LEICESTER'S GREAT INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC 1918-1919 by JONATHAN WILSHERE

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## LEICESTER'S "GREAT" INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918-1919

FEW families escaped the influenza pandemic that swept the world in 1918-19 and which ranks amongst the greatest in history: estimates of mortality vary from twelve and a half to twenty million, far more devastating than the previous severe world-wide influenza of 1889-90. Both epidemics derived from a Virus A strain, a type generally more virulent and dangerous than other strains.

The influenza of 1918, nicknamed "Spanish 'flu", was reported spreading in Germany on 6 July yet in the United Kingdom within the following week it had already caused a number of deaths in Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Sunderland and Leeds. By 19 July it was prevalent in Loughborough with nearly a quarter of that town's children away from school: the summer holidays were consequently brought forward. The illness was of a mainly slight nature, though factories reported low attendances, normal working was not disrupted too much. People were taking precautions and chemists' shops reported a heavy demand.

The Leicester "summer wave" total of one hundred deaths (including thirty from pneumonia and bronchitis) during June and July did not cause undue concern, yet within a year another fifteen hundred were to die. The death rate in Leicester for 1918 was as high as 18.1 per thousand population, a figure exceeded only three times in the preceding twenty years. Influenza with 1,100 deaths was the biggest "killer", leaving Phthisis\* (316) and Cancer (309) far behind. Artificial conditions existing during the First World War brought about the then lowest birth rate on record (14.9 per thousand population); deaths had exceeded births for the first time since official records began in Leicester in 1841. Parish Register evidence suggests that that date can be pushed back to 1801 if the Leicester parishes are treated collectively. In 1919 the local death rate, notwithstanding a further 300 'flu deaths, fell to 13.6 per thousand, the birth rate rising slightly to 15.3 per thousand. Comparable figures for 1981, the most recent year with official figures to hand, were 11.7 and 16.0 per thousand for the local death and birth rates respectively.

The second "autumn wave" was more severe; within one week 'flu deaths increased from five to fiftyfour, the latter figure relating to the week ended 19 October. Leicester now had a dangerous epidemic on her hands; all parts of the town were affected, as were young and old of all classes. Medical staff were reported as "run off their legs" and District Nursing and private nursing Associations were severly extended. By 25 October school attendance were under two-thirds and many teachers were absent; the only course was to close the schools. The week ended 26 October produced 283 deaths, 194 from 'flu, more than five times the weekly average of 50-60. Another 262 'flu deaths plus a further 40 from associated bronchitis and pneumonia occurred the following week. The town's undertakers, whose staffs had been depleted by the demands of war, were unable to cope with this situation and sent a deputation to the Town Hall. Coffins were now being made in railway workshops and in addition Corporation employees, lent from the Tramways Department, made 100 at cost price. Transport difficulties to cemeteries were allieviated by the loan of a Red Cross ambulance. Several wards at the Groby Road Isolation Hospital were closed and disinfected, thus releasing three doctors, eight nurses and 70 tuberculosis beds and a further 30 from convalescent scarlet fever cases. During October and November, with the aid of the Fire Brigade motor ambulance, 96 and 73 removals of desperate cases were made respectively, 27 and 19 proving fatal. An acute home nursing shortage meant many sticken families were often in dire need when several members of a household were seriously ill simultaneously; one story told of dead and dying found in one house. An appeal for nightwork volunteers was made in the local press; few were forthcoming, although several school-teachers acted as temporary nurses.

\* i.e. pulmonary tuberculosis/consumption.

Loughborough had been badly affected in the "autumn wave"; despite alarming rumours, a hig incidence of cases and an attempt to 'play down' the situation, the death rate in excess of 50 per thousand population might have been worse. Four deaths had occurred in one house. A great number of comparatively young people seemed particularly prone to the outbreak at this time, although by November the 'flu had become milder in character and the epidemic was on the wane. Eleven funeral had been booked on a single Monday morning with one firm of undertakers and a wreath-make supplying nearly 150 in a single week. The schools were kept closed for a further week, as were the Sunday schools. In mid-November, the Loughborough Medical Officer of Health stated that the number of fresh cases (which has 'peaked' at 150 a day) was declining. The death rate for October and earl November was 39.5 per thousand population. As this study is concerned primarily with Leicester, the full impact of influenza throughout the County has not been studied, although it is known that in Ibstoc there were eighty 'flu deaths in November 1918.

Reverting to Leicester, influenza deaths declined throughout November and December; the followin table summarises the position:

| Week ended  | 'Flu Deaths | % age of Total | Total Deaths |  |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|--|
| 9 November  | 147         | 67.1           | 219          |  |
| 16 November | 65          | 41.7           | 156          |  |
| 23 November | 20          | 28.2           | 71           |  |
| 30 November | 18          | 21.2           | 85           |  |
| 7 December  | 18          | 25.7           | 70           |  |
|             | 268         | 44.6           | 601          |  |

There were a further 23 deaths from influenza before the end of December, but only six in Januar 1919. Despite the strain placed on trained nursing staff, only one death of a nurse was reported durin this second wave.

