

Notes on the Kildwick Typhoid Epidemic – 10

What was happening behind the scenes – the Eshton Hall papers

In all our previous Notes, we have looked at the Kildwick typhoid epidemic using newspaper reports and material that was available to the public at the time.

In this Note, we will look at some of the private exchanges that were going on during the epidemic: using as source material papers from the Wilson family archive held by West Yorkshire Archive Service, in Bradford.

These papers, letters and notes to and from Major Wilson, the owner and landlord of the Kildwick estate – which included all the houses in Kildwick involved in the epidemic, provide an interesting insight into what was happening behind the scenes at this time.

However, there are a number of problems in using this material:

- In some cases, only one side of an exchange is available. Not all of the letters sent by Major Wilson were copied and retained.
- Some of the handwriting is very difficult to read. Sadly, this is particularly the case with Major Wilson and J. W. Broughton, his land-agent in Kildwick. In one case, where we have both Broughton's message to Wilson and Wilson's reply, almost the whole exchange is unreadable.
- Several of the items are undated. In some cases, however, it is possible to assign a likely date, based on the content of a given note and its context.

Major Wilson's reaction to the epidemic

That Major Wilson was initially very shocked by the news from Kildwick is obvious from a note to his land agent, J. W. Broughton:

Wilson to Broughton (undated – but probably mid-January 1899)

I am truly sorry to hear your bad account from Kildwick this morning and I make out that it might be a rather serious matter. However all that can be done for the present is I suppose what you have done to get the sanitary inspector to investigate the matter. Will you kindly let me know what steps must be taken in the matter. I hope Mr. Brigg progresses as well as maybe.

There seems no doubt that Wilson wants the sanitary inspector involved and is keen to do all that is required to help.

Another letter from Wilson to Broughton, sent at the height of the epidemic, expresses a similar heart-felt concern:

Wilson to Broughton (22nd [probably February 1899])

... I am sorry to hear of the incidences of the fever. I had hoped and trusted that it was at an end.

[the letter then goes on to discuss who is responsible for the drains at Kildwick Hall, concluding that the lease indicates that they are the responsibility of the tenant.]

I suppose [this is] satisfactory as regards ourselves, but not of any account to the unfortunate sufferers. Now please see that they have no cause to suggest anything like want of practical sympathy on my part – the other [unreadable] is easy enough to give !! but it would make the matter a thousand times worse if in years to come there was any suggestion of my having treated the matter with apparent unconcern !

Apparently the words of a man with his heart in the right place.

However, as the epidemic progressed and the villagers, particularly John Barritt, made increasing calls for a full public inquiry into the matter, Wilson's attitude began to change as the full extent of his potential liability, as landlord, became clear.

A mis-judged attempt at financial relief

The underlined word "practical sympathy", in the note quoted above, is perhaps significant in understanding Major Wilson's approach to his tenants during the epidemic, as is his comment about "the other ... being easy to give".

At some point early on, however, he must have decided that some financial relief might be appropriate. As he wrote to Broughton:

Wilson to Broughton (undated – but likely after 1st February and before 10th February 1899)

... Now I have pondered in my mind how to afford some easement of this unfortunate suffering at Kildwick in the simplest manner. Now supposing it was [... unreadable ...] a matter of returning their rents this next half year. What would that mean ? ... Does this sort of idea seem feasible to you ? Tell me if you have heard anything more of Mr. Barritt.

Here again, with the idea of refunding rents, we see Wilson applying what he sees as being a practical response to the "unfortunate suffering". But perhaps the reference to Mr. Barritt is also significant ?

This rent refund idea seems to have been agreed upon, as a later note authorises Broughton to proceed:

Wilson to Broughton (undated – but likely after 1st February and before 10th February 1899)

Please return ½ yr. to the Cottages, as per the list you enclosed:

The reverse of the page has a list of who is to receive the refund, and the total amount:

A handwritten list of names on the left, grouped by a large right-facing curly bracket. To the right of the bracket is a monetary total. The names are: J. Barritt, H. Tillotson, Mrs. J. Tillotson (the late) estate of, Mr. Foster, C. Hargreaves, and Holmes. The monetary total is written as £ 2. 2. 15. 18. 5-.

