

Notes on the Kildwick Typhoid Epidemic – 8

The illness and treatment of Mr. J. J. Brigg, MP

The first person to fall ill in the Kildwick typhoid epidemic of 1899 was the MP for Keighley, Mr. J. J. Brigg. The concern felt locally was immediate and sincere. His treatment and recovery was considered so important that from mid-December 1898 until mid-April 1899, hardly a week went by without a report appearing on the MP's progress in the local press.

It is a feature of the times that these reports were kept separate from those on the Kildwick epidemic itself; often with two reports, one on Mr. Brigg's health and another on the events in the village, appearing on different pages of the same issue.

The press seemed to take the view that what was happening up at Kildwick Hall was totally disconnected from what was going on in the village below, and certainly worthy of far more column inches. This disconnection continued even after they had themselves reported on how precisely the two events were linked.

How the illness was reported

On December 6th 1898, Mr. Brigg returned from London to his home at Kildwick Hall feeling ill. A doctor was called and, from then on, Mr. Brigg received the best and promptest medical treatment. This almost certainly ensured his survival when, at various times, he appeared certain to die. There is little doubt that, of those who acquired the disease but recovered, his was the closest run thing.

The first doctor to attend was Dr. Scatterty, the Medical Officer of Health for Keighley. He diagnosed pneumonia. The Craven Herald reported the illness in measured terms:

Craven Herald, Dec 16th 1898 – FARNHILL – J. J. Brigg M.P. – ... *has been seriously ill during the week. Yesterday morning he was stated to be a little better. He still maintains his strength.*

The Keighley News expressed a good deal more concern about the health of their local MP, with two separate reports in the same issue:

Keighley News, Dec 17th 1898 – Local News – The serious illness of Mr. Brigg M.P. – *We regret to state that Mr. John Brigg, is lying at his residence, Kildwick Hall, very seriously ill. Last week he was struck down with a severe attack of bronchial pneumonia following on influenza. On Monday last his condition became extremely critical, and complications were feared. On Tuesday they appeared to be a slight change for the better, but it was found advisable by Drs. Dobie and Scatterty, Keighley, to call in Dr. Campbell of Bradford, for consultation. Drs. Dobie and Scatterty have been unremitting in their attentions to the honourable gentleman, the latter remaining at Kildwick Hall throughout the night.*

On Thursday morning they were in a position to report that he had passed a good night and that his general state showed further improvement. In the evening they reported that there was no material change in his condition, and that he still maintained his strength.

Yesterday's bulletins were as follows:

1. *After further consultation with Dr. Campbell, of Bradford, we find no material change in Mr. Brigg's condition which is still serious. William Dobie, MD; William Scatterty, MD., Kildwick Hall, Dec. 16th, 10 am.*
2. *Mr. Brigg's strength has been a little better maintained this afternoon but his condition is still very critical. William Dobie, MD; William Scatterty, MD., Kildwick Hall, Dec. 16th, 10 pm.*

Keighley News, Dec 17th 1898 – *The very serious illness of Mr. Brigg, M.P. Keighley Division, has awakened keen solicitude and painful interest in Keighley and throughout the surrounding neighbourhood. Towards the end of last week Mr. Brigg was seized with an attack of pneumonia, which speedily gave rise to some of those aggravations and complications which are incident to the malady. There have been times during the week when the condition of the patient has been most anxious and critical, and others in which it seemed that his naturally good constitution and temperate antecedents would enable him to pull through. We voice the universal sentiment when we express the earnest hope that this condition of strained anxiety may be put to an end by a speedy improvement in the patient's condition.*

The second of these seems to be rather effusive in its language, but is not untypical for the time.

The following week's news, was a good deal more hopeful. The report, in the Keighley News, is reproduced below. Sadly the microfilm held by Keighley library is very difficult to read in places, but the gist is easy enough to follow:

Keighley News, Dec 24th 1898 – Local News – The illness of Mr. Brigg M.P. – *We are glad to be able to report that since our last issue Mr. Brigg M.P. has made a little progress towards recovery, though we are afraid he is entirely [... unreadable ...]. At noon yesterday the doctors issued the following [bulletin ?] which ran as under: Mr. Brigg [continues ?] to show some slight improvement; [his ?] strength is maintained. Last night's [bulletin ?] is as follows: Mr. Brigg has had a better day and his strength is a little [... unreadable ...]*

But even as this report was going to press, Dr. Scatterty was revising his diagnosis and a case of typhoid at Kildwick Hall was reported to the Skipton Medical Officer of Health on December 24th.

Despite this, even on the 31st, the Keighley News were optimistic. As “get well soon” messages go, this item is surely a long way over the top ?

