for little more than a month.

Often, one severe illness either accompanied or quickly followed another. Living conditions may have had a lot to do with this. Houses were poor and smaller, and families larger. Glemsford in the 1880's had a population very similar in size to that of the 1980's, but with none of the new estates. Overcrowding, with its attendant hygiene problems, was rife. Undoubtedly, the standard of living was lower. Medical wisdom was relatively unsophisticated. Medical attention was limited by its cost. Such a combination of factors would have left the ordinary population wide open to the many infections, and the weakening effect of one illness may well have opened the way for other infections.

Ten outbreaks of Whooping Cough are recorded between 1874 and 1901. Four of them rode on the back of recorded outbreaks of Measles or Scarlet Fever. Between 1874 and 1890, there were five major outbreaks, while between 1891 and 1901 there were another five. All the indications are that the 1890's represented "Hard Times" for the people of Glemsford, and for the children in particular.

Researchers into the lives of ordinary people, like George Ewart Evans, have already noted how often "cures" for Whooping Cough appear in the traditions of East Anglia; one such was the meat, and particularly the liver, of a roast or fried mouse. It is a reasonable supposition that cures would be many for a complaint that was ever-present. Teachers in the Infants' School often had to deal with children seized by the fits of coughing and vomiting which are typical of "the cough". Time and again the log records such children being sent home.

The outbreak which hit the school hardest was that which broke out at the end of the Harvest Holiday, in September 1901. Miss Bowrey makes no mention of the illness before school closed on 2 August (although there was a small-scale outbreak of Mumps affecting "the most regular of scholars" in late July) but by the re-opening on 2 September "... Only 99 scholars were present owing to the prevalence of Whooping Cough in the village. ... The number on books is now 168, so that 69 children were absent today and many of those in school come from infected houses". By 27 September, with 162 enrolled, "the number of certified cases of Whooping Cough is now 78". Since nearly half her children were ill, it is hardly surprising that "attendance is still deplorably poor" on 4 October, by when the average weekly attendance had fallen to 67 out of a new roll of 182. This percentage (nearly 37%) was little improved by 18 October (50.4%). After that, matters began to improve only gradually.

Miss Bowrey felt deeply for her pupils. As November began, she wrote: "many children are still suffering so severely from the Whooping Cough that they are quite unfit to return to school". She had other reasons to be worried. The annual visit by His Majesty's Inspector was due on 12 November, by when attendance had only reached an average of 61%. Since the school depended so much on a successful inspection, an anxious Mistress revealed a lot about the severity of the epidemic when, as early as 18 October, she felt obliged to note that "the work of the school is ... very much behind the usual points reached by this time of a school year ". Perhaps this was written for the eyes of HMI. The reason was painfully clear. To give him his due, Mr Claughton made allowances in his report. His report, received on 7 April 1902, states: "the attendance during the Autumn has been very low on account of Whooping Cough. ..." Miss Bowrey was probably relieved to read his later comment: "The general character of the teaching is quite satisfactory".

The impression that the 1890's and early 1900's were difficult times is supported in dramatic fashion by two other disturbing "medical" references. On 19 February 1895, Harry Starling and his sister Bertha from the Girls' School were sent home because there was "Typhoid Fever in the house" . Mercifully, this was a totally isolated example, and no death is mentioned. Even so, at the end of a century which had seen so much progress in Public Health matters, and at a time when the school was about to be used as a base for "Water Board" enquiries, it is a shock to find mention of such an illness. Less surprising are the cases of Diphtheria, which is often regarded, with Scarlet Fever, as the major threat to the health of children at that time. As surprising as the outbreak of Typhoid is the fact that Diphtheria is not mentioned until December 1895, and then only "in one family" with no apparent further cases. The next reference underlines the fear with which Diphtheria was greeted. On 1 June 1898, Mr Oscar Clarke sent the school a note ordering that Thirza Mead and her sister Flora (from the Girls' School) were to be excluded "on account of there being Diphtheria in the house". Matters moved remarkably fast. The following day, the pair were readmitted, a "certificate having been received from Dr Waring contradicting Mr Clarke's note". There was no outbreak. When the disease did next strike, in 1900 and 1901, it was much more serious.

