Health and Sickness in Chagford in the 1920s

Jean Rhodes

After the turbulence of the Great War, people in the small town of Chagford experienced changes in health provision and the related effort to provide suitable housing. Although the aetiology of disease wasn't fully understood, the 1920s saw attempts to contain some infections. Isolation hospitals housed children with such diseases as scarlet fever and diphtheria. Housing improvements and new builds were implemented by national and local government and land was made available for growing vegetables on allotments. The local school taught not only the Christian religion and the 'three Rs' but also interest in local agricultural practices.

In April 1921, the medical officer of health (MOH) for Okehampton Rural District, which covered Chagford, stated that 'small districts like ours sometimes go for months or even years without a case of infectious disease which it is necessary to isolate'. He noted that there was no *local* hospital for infectious diseases, but 'In these days of rapid motor transport, a few miles in an ambulance are quickly covered and with reasonable care without risk to the patient.' The nearest general hospital available to Chagford patients at this time was the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. Infectious diseases were treated at the Whipton Hospital, Exeter.[1]

The same MOH report commented that in Chagford:

> The housing conditions of the Borough were apparently proceeding in a very satisfactory manner for such an old town. In addition to houses being built to supply the growing population, many of the old and unsatisfactory cottages were replaced by new ones. Had it not been for the war, there is no doubt that housing needs would have been well met. The stoppage of building due to the war and cost of building since, has led to a shortage of houses. Houses that should have been closed are still occupied and there are several cases of overcrowding. 9 houses were found unfit and could not be made so in 1919. 12 more are fast getting into a condition which will cause them to be condemned.[2]

Written Evidence

Written evidence was obtained from the daily work records of a blacksmith, William Stoneman (WS); the personal diary of farmer Walter Perryman at Yeo Farm Dairies (YFD);

[1] Devon Heritage Centre 2393A/R/1, *Annual reports of the Medical Officer of Health for Okehampton Rural District.*
[2] Ibid.

the parish church magazines (P Mag); the parish council minutes for the 1920s (PC Mins) and the School Log Book (SLB).

1920

20 February 1920: 'County Councillor May was requested to support purchase of Westcott Farm by the County Council so as it can be let for agricultural purposes, as the parish has a need for 100 acres of allotment land.' (PC Mins)

28 February 1920: 'Meeting with County Councillor to consult him in respect of allotments for ex-soldiers.' (PC Mins)

9 March 1920: 'Estimated cost of Allotment Land (if bought at Westcott) not less than £7 per acre. When men asked if they were prepared to pay that sum they unanimously said no but would be prepared to pay £3. Decided to take no land unless it could be let for a sum not exceeding £3 per annum.' (PC Mins)

7 June 1920: Allotment Officer suggests Council should choose suitable men and suitable land and seek compulsory power to secure it.' (PC Mins)

1 August 1920: 'Hospital Sunday: For many years past Chagford has raised a larger sum than any other parish in Devon.' (P Mag)

10 August 1920: 'Mr. L. Hill Moorlands 1 new bottom and solder lamp. 1s.9d.' (WS)

17 September 1920: 'Another case of diphtheria.' (SLB)

20 September 1920: 'Another case of diphtheria reported today' (SLB)

18 October 1920: 'School Dentist visited today and treated scholars in the cottage opposite the school. There were several absentees and refusals. Many parents attended.' (SLB)

26 October 1920: 'Duchy Forest: 1 new twibule 14s. 6d.' (WS) [Twibule – a blade with an adze at one end and an axe at the other.]

