
FEATURE ARTICLE

Smallpox epidemic in East Ilsley in 1753:

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When you searched the parish registers for your family history, did you come across an unusual increase in the number of burials in your parish? You probably thought of some sort of local epidemic but had no other information to go on. One such example cropped up in the parish registers of East Ilsley in the mid 18th century. In 1753, there were 27 burials recordedⁱ, compared with the usual number of between 6 and 12 – an enormous increase for such a small village. As is often the case at that time, the registers record only the name of the deceased with no other information.

It was only when I started looking at the accounts books for the overseers of the poorⁱⁱ that it became clear that there had been an epidemic of smallpox in that year. The first mention of smallpox in the accounts occurs in April 1753, when the costs of Joseph Whiteing's illness are listed. For the rest of 1753 and into the first half of 1754, the accounts continue to list the details of expenditure during the smallpox for many different people in the village. It is clear that this was a major epidemic, with at least 7 poor families being mentioned. Of course the poor were not the only people affected. Many of the other burials in that year were also likely to be due to the epidemic, and may even have included that of the rector Rev. Joseph Barnes. Although at 79 years of age, it may have been the strain of visiting the sick and carrying out so many burial services that finished him.

Identifying which of the burials relate to smallpox deaths among those not mentioned in the overseers' accounts is not so easy. The total of smallpox deaths for 1753 is estimated to be about 20 of the 27 burials, making the assumption that the deaths of elderly residents, infants and mothers shortly after childbirth are probably from other causes. This implies that probably 50 to 60 people in the village were infected during the year, a major drain on the resources of a small community.

Joseph Whiteing and his family survived but others mentioned in the accounts did not. The mortality rate for smallpox in the 18th century was typically 20 to 60% of those infected, rising to 80% for children. Although the disease is highly contagious, it does require close contact with the victim to be transmitted. So quarantine was really the only option for a community. For poor families with cramped accommodation, this was a major problem, since victims could be contagious for up to 5 weeks.

So how did the epidemic affect the village? From the overseers' accounts books it is clear that the financial cost was high. Take as an example, Joseph Whiteing, who was the first person mentioned in the accounts. Over a period of 3 months, from April to June 1753, the accounts list the cost of supporting Joseph and his family during his illness, coming to a total of £9 6s 11d (see list below). There were then further expenses of £1 7s 11¼d in October 1753 for his daughter's illness. This was at a time when the normal monthly total for the overseers would have been less than £4, supporting perhaps a dozen families. The bills included nursing for Joseph, provided by Widow Clark (who presumably had already survived smallpox) as well as bills from local shopkeepers, such as the Snosswells, for food and other living essentials. It is quite likely that the family was quarantined during Joseph's illness to try to reduce the risk of spreading the disease.

April 22nd 1753	
The expense of Joseph Whiteing in the Smallpox	£1-7-9½
Paid for maintaining Joseph Whiteings Wife & family	£0-5-0
May 20th 1753	
Paid for maintaining Joseph Whiteing in the Smallpox to James Martin	£1-9-4
Paid William Deacon a bill for things delivered to Joseph Whiteing in the Smallpox	£0-11-6¼
Expenses Joseph Whiteing in the smallpox paid for maintaining him	£0-13-4
Paid for maintaining his family	£0-17-0
Paid Henry Pryor for Waiting on Joseph Whiteing with Smallpox	£0-6-0
Paid the Widow Clark for nursing Joseph Whiteing in the Small Pox five weeks	£2-10-0
June 17th 1753	
Expenses Joseph Whiteing in the Smallpox Paid William Deacon and James Martin	£0-14-11¼
Maintaining his family	£0-12-6
Oct 7th 1753	
Paid Mrs Snosswell a Bill for Joseph Whiteings Daughter during the Smallpox	£0-6-2
Paid William Deacon a Bill for Joseph Whiteings Daughter	£0-16-6¼
Ditto Jane Foster waiting on Whiteings child	£0-5-3

Over the period April 1753 to Jul 1754, a total of £45 was spent by the overseers in support of poor families affected by smallpox. This represents about the same amount as was normally spent in total on poor relief in a year, supporting poor widows and orphans in the village.

Of course the financial cost is only one aspect of the effect on the community. For some families, the epidemic meant the loss of several family members. Joseph Whiteing was lucky – both he and his daughter survived. Other families were not so lucky. The Snoswell family lost 4 family members in that year. They ran one of the shops in the village and were reasonably well off – Elizabeth Snoswell who died in April 1753 left £12 in specific bequests to her 4 sons in her willⁱⁱⁱ. Her son Thomas, who died in Aug 1753, leaves 6s a week to his brother Richard from the time of Elizabeth’s illness to Thomas’s death as recompense for Richard looking after the family during the smallpox, at the expense of his own business. Two other Snoswells also died in the early part of 1753, but this may well have been from other causes. John Barret and his daughter Mary, aged 5, both died in the epidemic. James and Mary Coakes lost both their son John, aged 16, and daughter Mary, aged 9.

So what happened in the longer term in East Ilsley? Smallpox continued to crop up intermittently, as mentioned in the overseers’ accounts, but there were no major epidemics for the rest of the 18th century. This may possibly be due to the overseers providing premises where smallpox victims could be quarantined away from their families and most of the village. In 1755, the first mention is made of somewhere called “the Lodge”, whose upkeep appears in the accounts periodically over the next decades. Although it’s not specifically stated, this may have been the quarantine house. In the early part of the 19th century, a map and terrier of the village compiled by the Rev. Thomas^{iv} lists two cottages on the eastern edge of the village as being the Lodge. By 1831 these cottages were definitely owned by the parish but by then they appear to be no longer in use as quarantine premises.



Location of 'the Lodge' (arrowed) – part of the map of East Ilsley in Rev. Thomas' notes on parishioners, dated 1831.

What other fascinating snippets of information will come out of the overseers' accounts, as they are transcribed? Watch this space!

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¹ Parish Register transcripts, St. Mary's Church, East Ilsley, Berks FHS (CD)

¹ East Ilsley is relatively unusual in Berkshire in that a full set of detailed overseer's accounts have survived for the whole period between 1744 and 1796 (BRO reference D/P 74/12/3). The detail in these accounts is a fantastic resource for family historians, since it covers the poorest end of village society, who otherwise would leave few records apart from their births, deaths and marriages. These account books are currently being transcribed by East Ilsley Local History Society, who aim to make them available on CD in the near future.

¹ Transcripts of the wills are found in "In the name of God, Amen – transcripts of 190 East Ilsley wills" by Eric Saxton, CD published by East Ilsley Local History Society

¹ The map of the village identifying the Lodge is in the booklet "A drunken worthless creature – notes on parishioners, 1831" by Kay Sanderson, published by the East Ilsley Local History Society.