

## COVID-19 IN BIDFORD & DISTRICT: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Pandemics are nothing new: the Black Death of 1346-51, the Great Plague of 1664 -67, the Russian Flu of 1893-94, the Spanish Flu of 1918-20, the Asian Flu 1957-58, the Hong Kong Flu 1968-69, the Russian Flu (again!) 1977-78 all caused by variant types of the 1918 outbreak, the 2003 SARS-COV outbreak, the 2009 Swine Flu pandemic, the list goes on. A common feature of all these is the transmission of the virus to humans from animals, many of these being from avian or swine sources.

This area was not immune from such outbreaks and it is estimated that as many as one in seven out of a population of 1,500 in Stratford upon Avon died of the plague in 1564.<sup>1</sup>



Bidford itself also suffered from these epidemics as they swept across the country and cases of various epidemics were recorded in the village in 1684, 1710-12, 1725-9 and 1744<sup>2</sup> as well as in those previously mentioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another interesting feature is the sense of attributing these outbreaks to a geographical source. Whereas the WHO now designate epidemics by their medical features and year of outbreak - **CO**rona **VI**rus **D**isease – **2019** - others, notably former President Trump, are happy to call it ‘the China Virus.’ Ironically, the Spanish Flu did not originate in Spain but Spain, neutral in WWI, was one of the first countries to report widely on the disease and without the wartime reporting restrictions prevalent elsewhere, it was seen as particularly hard hit and seen by other countries as the source.<sup>3</sup>

*Soldiers ill with Spanish flu at a hospital ward in Kansas*



Many epidemiologists, however, identify the source of the 1918 outbreak to a pig farm in Kansas, USA from whence the H1N1 influenza A virus spread to a nearby army camp and thence on via America’s troops deploying to the Western Front as part of the country’s entry into the Great War.<sup>4</sup> Although estimates vary, it is reckoned that the disease ultimately caused the deaths of between 50m and 100m worldwide, far more than the estimated 16m resulting from the First World War.<sup>5</sup> In England, over 228,000 fatalities were recorded.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Tudor Society: <https://www.tudorsociety.com/11-july-1564-the-plague-hits-stratford-upon-avon/>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Churchley talk to Bidford & District History Society 17<sup>th</sup> January 2020: *Plague, Pestilence and Pox – Death and Disease in Days gone by ...*

<sup>3</sup> *The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918*: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-Spanish-Flu-pandemic-of-1918/>

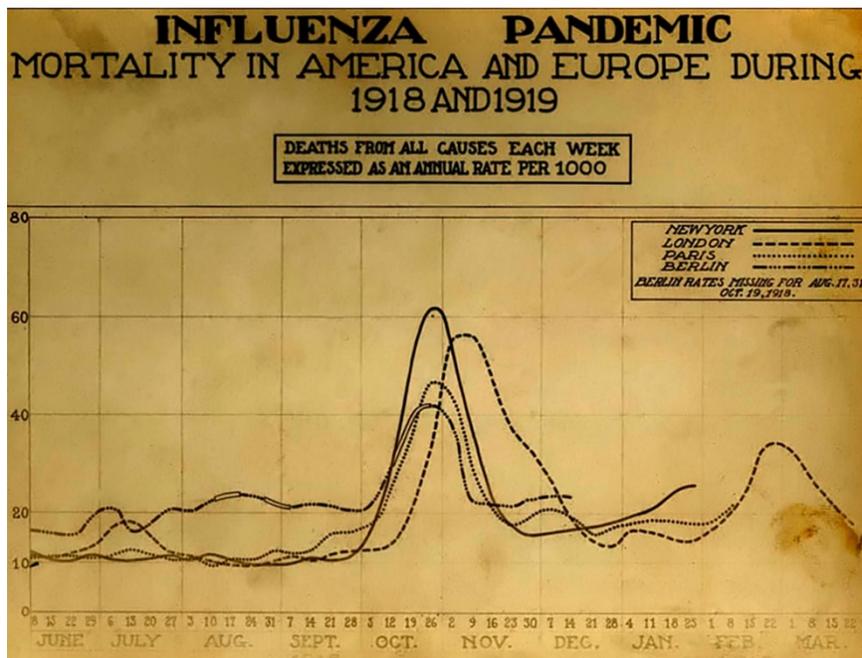
<sup>4</sup> Worcestershire and The ‘Spanish’ Flu: the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19” (WTFSF) presented to the Spanish Flu Study Day Friday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2029, page 1 and Spinney, Laura (2018). *Pale rider: the Spanish flu of 1918 and how it changed the world*. Vintage. p. 36. ISBN 978-1-78470-240-3. OCLC 1090305029

<sup>5</sup> WTFSF, page 1.