1921

4 January 1921: 'Duchy Forrester: Stone sharp 2 picks 8d.' (WS)

14 January 1921: 'About 10 children excluded on account of scabies.' (SLB)

8 February 1921: 'Mr. S. Dicker Drewston: two new bottoms to lanterns.' (WS)

1 March 1921: 'Mr. W. Aggett Bellhanger 8 pieces iron 6½lbs 4s.9d.' (WS)

17 March 1921: 'Devon County Council offered a portion of Nattadon Farm to the Council for Allotments.' (PCMins)

16 June 1921: 'Mr Brommel Husson [Hurston] mending knife bar 4s.6d. 34 sections riveting and rivets in 2 bars £1.1s.0d.' (WS)

28 July 1921: 'Messrs. S. Rice, H. Endacott, G. Partridge, W. Brimblecombe, H. Salt and C. Matthews were chosen by lot to be tenants of the six cottages at Dennis Park.' (PC Mins)

27 October 1921: 'In connection with Rat Week it was decided to obtain a supply of poison for the drains and storehouse.' (PC Mins)

25 November 1921: 'Public Meeting approves Parish Council to enclose part of the Common for recreation.' (*Western Times*)

1922

7 February 1922: 'Mr. Perryman Yeo: 1 cogwheel for chaffcutter. 10s.9d.' (WS)

16 February 1922: 'John Tarr Rushford Mill 2 shares 5s.' (WS)

23 March 1922: 'Mr Lambert Middlecott gauge wheel 5s.0d 1 axle 1key1 washer 2s.0d.' (WS)

17 June 1922: 'Yeo Farm: two men, two horses, and carts drawing two loads of vags from Dartmoor till dinner time.' (YFD) [Peat turves for fire]

15 August 1922: 'Duchy Forester 12 feathers 9d.' (WS)

6 December 1922: 'Lloyd Hill: 2 tares 6 feathers 2s.6d.' (WS)

1923

11 January 1923: 'The War Office having received an offer of £200 for the Drill Hall in New Street, Council withdrew its' bid of £160.' (PCMins)

23 January 1923: 'Wm. Hutchings, Brimstone Down, paid 16s. for oak board for the clam at Glassy Steps [over the River Teign].' (DRO/3963M/B3/4)

1924

29 January 1924: 'The Fire Brigade Captain Mr. W. Weeks reported Fire Engine will not go in Mr. Morcombe's car unless the roof is taken off. Decided to have *2 planks* to run engine on

loading and unloading. A bill for taking the engine to Moreton to be weighed. The weight was 15cwt.' (PC Mins)

16 April 1924: 'Should I be spared to continue to Christmas, my service will be 45 complete years as Head Teacher of this school. I have two pupils of the third generation under my tuition, whose parents and grandparents were taught by me in this school.' (SLB)

1925

28 March 1925: 'Lower Middlecott farmhouse destroyed by fire.' (WSL)

27 July 1925: 'Two cases of diphtheria reported this morning. Closed school today.' (SLB)

30 July 1925: 'Report that the rents of houses would be 4 non-parlour 6/- and 4 parlour type 7/-. The District Council asked to continue building another 16 houses.' (PCMins)

31 August 1925: 'Re-opened school this morning. 94 absent 16 present. Children being kept home by parents as diphtheria still prevailing.' (SLB)

2 September 1925: 'No children present this morning. Dr Gameston, District M.O.H. has advised closure.' (SLB)

13 October 1925: 'Gertrude Greenwood has diphtheria. The attendance has suffered on this account. The Medical Officer for Okehampton District visited. He suggested good fires should be started to keep a good circulation of fresh air.' (SLB)

30 November 1925: 'Council agreed to the stopping up of the path leading from the end of New Street to Nattadon Common and creation of a new path through Dennis Park Houses.' (PCMins)

1926

27 September 1926: 'Dr. Stocks came to examine all goitre cases among boys.' (SLB)

1927

31 March 1927: 'I should like to appeal on behalf of the country children, some of whom walk three miles to school. Could not some means of conveyance be provided during the winter, if only one way, to secure their attendance.' (SLB)

16 September 1927: '"Health Week": suggested a lecture on Infectious Diseases for children.' (SLB)

1928

20 April 1928: ‘Request for conveyance for long-distance children has been found impossible. They have therefore attended with reasonable regularity on account of almost continuous bad weather.’ (SLB)