J. Barritt	}	£ 2. 2. 15. 18. 5-
H. Tillotson		
Mrs. J. Tillotson (the late) estate of.		
Mr. Foster		
C. Hargreaves		
Holmes		

Fig 1: Wilson's list of those he wanted to receive a rent refund

Quite how some of these names were selected is unclear:

- **J Barritt** – The Barritt family, as discussed in previous Notes, suffered three deaths in the epidemic.
- **H Tillotson** – This can only be John Hartley Tillotson of Church Terrace, the man who took in the surviving remnant of the Tillotson/Baldwin household after the death of Mary Tillotson and Stanley Baldwin.
- **Mrs. T Tillotson (the late) estate of** – Here Wilson seems to be trying to alleviate the financial situation of the Tillotson children, orphaned by the death of their mother.
- **Mrs Foster** – Elizabeth Foster of Main Street.
- **C Hargreaves** – Charles Hargreaves of Church Terrace.
- **Holmes** – This is the household of William Holmes, at the Kildwick post-office.

Whether or not the latter two, Hargreaves and Holmes, had members of the household who were ill, or whether they were simply inconvenienced by the outbreak is not known – their names do not appear in any of the newspaper reports.

If Major Wilson hoped that this gesture would be appreciated by his tenants in Kildwick, he was mistaken. In fact it back-fired spectacularly.

On February 10th 1899, J. W. Broughton received two replies intended for Major Wilson; one from Elizabeth Foster, the other from a very upset John Barritt.

Elizabeth Foster to Wilson, via Broughton (10th February 1899)

Dear Sir,

Very many thanks for your kind letter of sympathy, also the cheque of £2 which I received this morning.

But I beg to remind you, that I am a widow with five children totally dependent upon their earnings, of which two of them are in the Hospital, and one is to attend to in my own home, and the only income I have now coming in is from one boy namely 9/- [nine shillings – 45p] a week salary, and having no money beforehand I shall be totally dependent on charity for at least 3 months to come, even supposing they all get better, and from some source, or other, I shall most certainly expect some recompense, as someone is most seriously to blame for the calamity which has fallen upon this happy village.

I remain Yours Truly, Eliz Foster.

John Barritt to Wilson, via Broughton (10th February 1899)

Your letter to hand this morning. I thank you for your expression of sympathy in my great bereavement. At the same time one would have appreciated it much more if Major Wilson and yourself (when in Kildwick the other day) had called at my home and sympathised personally with an old tenant of thirty years standing, and if £2 is as much as Major Wilson can afford he is no better off than myself, although I have had to part with a son and two daughters dearer to me by far than all Kildwick, and I must remind you that someone will have to pay far more than £2 before this affair is settled.

I remain Yours Respectfully, John Barritt

P.S. I return you the cheque value £2

Obviously these were not the sort of responses Major Wilson would have liked to have received.

They are the first sign that the villagers were directing the blame for the epidemic towards the Kildwick landlord. It is even possible that his offer of £2, well meant though it probably was, could have been the trigger for John Barritt's campaign in the press and elsewhere for a full public inquiry (see previous Notes).

Certainly, after this, Wilson's attitude changed. So, by April 1899, he was writing to Broughton:

Wilson to Broughton (dated April 21st 1899)

... I wish Mr. Barritt would act a little more and jaw a little less. But I suppose that writing to the press does not win him any support but will rather tend to alienate sympathy.

and, about another villager:

Wilson to Broughton (dated April 22nd 1899)

[There is still a lot of] vapourising about the epidemic. He [Mr. Hepworth] would seem to have got off a good deal better than many, without in any way trying to minimise the trials of his wife's serious illness.

A falling-out with the Brigg family – over a cover-up ?

The Brigg family, who leased Kildwick Hall from Major Wilson, were always well regarded in the village, and news of Mr. Brigg's illness – the starting-point for the epidemic was no doubt a cause for some concern.