<sup>6</sup> *The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918*: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-Spanish-Flu-pandemic-of-1918/>

Global mortality rate is not known, but is estimated to have been between 10% to 20% of those who were infected.<sup>7</sup> At the time its cause was seen as a bacteria, Pfeiffer's bacillus, first identified in the Russian Flu pandemic of 1893-94 and named after the German physician detecting it.<sup>8</sup>

However, there were some who considered it was a biological weapon introduced by the German pharmaceutical company, Bayer, into its new wonder drug, Aspirin.<sup>9</sup> With some in the US naming a deliberate leakage from the Wuhan Institute of Virology as the cause<sup>10</sup> and some in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs identifying its source as US service personnel visiting the Wuhan region in October 2019 for the Military World Games<sup>11</sup>, once again pandemics have been turned into weapons of propaganda. At the time of writing a WHO team has just arrived in Wuhan to investigate the cause and nature of the COVID-19 outbreak there, so we might just find out how it started, or then again, not ...



The Spanish Flu had three distinct waves in the spring of 1918 and, hitting hardest, the autumn of 1918, as well as at the start of the following year. Presently we appear to be still enduring the second wave of COVID-19, but ...

Typical symptoms of the 1918-20 virus were muscle aches, headache, fatigue, sore throat and fever.

Sound familiar?

A chart of deaths from all causes in major cities, showing a peak in October and November 1918

As there were no antiviral drugs to treat the virus, and no antibiotics to treat the secondary bacterial infections, doctors would rely on a random assortment of medicines with varying degrees of effectiveness, such as aspirin, quinine, arsenics, digitalis, strychnine, epsom salts, castor oil, and iodine. The influenza virus was not isolated until 1933 and so at the time, the cause of Spanish Flu was often seen as a "germ" or a "microbe" and associated with the upper respiratory tract, so remedies often focussed on addressing throat and nasal symptoms.<sup>12</sup> Dr Fosbrooke, resident of the High Street, Bidford, and the area's doctor as well as the Medical Officer of Health for Evesham, Pershore and Feckenham, suggested gargling the throat with Condy's Fluid [a disinfectant] every night and morning, and advised that all symptoms related to fever should be regarded as infectious,

<sup>7</sup> The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-Spanish-Flu-pandemic-of-1918/>

<sup>8</sup> WTFSF, page 1.

<sup>9</sup> WTFSF, page 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sky News article, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2021: <https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-us-intelligence-claims-wuhan-lab-researchers-had-coronavirus-symptoms-before-first-reported-cases-12190416>

<sup>11</sup> New York Times article, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/asia/coronavirus-china-conspiracy-theory.html>

<sup>12</sup> Coventry and Warwickshire 1914-1919: 'Local Aspects of the Great War, Volume 1, Chapter 9: 'Spanish' Influenza in Warwickshire, 1918-19 (SIW) by Holland Chris, page 120

and to stay at home in bed for a few days, stating that "overcrowding in dwellings, the aggregation of large numbers of persons in one room or in assembly rooms, and places of entertainment, should be avoided."<sup>13</sup> To aid good ventilation, people were advised to keep their windows open. Sound familiar?

In a letter to *The Worcester Daily Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> November 1918) a Major E.O. Henshaw, suggested "keeping cheerful, lighting bonfires near the house, and disinfecting ... clothes by baking them in the oven."<sup>14</sup>

"Avoid intoxicating liquors and eat plenty of nourishing food. Porridge is desirable" was the advice