1929

3 July 1929: ‘C.G. Hayter-Hames Esq. agreed to take out bearings in Mill, insert new half principal in roof of boiler house and bolt same to old principal and repair, slating over same, to repair holes in roof of stable and loose slates on cottage roof and repair slating on Kennel roof, fix 13 feet of skirting, 1 length of pipe, to unfix 2 cornices of bricks on top of boiler house chimney and provide material for the Sum of £4.10s.0d.’ (GSEB)

12 August 1929: ‘Mr. Gideon Webber’s legacy to be used for improvements at Padley Common.’ (PC Mins)

14 September 1929: ‘Capt. Grieg arrived with Gadfly aeroplane.’ (HWP Diary)

6 October 1929: ‘Started fires today and country children provided with hot cocoa at midday.’ (SLB)

5 December 1929: ‘Doctor C.H. Berry, requested extra arm to be fixed on Waye Cross signpost directing people to the Dartmoor Sanatorium at Thorn.’ (PC Mins)

Oral Evidence

Oral evidence was recorded in 1997 with five Chagford women and one man who were all young in the 1920s. They are Mrs Edith Smerdon, b. 1906 (ES); Mrs Amy Harvey, born 1909 (AH); Mr Leslie Stoneman, b. 1910 (LS); Mrs Edith Northway, b. 1913 (EN); Mrs Ethel Rice, b. 1913 (ER); and Mrs Dorothy Kingsland, b. 1925 (DK). Mrs Harvey and Mrs Kingsland are included, despite being born in Throwleigh and South Zeal respectively, because their medical services were centred in Chagford.

Edith Smerdon

Edith considered her family lived in ‘quite different times’. Agriculture was the main occupation of the area. The most important factors in her life – both on the family farm of her childhood and after marriage on her husband’s farm – seem to relate to her immediate and extended family, who lived nearby. Marriage was only possible when she had made arrangements to look after her ageing parents and her husband’s widowed mother – a network of mutual support still evident in rural areas in the 1920s. ‘We’d never of got married if – we didn’t leave our old people – they needed us at home. You either went in with your in-laws or you would never have married.’

While her chores were mainly domestic – cleaning, cooking, butter and cream making – her brothers helped with sowing potatoes, chaff cutting, bringing in animals, feeding and milking. Many of these processes are now automated. Edith's family coped with minor illnesses and accidents, often preferring traditional, inexpensive remedies to prescribed or proprietary medicines. Although they did call the doctor and visit the surgery occasionally, on the whole:

> We didn't go – no – 'cos you see – I remember the bills – the bill would be – Four Pound which – you'd have to sell several chicken and that – to raise that – Four Pounds is nothing now to look at but it was an awful lot then. So you didn't go to the doctor.

While the men often had insurance for themselves with a Friendly Society,

> … there was nothing for the women and children. If they were sick and had the doctor, the man had to pay for them himself. That meant they were at death's door before they sent for the doctor. Everyone was frightened to be ill.

In minor illnesses, traditional, inexpensive remedies were used:

> Inflammation of the eyes was treated with an extract of house leek which grew in the granite walls – Mum would put them in butter muslin, bruise them with the handle of a knife, then squeeze it in your eye – and you know it always worked – always coored them.

They also 'used turpentine a lot – red flannel was supposed to be better than creamy flannel – but if you had a cold on your chest, you sprinkled some turpentine on the flannel', a cure used for her father's bronchitis and her own pleurisy.

Preventative methods were not unknown:

> Mother used to make, for the spring, to keep you well as children – she had to hide it away from us, we called it brimstone – that's sulphur isn't it – a yellow powder – mix that with golden syrup, and you'd have a teaspoon of that every morning. We would always want more because it was lovely. That was to clear you out and keep you healthy for the spring.