However, once the illness had been confirmed as typhoid and cases subsequently began to appear in the village, it would seem perfectly reasonable to expect the villagers to have expressed a somewhat different opinion about those that lived on top of the hill. Particularly when, on January 22nd 1899, Ascough Rodwell, the Skipton RDC sanitary inspector, demonstrated beyond doubt that the infected water which had spread the disease to Kildwick had come straight from the drains at Kildwick Hall.

Major Wilson, writing to J. W. Broughton, seemed unconcerned that the Brigg family might be prepared to accept the blame for the epidemic:

Wilson to Broughton (dated February 15th 1899)

... Also he assumes he is somewhat of a scapegoat in the epidemic. A propo that, it has cost me no trouble at all in that he has entirely shifted off my shoulders onto his own !

Note: The "he" in this note is thought to be J. J. Brigg junior, the son of the Keighley MP who was the first victim of the epidemic. J. J. Brigg junior appears to have acted as his father's secretary during the period of his illness.

But the question of who was responsible for the Kildwick Hall drains was an important one, and Major Wilson quickly took legal advice.

The Eshton Hall papers include a letter dated February 15th 1899, from William Hartley, Solicitors of Settle, to Broughton. It is obviously a reply to an inquiry about the details of the Kildwick Hall lease and the supply of water to the village, and indicates that although Major Wilson was responsible for the supply of clean water to the village, the tenant was responsible for the repair and up-keep of the drains at Kildwick Hall. So if the disease had spread to the village due to a problem with the drains at the Hall, the Brigg family were responsible; but if the problem were with the supply itself, Major Wilson was liable.

This matter must have been discussed by Broughton and J. J. Brigg before the latter heard about the full report on the epidemic being prepared for Skipton RDC by Dr. Atkinson, the Medical Officer. He then wrote to Broughton a quite remarkable letter – indicating that both of them knew the precise source of the infection.

Brigg to Broughton (dated March 11th 1899)

Dear Mr. Broughton

I hear that Dr. Atkinson is preparing a report on the Typhoid which will be in print shortly and which he has promised to let Dr. Scatterty [Mr. Briggs' physician] see before publication. We think that the actual fact of the connection of the sewer and the clean water should be pointed out as I presume Dr. Atkinson will state that the two courses are some distance apart and that the trouble has been probably caused by the drains being blocked and bursting. This would imply some censure on us for not keeping it in order.

I don't think anyone has heard of our tracing the connection, but it is commonly said that the connection was made, of course unwittingly, in a dry time about 25 years since by a man named Henry Tissington, now dead. No doubt he found the sewer full of apparently clean water and tapped it.

As all the parties are now dead who were concerned in the matter, would it not be as well to tell Dr. Atkinson the condition of thing?. If any further enquiry were made the drain would have to be opened where you saw it and the connection seen.

Please let me know what you think.

Yours truly, John J. Brigg

So, both the Brigg family and Broughton knew precise details of the connection between the drains at the Hall and the village water supply, and Brigg clearly wanted this to be made known: so that the family could not be blamed for failing to keep the drains in good repair.

Broughton (and Major Wilson), however, thought they would be better served if the matter remained a secret. In the only letter in the Eshton Hall collection written in Broughton's hand, he attempts to warn-off Dr. Atkinson:

Broughton to Dr. Atkinson (dated March 13th 1899)

Private,

Dear Sir, From a letter which I have received from Mr. J. Brigg Jnr. I learn that you propose to submit your report to Dr. Scatterty before publication and as I don't like the tone of Mr. Brigg's letter I hope that you will not permit anything to be inserted by Dr. Scatterty with the object of relieving Mr. Brigg at the expense of Major Wilson. If the tenant's medical man can see the report before publication cannot the same privilege be extended to the landlord's agent ?

Yours truly.

But Dr. Atkinson was not going to let anyone influence his report:

Dr. Atkinson to Broughton (dated March 14th 1899)

Dear Sir,

KILDWICK REPORT

You have been misinformed. I do not intend to submit my report to Dr. Scatterty before publication.

Yours truly. FE Atkinson (Dr.)

