

Health and Safety in the 1840s

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In the 1840s, Bradford was growing. In 1847 when the Borough was incorporated it had 66,718 inhabitants. The new council adopted “LABOR OMNIA VINCIT” which used to be painted under the boar’s head on the side of every blue and cream Bradford bus. One of the councillors was my great grandfather Edward Hawksworth Parratt, Ironmonger of Broadstones, the old street under the church steps.

On the other side of the world, the Ganges Delta, lurked a new menace, a real beast from the east – cholera. Cholera is an infectious disease of the small intestine causing severe diarrhoea which can lead to dehydration and death. It is caused by drinking water contaminated with a bacterium called vibrio cholerae. Massive dehydration leads to sunken eyes and blue-grey skin. The first pandemic came from Jessore in the Ganges delta in 1817. It died out in 1823-4 but by then had migrated, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths. In 1823-4 Filippo Pacini had identified the bacteria during an outbreak in Florence, but not until 1883 did the medical world accept this. By 1849 it had reached Bradford.

Health was an interest of Edward Parratt. Already, in 1803, Commissioners looking at “Health in Towns” had seen that the Beck at Cuckoo Bridge was full of filth and the Bradford Canal which reached a dead end behind Broadstones was known as River Stink.

Edward was chairman of a committee which met in March 1843 which arrived at this resolution: *“That, considering the importance of the township of Bradford, the amount of its population and extent of its highways, it is inexpedient and improper that the responsibility of management of the highways should be in the hands of two people. It is resolved that A Board should now be formed for the superintendence of the highways of the township of Bradford and that such board consist of thirteen householders, residing in, and assessed to the poor of the township, and that such board should be called “The Board for the repair of the Township of Bradford.”*

As a result 16 people were elected commissioners for health. Edward Parratt was one. This looked progressive, but cholera was on its way, arriving in Britain in 1831. In 1844 James Smith in his Health of Towns Commission said *“Of Bradford I am obliged to pronounce it the most filthy town I visited It has courts and yards and dingy alleys with effluent-laden watercourses”*.

Elsewhere, Paris suffered in 1849. In Ireland, already weakened by the potato famine, thousands died of cholera. In 1849, the worst year, 5,308 died of cholera in Liverpool and the settlers trying to cross to America carried it with them to California. It is only a wonder that only 420 died in Bradford.

The 1850s saw people trying to improve their lives. The opening of Undercliffe Cemetery where Edward bought a grave plot, stemmed the overcrowding of churchyards with burials only a few inches below the ground surface. The famous Titus Salt moved his business out to Saltaire, featuring a model village, and a tradesman like Edward Parratt was able to move his family to the newly built Hanover Square off Manningham Lane, away from old shops in Broadstones.

Amazingly, of his 10 children born in Bradford between 1838 and 1860 only one died young.

(1565)