

It is easy to think of typhoid as a problem which affects only developing countries, but not long ago typhoid epidemics were endemic in Britain. Indeed Malton experienced a serious outbreak as late as 1932.



A large framed map in the Woodhams Stone Collection records the epidemic. It pin points the position of the sewers, drains and water mains as well as the houses where those affected lived – each marked with a red cross. It is believed to have been created in 1933 for the Ministry of Health's Report and covers houses in Malton, Norton and Old Malton.

Malton derived its drinking water from local pools and springs, the River Derwent and the Ladywell. This well's water supply was constant and reliable but was often inundated by flood water from the River Derwent which was heavily polluted with raw sewage. Typhoid and diarrhoea were recorded as being prevalent in Malton from 1873-1877 and in 1889 there was an outbreak of diarrhoea in Malton that was said to have "affected every household in the town". Plans were made to bring water from other sources but little action was taken.

Meanwhile, Norton installed an entirely new water supply. As a result the only Norton residents to be affected by the 1932 outbreak were those who were infected in Malton itself.

The Malton typhoid outbreak began on 23rd September 1932 when a young harvester became feverish. He was sent by a doctor to Spring Hall, Malton where no precautions were taken. Unfortunately there was a fracture in the pipe coming from the hospital which carried the typhoid infected sewage. The sewage seeped into the ground and contaminated the Ladywell. From 30th September – 26th October the infected sewage went straight into Malton's water supply and people drank and washed in infected water for over four weeks.



The first case was finally reported on 15th October 1932. Twenty further cases were notified during the next three days. Once the outbreak had been recognised emergency measures were introduced. The town was sealed off completely for almost three months and travel was discouraged. By the end of the outbreak there were 235 primary cases of typhoid and 35 secondary cases. 23 people died. One person who died was Dr George Colley Parkin who worked tirelessly to help those people who had been infected. He was said to have saved many people, especially children, even when “he was weary and ill”.

The Chief Medical Officer stated in the subsequent Public Health Report that the outbreak derived from a local well:

“a source which the local Council were urged by the Local Government Board to abandon forty years ago by reason of its liability to pollution and the associated high incidence of diseases of the enteric group.”

In other words if warnings had been listened to and action taken earlier the 1932 outbreak could have been prevented.

The need for clean water is a continuing one in the world and 844 million people don't have safe, clean water to drink.