Keighley News, Dec 31st 1898 – Local Topics – *The reports concerning the health of Mr. Brigg M.P. have been, during the week, uniformly encouraging, although hardly sanguine enough in tone to encourage anything like presumptuous confidence. While the patient has hardly made that progress towards recovery which might have been hoped, his strength has been wonderfully well maintained. Though the patient is, of course, not yet beyond liability to relapse, we regard ourselves as at least entitled to hope that the time when a more decisive turn for the better will take place is near at hand.*

Note there is no mention of typhoid in the above report.

By the new year, it was possible for press reports to mention “Mr. Brigg” and “typhoid” in the same paragraph – but it is notable that the typhoid is described as being a complication resulting from his pneumonia, and not the illness itself. Throughout, the press will try to make a distinction: Mr. Brigg “acquired” typhoid; the rest of the village simply fell ill with it.

Keighley News, Jan 7th 1899 – Local News – Mr. John Brigg M.P. – *We are glad to be able to state that Mr. Brigg M.P. is now out of danger and convalescing, though still weak and confined. ... Mr. Brigg had to battle against typhoid fever as well as pneumonia. No further bulletin will be issued.*

So, it was all over. All that remained was to fawn a little more over the patient – and to recommend a nice quiet holiday in the sun somewhere.

Keighley News, Jan 7th 1899 – Local Topics – *Although the reports as to the state of the health of Mr. Brigg, M. P., have for some time been encouraging, it has not been until the present week that he has been pronounced out of danger. The protracted duration of his illness will, however, surprise no-one when it is known that one of the complications which attended his original malady was typhoid fever – itself one of the most lingering sicknesses, and therefore most trying to the vitality of the patient. Whilst warmly congratulating Mr. Brigg, his medical advisors, and the nurses and friends who have tended his couch on the happy turn which events have taken, we must express [the ?] solicitous hope that every care will be taken to nurse his strength and save him from needless retardation during the convalescent stage. It is quite possible that a man of Mr. Brigg’s ardent and active temperament may need to be protected against himself. With due care there seems to be no reason why the respected member should not regain his full strength. But he will need some time to repair the harm occasioned by the heavy draughts on his vitality during his prolonged sickness. When he is sufficiently recovered to travel safely, it is to be hoped that he will retire to some spot, in England or abroad, with genial climate, and well beyond the region of telegrams and the din of debate. This must well occasion some delay in Mr. Brigg’s return to his parliamentary duties. But we trust that he will not suffer this consideration to shorten his necessary holiday.*

Sadly, before they could get the brochures out, things at Kildwick Hall took a very serious turn for the worse:

Keighley News, Jan 21st 1899 – KEIGHLEY – The illness of Mr. Brigg, M. P. – *Last Saturday [January 14th] some very alarmist reports about the condition of the member for the Keighley Division were [... unreadable ...] in the town and inquiries at Kildwick Hall showed that, though these statements were exaggerated, Mr. Brigg’s condition was very critical. From that time to the present the feeling in the district has been one of great solicitude for the hon. member’s recovery. The following official communication describes the situation – “During the first part of last week Mr. Brigg was making steady improvement, but early on Thursday morning [January 12th] a serious complication suddenly showed [itself ?] and it was found that Mr. Brigg was suffering from embolism in the right leg. The main artery was blocked at the knee by a clot of blood, and the [joint ?] and leg were pallid and cold. Mr. Mayo Robson, of Leeds, was called in, and confirmed the diagnosis of Drs. Dobie and Scatterty. On Saturday [... unreadable ...] appeared to be spreading, and Mr. Robson expressed the gravest doubts as to whether Mr. Brigg’s constitution would be equal to the strain put upon it.*

Fortunately on Sunday and Monday things took a more favourable turn, and on Monday evening with a reduced temperature and [... unreadable ...] the condition of the leg was found to be much [improved ?]. This was confirmed on Wednesday, when Mr. Robson was able to say that he saw every reason to hope for Mr. Brigg's ultimate recovery. The leg [had ?] settled down, and although amputation at the knee will probably be necessary, ample time can be allowed for the patient to recover his normal health before it is attempted" ...

The Keighley News felt it necessary to go further to explain this in a separate article in the same issue:

The facts connected with Mr. Brigg's illness, and especially of this latest complication, have remained in some obscurity. But the public will naturally desire to know the exact details, which there need be no delicacy in disclosing. Some months ago, it will be remembered that Mr. Brigg paid a visit to the Dartmoor establishment at Princetown [Dartmoor prison], and in clambering over that rough country – not unlike our own moors – wrenched his leg. The sprain thus caused was, as so often happens, neglected, and grew more troublesome as time went on. At length, Mr. Brigg dealt with it somewhat heroically on the counter-irritant principle, that is by poulticing it with raw mustard. This broke the skin and caused much pain and local irritation at the time, and Mr. Brigg was obliged to excuse himself from fulfilment of one or two engagements as mentioned by us at the time.