IMAGE FROM AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR "FORMAMINT THE GERM-KILLING THROAT TABLET" SOURCE: ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS 9 NOV. 1918: 589

from Nuneaton, whilst the Rugby Housewives Committee reported that "large eaters of onions do not take any infection of any kind."<sup>15</sup> Naturally as the commercial instinct kicked in, it was suggested that health care and home products now had the ability to fight the flu with Horlicks Malted Milk recommended as the diet "before and after influenza."<sup>16</sup> 'Talora' influenza mixture was promoted by its inventor, a local Kidderminster chemist, E.G. Trevethick, claiming it "KILLS THE GERM AND CURES YOU AT ONCE."<sup>17</sup> Shortages of Bovril were reported and consumers

were asked to limit purchases so as to allow access to those with "more pressing need of it at this critical time."<sup>18</sup>

It is tempting to knock such quack potions and cures, but who can forget in more recent times this suggestion of Donald Trump, regarding the effects of bleach after it was reported to kill the virus in saliva or respiratory fluids within five minutes: "And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? So, it'd be interesting to check that." Pointing to his head, Mr Trump went on: "I'm not a doctor. But I'm, like, a person that has a good you-know-what."<sup>19</sup>

So what were the effects on the normal activities of daily life?

Nationally, the government's response to Spanish Flu was restrained. The Local Government Board, the body responsible for dealing with any outbreak at the national level, saw itself acting in mainly advisory role, leaving important decisions to local authorities.<sup>20</sup> The public health response was to

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<sup>13</sup> WTSF, page 3.

<sup>14</sup> WTSF, page 1.

<sup>15</sup> SIW, page 119.

<sup>16</sup> WTSF, page 5.

<sup>17</sup> WTSF, page 5.

<sup>18</sup> SIW, page 119 and WTSF, page 5.

<sup>19</sup> BBC News report, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52407177>

<sup>20</sup> SIW, page 118

control entry to theatres, dance-halls and other places of public-gathering and quarantine those who were ill, which had little impact on the spread of the illness.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the schools in the region were shut at one time over the course of the three outbreaks 1918-19 with high levels of absences of children and teachers in the region. It even impacted on the Armistice Day celebrations in November 1918. Many schools, however, had already been closed by the Medical Officers of Health due to the epidemic which was rife in Warwickshire that month. At Attleborough Infants School near Nuneaton, the logbook reported that the school “was closed for a month because of Influenza. Two children died.”<sup>22</sup> At Henley in Arden, the thanksgiving service had to be held outdoors in the Market Place the day after Armistice Day due to the outbreak.<sup>23</sup>

Schools, especially elementary [primary] schools in Birmingham were closed in an effort to stem the spread of the virus but then were reopened too early allowing the epidemic to rise further.<sup>24</sup> Sound familiar? On 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1918, the logbook recorded that Bidford’s Infant School in Church Street was “reopened after 5 weeks closure for influenza.”<sup>25</sup>

Limiting public gatherings was a notable feature with cinemas – perhaps one of the most popular forms of entertainment - ordered to close temporarily in Birmingham and Coventry and not to admit children under the age of 14, as the young were regarded as more vulnerable. Additionally, children were temporarily banned from attending football matches in Birmingham.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one of the most noticeable, unique and unexplained effects of the flu was its greater impact on those in the 20 – 40 age group compared to earlier pandemics and compared with COVID today.<sup>27</sup>

It is perhaps interesting to note that the more ‘working-class events’ were more tightly regulated than public activities attended by the middle classes, such as concerts and, perhaps, church services.<sup>28</sup>

Even before the onset of Spanish Flu availability of doctors was noticeable. In March 1917, Bidfordian, John Cole, aged 36 and chauffeur to Bidford Drs Hobbes and Crawford, was able to successfully appeal against conscription from military service. By providing his chauffeuring services he enabled Dr Hobbes, too elderly to drive himself, to come out of retirement and thus free up his successor in the practice, Dr Crawford, to join the Royal Army Medical Corps.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of October 1918 the shortage of medical practitioners was reported in the local and national press with a real strain on existing resources, many being on overseas service or engaged in military hospitals: “many are so over-worked that they scarcely have time to eat a meal from breakfast until they finish for the night.”<sup>30</sup> Nurses working in hospitals and infirmaries were chronically overworked with many becoming patients themselves. At the Warneford Hospital in

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<sup>21</sup> WTSF, page 3.

