

Chipping; A very unhealthy place to live!

Once science conquers an infectious disease it becomes difficult to imagine the panic that an epidemic once aroused. As time passes medical progress is taken for granted and a community soon becomes unaware of the danger that it has been spared. With this in mind it is difficult for us to imagine the fear and panic that accompanied an outbreak of diphtheria in December 1879. Forty-one children died between October 1879 and May 1880 in Chipping and the surrounding area. Set against the figure of eight deaths, between the same months in 1878/79, the true tragedy of the epidemic can be seen.

Before 1861 diphtheria was often confused with scarlet fever, after this it was identified as being a separate and comparatively new disease. It began with a sore throat and raised temperature and doctors found it difficult to distinguish early cases from sore throats and croup, it was often referred to as throat fever. The government set up four independent enquiries; each one was inconclusive in its findings, each suggesting a different cause. The only thing they did agree on was that diphtheria was a child killer, which spread rapidly, particularly in overcrowded areas. It was not until 1894, when a diphtheria antitoxin was introduced, that infant mortality rates for the disease began to fall.

The first case of diphtheria, during the Chipping epidemic, was reported in the late autumn of 1879; sadly this was to be the first of many.

The school logbook for Brabin's boys' school records:

"Dec 4th ... an outbreak of Diphtheria has kept many children at home. The disease appears to be spreading.

Dec 16th ... Closed school at noon at the request of the Rural Sanitary Committee. It will remain closed until the Medical Officer of Health gives permission to re-open it."

On Saturday 20th December 1879 it was reported in the Preston Guardian that three schools in the Chipping area had been closed due to an outbreak of diphtheria. The report ends with, *"At one house four children have died in a fortnight with the disease."* This was sadly true; four Sefton children from New House, Thornley, aged between one and thirteen had died.

We can only imagine the fear and panic that must have been prevalent throughout the area, and the unimaginable suffering of those who lost their children to the disease.

The schools remained closed for ten weeks and reopened in February 1880, but with some restrictions in place.