Whether it was the original sprain or the rather severe treatment to which it was subsequently exposed, or both combined, which laid the foundation of future troubles, we cannot say. But it is beyond doubt that the creation of effete and corrupt matter which is incident to typhoid fever has a tendency to avenge itself on any specially weak part. If there is trouble anywhere it is sure to be aggravated by a malady which so utterly deranges and weakens the whole system. There is strong reason, therefore to infer some connection between this injury to the knee and the present unfortunate complication...

Meanwhile, in Kildwick village, the week leading up to the January 21st 1899 saw the diagnosis, death and burial of Stanley Baldwin. By the publication date there were 8 confirmed cases of typhoid, in four households, including five cases in the Tillotson/Baldwin home.

The following week, by which time the number of confirmed cases in the village had increased to 18, Mr. Brigg was no better and the Keighley News was reporting another serious turn:

Keighley News, Jan 28th 1899 – LOCAL TOPICS – *Another crisis took place in the illness of Mr. Brigg M.P., last Saturday, which for the time [caused ?] the gravest apprehension. Another clot of blood formed – this time in the lungs – and for two or three days the most serious concern was felt as to the issue of this prolonged struggle between life and death. Whilst there is plenty of room for anxiety still remaining, it is satisfactory to be able to state that the alarm has not been repeated...*

A fortnight later came the crisis point – something that even merited a column in the British Medical Journal (see <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2462350/pdf/brmedj08548-0031.pdf>).

A telegram from Kildwick Hall to Mr. Broughton, the land agent for Major Wilson the Briggs' landlord, gives an indication of how precarious the situation had become.

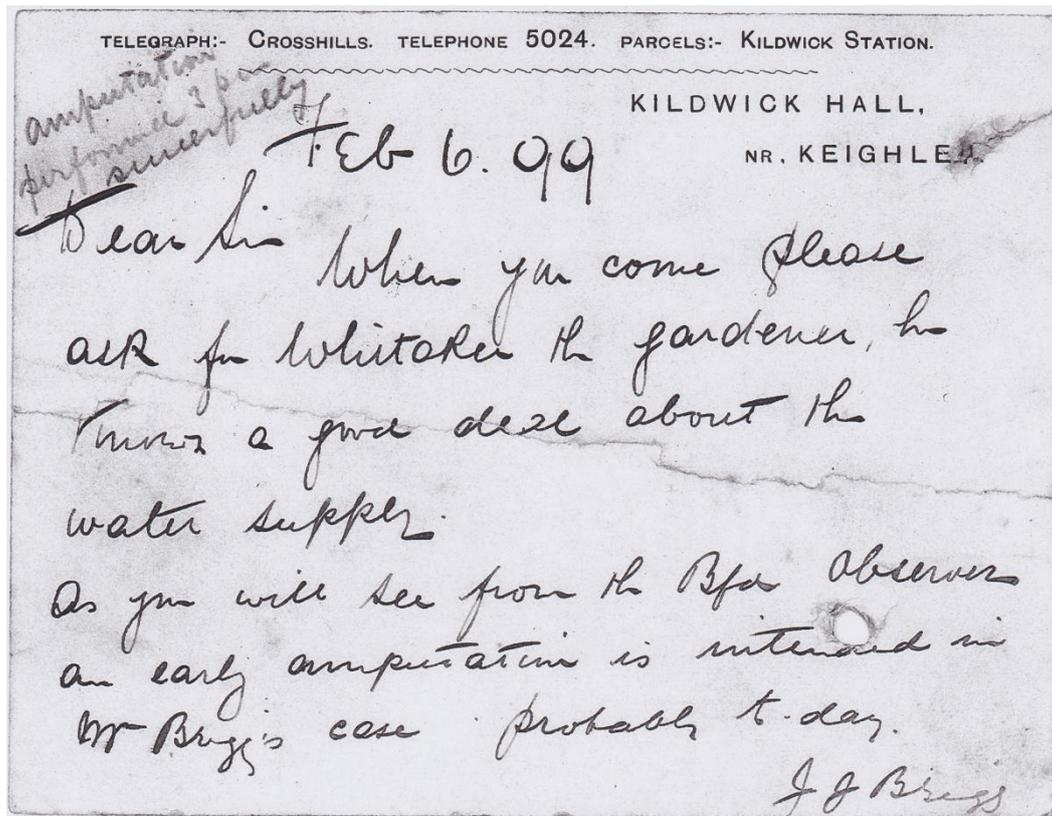


Figure 1: Telegram from Brigg's son to Mr. Broughton

The full facts were reported in the Keighley News:

Keighley News, Feb 11th 1899 – LOCAL TOPICS – Keighley – Grave Condition of Mr. Brigg, M. P.