Thorns in the finger were treated with carbolic acid. Warts and ringworm were charmed away by a neighbour. 'You didn't have to pay him any money, you could give him an ounce of tobacco – or any eggs.' Edith was in bed for two months during the 1918 flu epidemic; and although 'another one in Chagford had it at the same time', the family attributed her brother's diphtheria to 'paunching rabbits out the back of the pigs' houses where the drains came out'.

Amy Harvey

Amy was born at home:

> Everybody was born at home in those days. My grandfather built a house for us. He was village blacksmith, the third generation; Captain of the Bells; church verger and sexton; he was everything in the village really. When he died we moved into the forge – until I was married and Dad had been rushed into hospital with a hernia and had to give up work, and they sold it. We were the Hills of Throwleigh. Three grandparents had 10 children each.

Asked whether a doctor or nurse attended the birth of her sister, she said 'Oh there were no doctors then, they were all midwives for births.'

Her mother's father came from Shobrooke on the family farm:

> He was in charge of all the horses. They had a lot of cart-horses in those days – horses and cows and grandmother had all the poultry – two beautiful apple orchards. Grandpa Hill was also taxi driver of the village by cart or wagon.

Asked about the 1918 flu epidemic, Amy Harvey said:

> We didn't have it in Throwleigh. Several died in Chagford and then the lesser one in 1922 – my sister – well it was life and death with her for at least a week. Hers developed into – which was very serious in those days – double pneumonia – and somehow or other – there were three retired nurses in the village – and they took the duty of being day nurses and somehow or other they got a night nurse – but I'm quite sure my parents couldn't have afforded to do it – but I've got a feeling the village did it you know – and every morning they used to put a bulletin in the shop window. It was Dr. Hughes[3] here then and he was one of the few people who had a car and he came out from Chagford to Throwleigh three times a day and pulled her through.

Asked what the treatment was, she replied:

> They just waited for the point of – oh – crisis, didn't they? Then they made a turn for the better. I know my mother said the bill was as much as my father earned in a year but she paid it bit by bit – not all at once. The nurses were just helping out of kindness – they didn't expect any reward.

Asked about family lifestyle, she said:

> We were out a lot in the fresh air. I don't look on us as being always sick – no – pretty fit – and good wholesome food – freshly prepared – not like some of the stuff they have today – we had five gardens you know – with all those vegetables – everything we ate we grew – and we had room to keep poultry.

They kept a pig and preserved it in a big earthenware bath. They collected milk from the Barton 'warm enough to make junket immediately'.

When she had whooping cough, the doctor didn't come because of the expense but 'in those days you know, people used the chemist – I can recollect Dad going in to Chagford to get something by discussing it with the chemist.' [Pharmacists mixed their own medicines as well as selling proprietary ones.]

In 1929, when she was head teacher at Throwleigh School, a measles epidemic closed the school. 'I'm not sure whether I didn't ring the Education Officer – and they got in touch with the MOH.' They didn't have scarlet fever or diphtheria. 'No, we were so isolated. South Zeal *lived* with scarlet fever and diphtheria – they had a stream going through the village where all the sewage went and that village cleared up when they improved the sewerage'.

[3] Dr Hughes was the GP in Chagford from 1919–28. Dr Kenneth Purves came as a second GP in the mid-1920s.

Amy had diphtheria later when she was at boarding school in Crediton:

> I was in Whipton Isolation Hospital for 9 weeks. They couldn't get two consecutive negative swabs. I think there was a spray. There were two children on my ward that died while I was there. Oh yes it was quite serious you know. My mother used to catch a bus from Whiddon Down, which meant she must have walked there from Throwleigh, and she came to see me at least twice a week. Of course she wasn't allowed into the ward, she only saw me through the window.

Amy Harvey described what were called 'recommendations': 'All our Harvest Festival money went to the hospitals, and that allowed the Rector to hold a certain number of recommendations each year.' She didn't know whether that meant free treatment or whether it reduced the fee. She regarded the school clinics as a safety net. Part of her teachers' training was 'very insistent that we must be like nurses'. She also remembers the brimstone and sulphur syrup and the charming of warts. Earache was treated with a poultice made from hot bread between a bandage, heated in boiling water, squeezed out and applied 'as hot as it could be born.'