Major Wilson also appears to have taken legal advice on J. J. Brigg's letter, as he included text recommended by his solicitor, Mr. Vant, in his reply:

Wilson to J. J. Brigg (undated, but in reply to the letter of March 11th 1899)

In reply to yours of the 11th I know nothing about any connection having been made and cannot therefore assert to a state of things of which, as you say in your letter, there is no living testimony.

Quite why Broughton and Wilson thought that trying to keep information about the source of the infection hidden was their best option is unclear. Surely, given that everybody knew by this time where the epidemic had started and how it had spread to the village, it would have been better for both Wilson and the Brigg family to have announced that they had discovered the precise source of the fatal contamination of the Kildwick water supply, and that it had been the fault of the well-meaning, but now long-dead, Henry Tissington ?

Once Major Wilson had made his views known it would have been unwise of the Brigg family to have continued to lobby against their landlord. However, Brigg did manage to make his point one more time in a letter about a claim for compensation made by a villager:

Brigg to Broughton (?) (dated March 14th 1899)

Dear Sir

We recd. the following this morning addressed to Mr. Brigg. I expect you have recd. a similar one.

Skipton Mar 13. 99

Dear Sir,

We are instructed by Mr. Saml. Hepworth to make a claim against you for damages £150, the amount of loss sustained by him in consequence of an outbreak of typhoid fever on his premises caused by your wrongful pollution of his water supply. We shall be obliged by your letting us having a reply within a month.

Without prejudice.

Yours fthfully, Brown & Wood.

I have replied that Mr. Brigg is too ill even to be told that there has been any typhoid and that when we think fit we will ask his opinion.

In any case this must lead to a full investigation of the water courses.

Mr. Brigg is still holding his ground and if no further attacks happen he may eventually get well again.

Yrs truly, John J. Brigg

Clearly, Major Wilson's offer of a £2 rent refund was not now going to satisfy anyone.

Details of how the Brigg family came to resolve the claims made against them by the villagers will be covered in a future Note. For now, however, suffice it to say that the Hepworth case was not resolved quickly:

Brigg to Wilson (dated Dec 17th 1899)

Mr. Hepworth is still dissatisfied and has sent another letter from Messrs. Brown and Wood demanding £250 instead of £150.