<sup>22</sup> School Logbook Attleborough C of E Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1918– Warwickshire County Records Office, CR1486/1

<sup>23</sup> *Stratford upon Avon Herald*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1918; sourced from *Coventry and Warwickshire 1914-1919: ‘Local Aspects of the Great War, Volume 1, Chapter 10: The Armistice: Local reaction to the news of the Armistice, November 1918*, Holland Chris, page 134.

<sup>24</sup> West Midlands History Podcast: *Bovril, Whisky and Gravediggers: the Spanish Flu pandemic comes to the West Midlands*, Maggie Andrews and Emma Edwards (BWG): <https://historywm.com/podcasts/bovril-whisky-and-gravediggers-the-spanish-flu-pandemic-comes-to-the-west-midlands>

<sup>25</sup> School Logbook Bidford CE Infants School, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1918 – Warwickshire County Records Office, CR830/1

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.badseysociety.uk/sladden-archive/letters/aabc19180703>

<sup>27</sup> SIW, page 118

<sup>28</sup> BWG

<sup>29</sup> *Have You Forgotten Yet? (HYFY?)* Bob Marshall et al, Bidford & District History Society, 2018, page 232

<sup>30</sup> WTSF, page 4

Leamington, the Matron and many of the nurses had succumbed to influenza and so there were no Armistice celebrations.<sup>31</sup>

A local nurse from Badsey working at Bulford Army Camp on Salisbury Plain wrote in a letter to her fiancé: “ We have 145 women down with it and last week I had it myself – running a temperature of 101.2 but I got over it wonderfully quickly ... and when I was getting better the SMO sent me a bottle of claret and someone else ... some port wine – so I was able to drink your health!”<sup>32</sup>

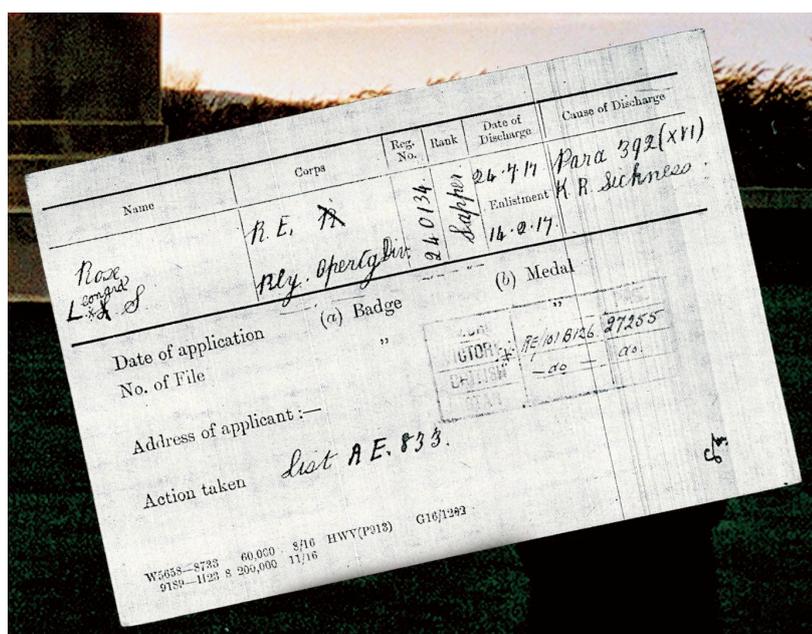
I’m not sure that these drinks are on the list of medicines currently being prescribed for recovering COVID patients! In consequence, routine medical examinations were suspended so as many doctors as possible were freed up to treat flu victims. Sound familiar?

With many men away supporting the war effort there were shortages of undertakers, horses and gravediggers and calls went out to businesses, especially in the transport sector, to assist in the burial of casualties.<sup>33</sup> In some cases wood for coffins ran out.<sup>34</sup> However, local troops where available, were called in to help in Coventry and the *Coventry Standard* was at pains to emphasise that all burials took place in daylight and that reports to the contrary were exaggerated.<sup>35</sup>

“The death of one man ... is a catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands of deaths: that is a statistic!”<sup>36</sup> Then as now, it is the reports of individual suffering which touch the heart the most.