Children walked a long way to school from places like Scorhill, Clannaborough and Murchington. Visits to Chagford were on foot. Amy describes Chagford Silver Band meeting the children at the crossroads. They then marched to the 'Downs' for step dancing and country dancing. While Mrs. Harvey's evidence is for Throwleigh, it is included here because medically it was a satellite village to Chagford.

Leslie Stoneman

Leslie was born in 1910 in the house next to the Chapel in Murchington. His parents were born in Murchington too. He had always wanted to be a teacher.

> The first house you come to in Murchington. That's where my mother was born. My Granny and Granfer had a smallholding there. I was christened in the chapel there by the Reverend Lowe of Throwleigh. We left school at fourteen and I started at Walland Hill doing some gardening work. I was supposed to be going out to Days in Okehampton doing mechanical work but that fell through. I was kept on there and I was gardening all my life.

As Leslie was an only child, he was taken to the doctor for cuts etc. and the doctor visited him when at pre-school age, he had diphtheria. At school, nurses came to inspect teeth, hair and skin for ringworm.

He helped his parents in the garden. They grew their own vegetables and kept poultry and pigs. The pigs were for the family to eat and the grandparents and then parents also sold them to Chagford butchers: Butcher Holmes, Butcher Collins and Butcher Heddon.

Leslie and his wife lost twin girls before having three more girls and one son. At the time of recording, he had twenty great-grandchildren. When their own four children were young, they had no running water and had to 'bring in a great big bath and heat the water and all bath in front of the fire there – it took several boilings for them all.' When they moved to a newly

built council house in Orchard Meadow – ‘the children were up and down the stairs turning on the taps in the bathroom because they never had a tap!’

Edith Northway

Edith was born in Hittisleigh in 1913, but came to Chagford aged 11 in 1924. She had two older brothers who died of meningitis. Her mother's family were all farm labourers. All the children had measles and chickenpox, for which they were kept in a darkened room. 'Something' was rubbed on the chest for colds, and cough medicine taken. A nurse would inspect the children's heads for nits and her mother would 'rub in something like Vaseline at the weekend – that stopped 'em.' They too would take syrup of brimstone, 'every weekend – Friday night'.

The family farm was 29 acres. They grew 'a little bit of everything, corn – and selling in Chagford and Exeter – kept a few cows, few sheep and a pig or two – sometimes for eating.' She described salting the pig – 'it would keep a twelve-month, making hogs pudding and nattlings etc. We used everything of the pig, bar the claw.' They made butter, which was sold in Newton. Edith was expected to help with cleaning, cooking, preparing the pig and washing.

Edith believed the family health was good and never needed a doctor, 'but doctors came to Moreton Hospital to do operations.' They had no help on the farm, 'just the family'. It was a healthy lifestyle: hard work and fresh food. She left school at 14 to help on the farm, 'driving horses etc.' and helping to grow 'potatoes, turnips, anything you could eat. Rabbits, pigeons, anything you could get off the land.' She used to love ferreting. They roasted over the hearth. She described 'a metal thing with a cover, hung on a hook over the fire.'

Edith walked to school every morning in all weathers, carrying groceries home [after school]. 'Nattadon was the worst, and then over all the fields.'

Ethel Rice

Ethel's family moved to the Chagford area in 1919 when she was six. Her father came as gardener to Furlong at Sandy Park. When Furlong was sold in 1929, her father stayed on as gardener and the family were allowed to stay in their cottage. When her father died, her mother and children were allowed to remain in the cottage, because her mother was already doing the laundry for the 'Big House', 'everything for 17/- a week' and Ethel became a housemaid, 'there were four of us working in the house.' Before working full time, she worked in the house before and after school.