On 21 September 1900, attendances were well up, "but a case of Diphtheria is reported...." Miss Bowrey continues to record "the enforced absence of two little ones in the same family". Without mentioning names, she had, the following week, to write that "the two cases of Diphtheria reported last week ended fatally on Monday and Wednesday of this week...".

Deaths among the Infants happened occasionally. Children came and went, through removal or ill-health. Even so, to record the deaths of pupils whom she had brought through the school, for whom she cared, must have been painful for Miss Bowrey. They were her "little ones". It is difficult to believe she did not feel the pain of their deaths. When the school was closed because of an epidemic, she must have feared the worst.

The 1900 cases of Diphtheria did not develop into an epidemic. Attendance through the autumn remained high. On the last day of the Christmas term, Miss Bowrey was able to "leave the Assistant in charge" so that she could leave "with the 10 a.m. train" ... "not being able to get home at all today ..." unless she did so.

School re-opened on 7 January 1901. On 11th January, " a case of Diphtheria is reported - Aubrey Waterhouse ... living at Duff's Farm. This necessitates the absence from school of his brother, Leslie, and of Herbert Upson. ..." Six days after the death of Queen Victoria on 22 January, things had taken a turn for the worse: "Dr Holden (Sanitary Inspector) visited. Owing to the increase of serious cases of Diphtheria in the village during the last few days, the Dr ordered the Infants' School to be closed until further notice to obviate the danger as much as possible. ..."

The closure only lasted a fortnight, but, on 15 February, attendance was "very poor ... owing partly to the convalescents still being absent ...". Diphtheria had obviously struck far harder than on previous occasions. The inevitable tragedy is revealed on 28 February when the school "received notice that George Cross, aged 7 years (nearly) who has not attended school since January 25th had died on the previous day, of Diphtheria ..." A mild form of Measles followed, but George Cross' death is the last record of Diphtheria before 1903.

Among the relatively few deaths recorded in the 30 years, there is a much broader picture of disruption and upheaval to the work of the school. The need to keep working, the need to please the Board, the need to please the inspector, the difficulties of coping with a group of children who were immediately affected by bad weather in their struggle to get to school were all pressures on the staff. But add to these concerns, the threat of disease, and the reality of dying pupils, and the reality of facing their classmates, and the teachers' work must, at times, have been dispiriting and harrowing.

There were also the other , more irritating than life-threatening ailments to cope with. Complaints like Mumps were serious enough to deserve mention in 1882, 1892, 1899 and 1901. In July 1899 an outbreak of Mumps warranted the Medical Officer of Health ordering that "all the children from infected houses, as well as those suffering from "mumps" must be exempted from attendance owing to the rapid spread of the disease" , Pupil Teachers were obviously susceptible, because Constance Reeve reported sick with a sore throat on 17 July but by 26th "will not be able to resume her duties until after the Harvest Holiday, as her reported "sore throat" has developed into "Mumps"".

Chicken Pox is mentioned once, as is Water Pox (apparently related) in 1881. "Skin Disease" appears several times, although the actual form is only rarely identified, as with Ringworm in 1881 and 1892.

Staff were concerned with hygiene. On 13 October 1890, Miss Roberts was "obliged to refuse Laura B. admission into school because of her filthy condition " and on 1 October 1902, Miss Bowrey went beyond even her usual level of detail in describing how "William J. (6) has habitually come to school in such a dirty condition that he is absolutely unfit to mix with other children ...".

After repeated warnings had been unsuccessful he was " ... sent home this morning and the Attendance Officer followed him to impress the necessity for constant cleanliness upon his mother, in order that health and comfort may be maintained in the school".

Perhaps she was prompted by that year's outbreak of Fever, but Miss Bowrey also made sure that Dorothy and Bessie X were sent home for the same reason. William's mother was obviously not amused.

"The Attendance Officer reported later that Mrs J. indignantly refused to make the boy clean..."

She was told he would not be readmitted. Pride was swallowed within a couple of days when

"William J. returned looking very much better for the cleansing which both his person and his clothes had received. ..."

The girls stayed away for another three days before returning "much cleaner".

Epidemic or isolated outbreak, dirt or disease, problems of health were a constant fact of life for the teachers and children.