At least 6 of Bidford’s soldiers in the Great War contracted the dreaded Spanish Flu with four surviving and two tragically surviving the horrors of conflict but succumbing to the virus near or shortly after the cessation of hostilities.<sup>37</sup>

Leonard Rose, a Sapper in the Royal Engineers, was gassed on the Western Front and discharged, returning to Bidford in 1917. Sadly, as was the case with so many who were gassed, he developed tuberculosis which, in turn, made him very vulnerable to the flu pandemic. This, in its turn, brought on heart failure and he died at home with his father by his side in March 1919, aged just 23. 3 days later he was interred in St Laurence churchyard, Bidford, following a military funeral.<sup>38</sup>



Leonard Rose's discharge card

<sup>31</sup> *Leamington Spa Courier*, 15 Nov 1918; quoted in SIW, pages

<sup>32</sup> Extract of letter from Amelia Camp to Cyril Sladden, a Major in the 9<sup>th</sup> ~Worcesters, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1918; quoted in WTSF, page 4; full transcription: <https://www.badseysociety.uk/sladden-archive/letters/aabc19180703>

<sup>33</sup> BWG

<sup>34</sup> Imperial War Museum article: ‘Spanish’ Flu: the Unseen Enemy: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/spanish-flu-the-unseen-enemy>

<sup>35</sup> SIW, page 121.

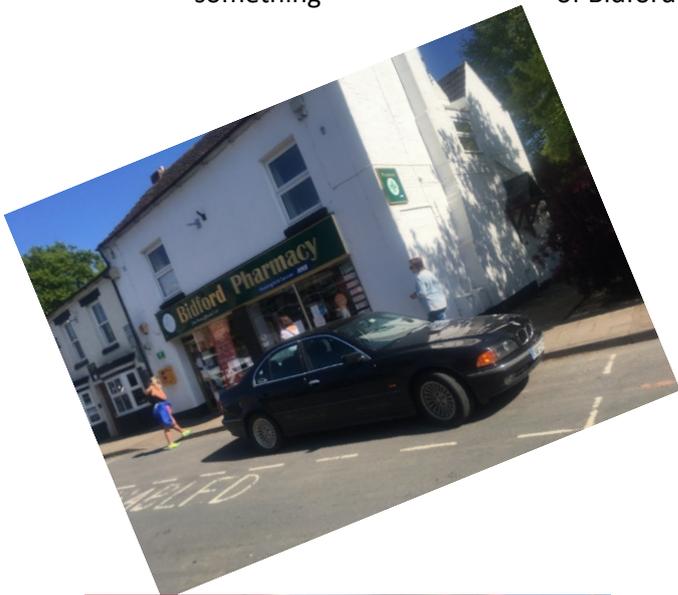
<sup>36</sup> 1932 essay on French humour by the German journalist, satirist, and pacifist Kurt Tucholsky

<sup>37</sup> HYFY? pages 45,148,189,198 and *We Will Remember Them (WWRT)*, Bob Marshall et al, Bidford & District History Society, 2014, pages 139, 140

<sup>38</sup> WWRT, page 140

In conclusion, perhaps the comment of the Ministry of Health, in its Report on the Pandemic of Influenza 1918-19 provides a most poignant epitaph, not just for then but for now, "The disease simply had its way. It came like a thief in the night and stole treasure."<sup>39</sup>

As I reflect on the current COVID-19 outbreak I am struck by the large number of parallels with that most virulent of pandemics occurring just over 100 years ago and sense, in our experience of COVID-19 that we are living through, once again, if not a unique, certainly a rare and exceptional, period of history. Mindful of this, Bidford & District History Society is collecting memorabilia and other items of local relevance to this worldwide phenomenon to capture something of its impact in our local community. In due course, the material collected will be suitably deposited in the local archive facility being developed within Bidford's Community Library. Some of the items already assembled facility within Bidford's Community Library. Here are a few pictures already assembled which tell something of Bidford's story in its first year of the COVID-2019 pandemic:



<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Health: *Report on the pandemic of influenza, 1918-19*, HMSO 1920; quoted in SIW, page 123.



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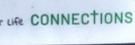



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Please get in touch if you are willing to share experiences, information or material about the impact COVID-19 has had on you. Who knows? What you share may become an item of history to give future generations of Bidfordians an insight into this truly painful but memorable event in our lifetime.

**Mark Shaddick: Bidford & District History Society.**

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With thanks to Dr Roger Leese for his advice in drafting this article. All photographs courtesy of Mark Shaddick, © reserved.