Ethel remembered the usual remedies for coughs and colds: camphorated oil, cough mixtures and red flannel on the chest. She had diphtheria and with her sister spent a month in Whipton Hospital until her throat swab was clear. Three children from the Chagford area died. Edith's parents came to see them: 'I don't know how they got up because you know, we were poor, but they could only speak to us through the windows – which was awful – to only see Mum and Dad outside.' This was difficult for children and parents alike. 'You had to stay in the

hospital from 4 to 9 weeks until your throat swabs were clear. It was awful to only see your parents through glass partitions.'

Her sister had measles.

> That was a dreadful time, because you had to pay if you had the doctor you see – being poor – you didn't call 'en unless you were forced to. So, Mum and Dad had a few words. Mum said "It's your responsibility if anything happens to that child". However she recovered. We didn't have to have the doctor, which was lucky.

Ethel's father had personal insurance through the Foresters, but the family were not covered. Ethel remembers treatment with Sennapods. 'We didn't like it, so we used to make it like tea with sugar and milk. It was horrible. I've never liked sugar in tea since.'

When Ethel left school she had wanted to train as a nurse, but to be a nurse you had to have a grammar school education. Also, 'If I hadn't gone in the house to work, father would have lost his job, and that meant no house, you see.'

Ethel was already working in the house:

> After school, washing up the children's and the governess's tea things and lay their breakfast. Then as we got older we had to go in before we went to school and do the grate in the schoolroom. So we were really working there before we left school.' [Ethel later remembered that they were ten or eleven when they started work.] 'I don't know how much we were paid but I don't think it was much. Mother was only paid 6d an hour when she did the housework, all the laundry and the ironing, so I don't suppose we had hardly anything. Later, under a new owner I had 10/- a week and I thought that was wonderful.

Ethel's parents never went to the dentist:

> Father, when he was taken ill – he couldn't keep his food down. He went to the doctor who told him to go home and get his teeth out and he would take an interest in him. Father came home very upset and he had his teeth out but he was dead before he got false teeth.

Ethel's mother had a horror of dentists but went with a child to the school dentist. 'He told her she had pyorrhoea and should have all her teeth out. But she didn't. It was amazing, they all dropped out, one by one.'

Nurses checked schoolchildren for head lice and ringworm but Ethel also knew of a local man who could cure warts and ringworm.

Though poor, Ethel said they had enough food. 'We had enough – suet puddings. Vegetables. We didn't grow them but we were allowed vegetables from the kitchen garden. We used to have meat on Sundays. We had liver sometimes. We had milk from the farm.'

Dorothy Kingsland

Dorothy was born in 1925. Her father had been a miner and had pneumoconiosis. Her mother was 'as tough as they come'. She recalled, 'We didn't have a doctor in those days unless you

were *dying* because you couldn't afford it. The district nurse only came if there was a birth.' She remembered her mother using a gypsy's remedy for pink eye – you had to boil up parsley and bathe the eye. She also made infusions of elderflowers that she had dried: 'Elderflower tea made you sweat out 'flus or colds.' She gathered sheep's wool to wrap around corns.

Dorothy considered her family's way of life healthy. Her parents kept chicken, cows and pigs and had lots of vegetables and fruit in the garden, but 'agriculture was going through a hard time in those days.'

Leaving school at 14, she had to go into service at Chagford House, home of the local squire, which she hated. She was allowed to leave but, 'jumping from the frying pan into the fire,' she then worked for the local GP, 'answering the door and answering the phone'. She was 'always doing the wrong thing. Other people of 15 perhaps could tell a private patient from a panel patient' but she couldn't. Private patients were to be seated in the dining room or sitting room; panel patients were sent down an alley way to a little waiting room: 'You can bet your bottom dollar private patients were sent down the lane.'

Conclusion

Both the written and oral evidence shown above point to gradual change over the 1920s in attitudes to health and treatments available. Although the expense of having a doctor meant alternative treatments were chosen for many conditions, medical care became increasingly available to those who could afford it.