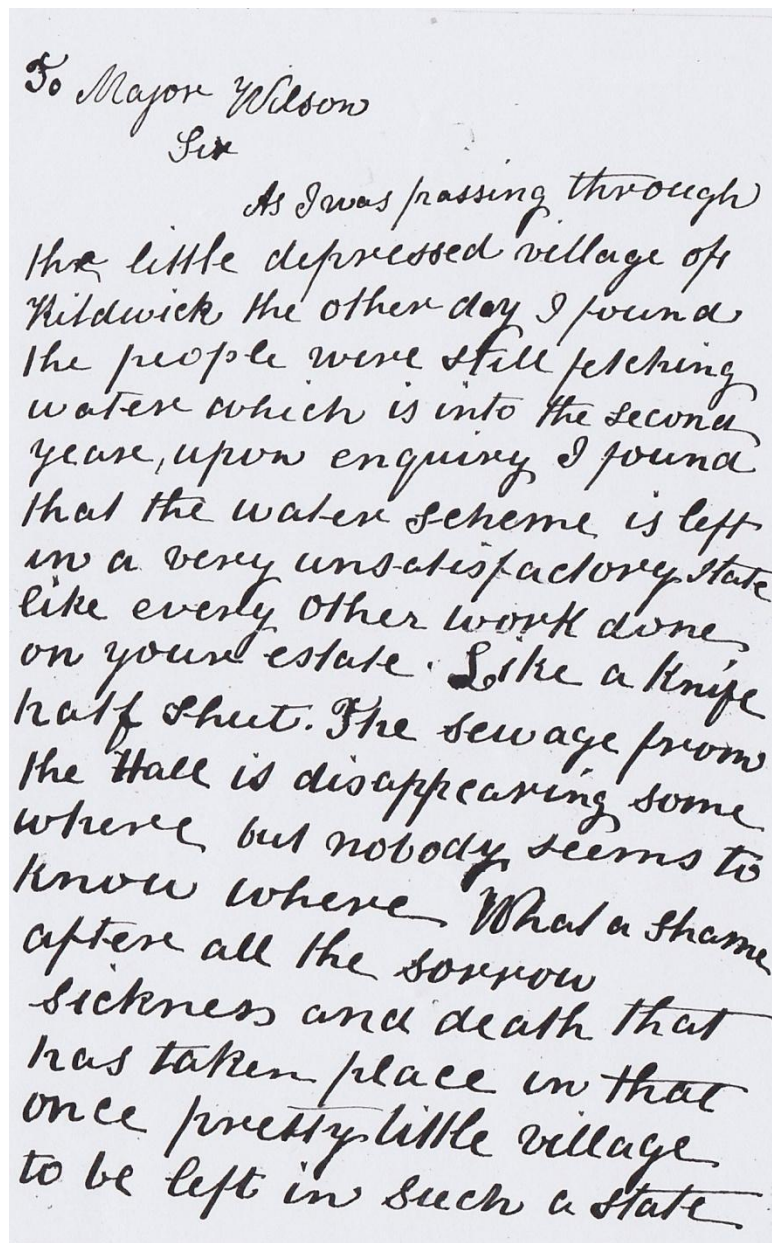
Poison-pen letters

As early as the middle of February 1899, Major Wilson was receiving anonymous letters.

Wilson to Broughton (dated February 15th 1899)

... Also a pleasant anonymous letter I received yesterday ! Altogether the picture does not appear to be smoothing over. I am sorry for I had hoped that it had been otherwise. I am inclined to wish that a local inquiry had been held but that was in the competency of the council to have asked.

The only one of these letters to have been retained amongst the Eshton Hall papers is reproduced on the following pages. Although this letter dates from well after the end of the epidemic, from a time when Major Wilson had announced his intention to return to active service in the Boer War, it clearly shows how there was still a lot of anger being felt about what had happened in Kildwick.



To Major Wilson
Sir

As I was passing through the little depressed village of Kildwick the other day I found the people were still fetching water which is into the second year, upon enquiry I found that the water scheme is left in a very unsatisfactory state like every other work done on your estate. Like a knife half shut. The sewage from the Hall is disappearing some where but nobody seems to know where. What a shame after all the sorrow sickness and death that has taken place in that once pretty little village to be left in such a state.

through the great mistake
and unlawful act of an
M.P. who ought to have
known better. I suppose
both he and you think the
poor people of Kildwick have
nothing to fight a law suit
with, so you have left them
to struggle through it as
best they can. I am told
you have kept away from
them and that you are
more anxious to go
fight the Boers in South Africa
than help your tenants
to fight the Boer at the
top of the hill, for
poisoning their dear ones.
I have known the Wilsons.

for over 50 years and have
always spoke well of them
but this act of yours has
surprised me. I suppose
you don't forget the rent
day and how those poor
people have paid their rent
is astonishing seeing how
little has been done for them,
and the great amount of
sickness and death that
has taken place during the
last 12 months. I hope the
gold mine in the Wilson
family is not deteriorating
it rather gives one that
impression when things
are left so unfinished.
Why cannot the Mayor
live on his own estate

then he would know what
was being done both
publicly and privately and
not allow the cesspool to
be pulled up and the W.C.
from the Hall to be piped
into the clean water drain
that the village below was
supplied from. It is horrible
to think these poor people have
drunk that water for over
10 years and then to end it
with throwing the excrements
from a Typhoid Patient into
it and so give 52 persons the
Typhoid fever and 10 to
prove fatal. Let us pray
for a more enlightened state
of things in this 1900

Yours truly a
Well Wisher

Fig 2: One of the anonymous letters sent to Major Wilson

The "Well Wisher" did have a point, in that it did take an inordinately long time for the water supply to Kildwick to be set right. This topic will also be covered in a future 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 us at 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

The Eshton Hall papers are available from the West Yorkshire Archive Service (<http://www.archives.wyjs.org.uk/>), reference 68D82/5.