The third and final wave, "spring", commenced quite suddenly in the week ended 15 February. After two weeks with a total of only 3 'flu deaths, the number increased to 12; the Sanitary Committee fearing the worst, sought assistance from V.A.D. nurses (five were forthcoming) and the Isolatio Hospital was again made ready to receive 'flu victims. There were questions asked about lives bein lost through the "inadequacy of whiskey" and the Committee was asked to step up supplies if possible The third wave showed certain variations from the course of the previous two outbreaks, but it wa relatively mild in comparison with the "autumn wave". Its peak lasted barely a month, the five week ending between 22 February and 22 March producing a death toll of 60, 91, 50, 41 and 19-261 'flu death in total. As many as that figure had died in a single week in the autumn wave, on two separat occasions. In the succeeding three weeks to 12 April 'flu accounted for only 17 deaths. Collectively, the three waves, including associated pneumonic and bronchitic cases, had caused 1,600 deaths, the second wave accounting for 62.5 per cent of these and the third 31.2.

Incidence, according to sex and age, of 1,176 deaths directly attributable to influenza in 1918 and 1919 is summarised in the Leicester Medical Officer's Report for 1918. Dr.Millard's table read:

| Age of Victim                    |        | Male     | Female | Total | (Percentage)   |
|----------------------------------|--------|----------|--------|-------|----------------|
| 0 to 5 years                     |        | 63       | 90     | 153   | 13.01          |
| 5 to 15 years                    |        | 62<br>58 | 120    | 178   | 15.14          |
| 25 to 35 years                   |        | 95       | 195    | 290   | 24.66<br>10.12 |
| 35 to 45 years<br>45 to 60 years |        | 53<br>66 | 82     | 148   | 12.58          |
| Over 60 years                    |        | 78       | 84     | 162   | 13.78          |
|                                  | Totals | 475      | 701    | 1,176 | 100.00         |

(The Percentage column has been added).

will be apparent that female deaths outnumbered male in the ratio 3:2, 45% being aged between 15 d 35 years. The toll of war and the number of men on active service had seriously curtailed the mber of males in Leicester during the period in question so that the results are, to some extent, tificial. There are stories of men returning from the war finding that the brides they had married ulst on leave a few months previously had died in the epidemic.

icester was one of the places chosen for a Local Government Inquiry and this involved sampling every ith house in representative streets. 1,061 houses containing 4,619 persons were thus surveyed with a sultant two per cent sample. Here there were 1,397 cases (1,311 actual) between 18 May 1918 and 19 arch 1919. (164 were twice attacked and 6 three times). The 32 deaths resulting from these cases ere equivalent to a death rate of 23 per 1,000. 26 deaths had occurred in the second wave, only 6 in e third and none in the first. Of the cases overall, the age groups with the highest incidence were 0 15 years 29.3% and 15 to 45 years 35.5%. From this sample, it was estimated 30% of Leicester's pulation, say 1 in 3, caught the disease, comparable to the usual 25% to 40% range found elsewhere in vere outbreaks. The 'flu death rate for 1918 and 1919 was about 7 per thousand population; this was whaps above average and accounted for half the total deaths.

ave you any known 'flu deaths in your ancestry during this outbreak? In the pre-drug era, almost any lu outbreak would produce a marked increase of deaths. One example of how medical advance has educed 'flu mortality is evidenced by the now largely forgotten Virus A epidemic in 1951, which was of ome magnitude, yet only produced 117 deaths in Leicester.

s a tailpiece and as an example of the importance the medical profession of the day placed on leanliness and prevention of the disease, and of mothers recognising that care was necessary to revent their children contracting the dangerous pneumonic complications, the following advertisement is the local press on 14 February 1919 is a prime illustration:

## The INFLUENZA SCOURGE

has no greater enemy than real antiseptic cleanliness - cleanliness of house, cleanliness of clothes, cleanliness of person.

Ordinary soap, however, plentifully used, will not give this antiseptic cleanliness, therefore link up with LIFEBUOY.

Lifebuoy soap cleans and disinfects at the same time. Disease germs can find no lurking place where Lifebuoy soap has been used.

LIFEBUOY SOAP will safeguard the children - keep them healthy as well as clean - protect them from contagious diseases.

-USE LIFEBUOY SOAP FOR CLEANING THE HOME --WASH YOUR HANDS AND FACE WITH IT --BATHE WITH IT - SHAMPOO WITH IT -

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