– A consultation between Mr. Brigg's medical attendants and Mr. Mayo Robson, of Leeds, took place on Saturday last [February 4th], and again on Monday, and on the latter occasion the immediate amputation of the right leg was resolved upon. The following bulletin was subsequently issued:–

Mr Brigg's right leg was amputated at the knee by Mr. Mayo Robson this afternoon. The patient [... unreadable ...] the operation very well, and is now progressing as favourably as can be expected. Wm. Dobie. Wm. Scatterty. Kildwick Hall, Monday, 4 p.m.

... Mr. Brigg had not been moved for nearly two months, his heart was in a weak condition, and the administration of the anaesthetic had to be done with [special ?] care. The operation was a successful one in every way, Mr. Brigg recovering nicely from the [... unreadable ...] and the wound healing in a satisfactory manner. We regret to say, however, that on Thursday afternoon the hon. member had another relapse [in ?] consequence of a small embolism in another part of the circulatory system. The temperature of the patient rose greatly, and consciousness was partially lost. Yesterday Mr. Brigg gradually regained sensibility and was able to take a little nourishment. The condition, however, remained critical. Late last night it was reported that Mr. Brigg was a little improved but that his condition was still very [severe ?].

And, somewhat less extensively, in the Craven Herald:

Craven Herald, Feb 10th 1899 – KILDWICK – *Mr. John Brigg MP, whose leg was amputated this week, survived the operation very well, but yesterday had a relapse and was in a serious condition.*

A week later, Major Wilson expressed his continuing concern in a note to Broughton:

February 16th – ... *I fear that this last ... can only forestall a termination and I fear to see at any time an announcement of Mr. B's death.*

From this point on, however, the reports are consistently more hopeful in tone. Three week's after the amputation – when the Kildwick epidemic had claimed 8 lives – the Keighley News' report on Mr. Brigg's illness was almost jocular:

Keighley News, Feb 25th – Local News – *The following bare facts connected with the sad illness of Mr. Brigg M.P. constitute something of a record: On Wednesday morning last Mr. Brigg was seized with a shivering fit at five minutes to nine. The doctor was summoned by telephone; he ran to the station, caught the 9:02 train to Kildwick, where he was met by a dog-cart, which took him to the Hall and at 9:23 he was by the patient's bedside. The utmost promptitude by the doctor could not, of course, have accomplished this marvellous feat had not everything coincided in his favour, and everything fitted in with marvellous precision but as a specimen of medical alacrity it will be hard to beat. The distance is six miles.*

In contrast it might be interesting to note that, following the notification of Mr. Brigg's illness as typhoid to the Medical Officer in Skipton on December 24th, it was not until January 16th that Dr. Atkinson made his first visit to Kildwick: a matter of some 22 days. The distance is less than four miles.

Major Wilson, in another note to Broughton expresses his relief that Mr. Brigg was getting better:

March 13th – *[I hear] from young Mr. Brigg that his father showed a decided improvement. It will be a marvellous effort of nature if after all these weeks of suffering and [... unreadable ...] at death's door, he should yet recover.*

The final report of note from the press describes the patient's recuperation.

Keighley News, Apr 15th – Illness of Mr. Brigg M.P. – *During the week the member for Keighley Division has made further progress of a substantial kind towards recovery. He has been gaining strength daily, and is much improved in all respects as compared a week ago. He is, and has been for some time, conscious and converses clearly though on rising from sleep he shows a certain amount of [vagueness ?] of a temporary character...*

This was confirmed in a letter from Walter Brigg to Mr. Broughton:

April 29th – ... *My father continues to improve, but very slowly.*

Mr. Brigg survived his illness and operation, although he did not return to parliament until 1901. He remained the M. P. for Keighley until his death, in 1911.



Figure 2: Official parliamentary portrait of John Brigg MP, 1901 (copyright National Portrait Gallery). In earlier portraits, dated 1897 and '98, John Brigg appears without a stick.

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

References

All the information described in this note has been derived from newspaper reports of the period printed in the Craven Herald and the Keighley News, and papers from the Eshton Hall collection held by the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford.