

# 20th Century Sparks!

## Poverty

### Being ill, keeping healthy

In the first half of the twentieth century, expensive healthcare, bad housing and poor diets contributed to the the nation's health.

On this page and in [The Black Spot of Brighton](#) , [Brighton plagues](#) , [Tales before and after the NHS](#) and [Products to keep you healthy: then and now](#) we explore memories of unsanitary housing, the spread of disease and how health cures have differed from the past to the present.



Sarsaparilla label  
<http://clendening.kumc.edu/dc/sc/labels.html>

### Terrible conditions

Conditions were terrible in those days, proper diets were non-existent and fresh milk was a luxury we couldn't often afford. A lot of children died young. Ricketts was a prevalent disease, when little legs became like broomsticks and were often crooked. Consumption, or TB as we know it now, was a dreaded word, with the damp houses and bug infested bedrooms, children grew up with the smell of dankness and illness.

*Georgina Attrell - [Backyard Brighton](#)*

### Neighbours pitched in to help the ill

There was a marvelous neighborly spirit in those years. If you were ill, the whole street was concerned and wanted to do something about it and they did. They took it in turns to make milk puddings and custards out of their little money. Anything they could do to help.

*John Langley - [Always a Layman](#)*

If a neighbour fell ill we would still help, despite having fallen out before. Neighbours were neighbours then, and you would share everything that you got.

*Mrs. Barnett - [Back Street Brighton](#)*

There was a community spirit, engendered of course by the fact of all being in the same boat...Unlike some I cannot say that I look back on those days with any affection. The memories I have are of being damned cold in winter, suffering chilblained ears which bled, having rickets through my poor diet and certainly not being over protected by my parents.

*Mr. W.G. Holmes - [Back Street Brighton](#)*



## **Poverty**

### **Being ill, keeping healthy - continued**

#### **Keeping healthy**

##### **Eat a raw onion and drink Sarsaparilla**

Sometimes in Trafalgar Street Dad called into the herbalist's to buy a lump of licorice for sore throats, or a drink called Sarsaparilla, or some other herbal remedy. We never went to doctors, because we could not afford them. A winter cold was treated by eating a raw onion, and by rubbing the chest with camphorated oil. A glass of hot homemade elderberry wine was another winter remedy very much enjoyed when I had a cough.

*Ruby Dunn - Mouslecoomb Days*

##### **Nasty ointment**

Sickness was a do it yourself affair, or a visit to the herbalist, sending for the doctor was unheard of because nobody could afford it. There were two herbalists who were patronised by the street, one by the name of Stokes, who had his establishment at the corner of Waterloo Place and Phoenix Place, the other at the Open Market at the London Road entrance.

When I was diagnosed by my mother as having mumps or swollen glands, she took me to the Open Market herbalist who concocted some black ointment to be applied once a day and I was cured. Whether this was due to the ointment or nature I wouldn't like to say.

*Mr W.G. Holmes - Back Street Brighton*

##### **A double dose of syrup of figs**

After our baths we were given a dose of syrup of figs whether we needed it or not. I loved it, but my brother hated it, so if Granma or Mother wasn't looking I used to drink mine quickly and exchange my empty spoon for my brother's full one. It was ages before I realised I was having a double dose, though it never seemed to do me any harm. We were always given a sweet after the medicine and although I often used to drink my brother's medicine I never got his sweet.

*L. Scarborough - Backyard Brighton*



## Poverty

### The Black Spot of Brighton

**During the 1920s/30s many of the smaller communities living in court areas or so-called 'slum' dwellings had to share their space with traders and businesses. In Oxford Court there was a Slaughter Yard. These two extracts from 'Backyard Brighton' explain how the cattle were brought to the court for slaughter, and how the cramped and unhygienic conditions this created brought about, inevitably, disease and death.**

Our house was on the south side of the street, the Court opened out and several trades were carried on there. Behind us there was a huge storage area which stretched almost to London Road where the parents of Bellman's the hosiers had a sack business for quite a time; beyond this there was a slaughter yard.

The cattle would be driven down Trafalgar Street from the station, along London Road and into Oxford Street past our house and into the Court; from my bedroom I could see them being slaughtered. Having the slaughter house there encouraged the rats, and that, with the bugs in the houses, made it an unhygienic area.

At one time, it was known as 'The Black Spot of Brighton', and I seem to remember it had something to do with children dying. One family that lived in Oxford Court lost several children while they were still young. I remember rats being caught in the sewers and released on the Level for the dogs to catch them. I believe this was on one of the Bank Holidays.

*Benjamin Paulett Bowman - Backyard Brighton*

The slaughter house was in use for most of the time. We could hear the bleating of sheep and the mooing of cattle, shots as the animals were killed, day and night for several days at a time; then it would be quiet for a week or two.

The farmers would bring the sheep or cattle (75-100 at a time) into Brighton Station by train, and then drive them through the back streets, down Ann Street, across London Road, along Oxford Street and into Oxford Court.

The animals were herded into the bottom end of the cul-de-sac, with two men behind them, to stop any escaping while the slaughter-house gates were opened to allow a few in at a time.

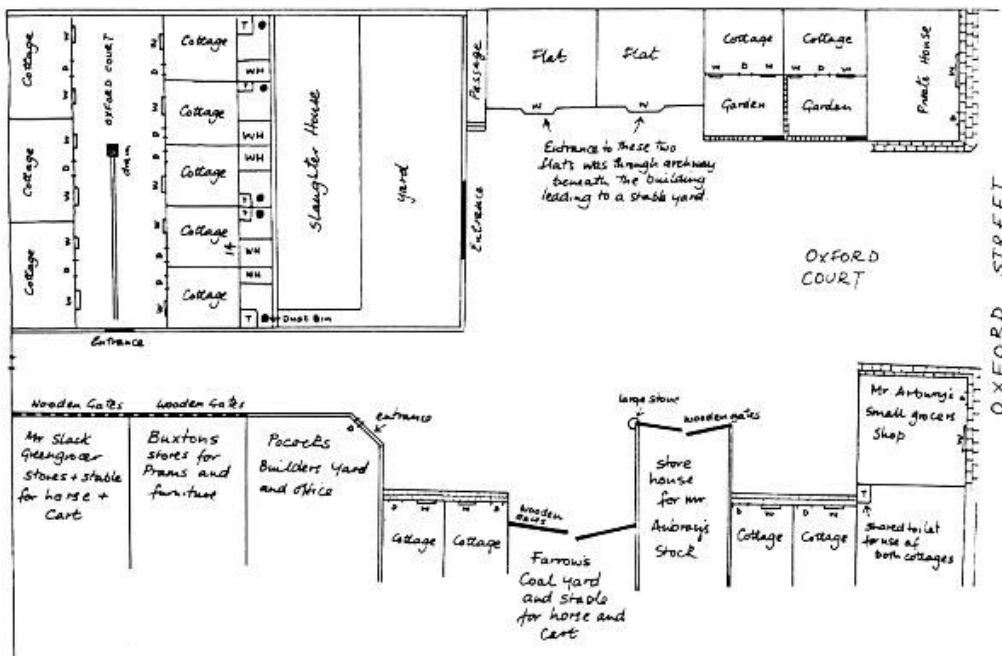
It was bad luck if anyone wanted to get out of their front door, as it was impossible to push a way through all the animals. The women and children were often upset by the cattle pushing their noses against the window and peering into the houses. When I was a child I remember waking up to see flames and smoke billowing out of the slaughter-house roof.

*Ernest Whittington - Backyard Brighton*

# 20th Century Sparks!

## Poverty

### The Black Spot of Brighton - continued





## Poverty

### Brighton plagues

#### 1930s - Scarlet Fever

I had only been to school two months when I caught scarlet fever, which in those days was a killer disease as they had no antibiotics, and very few other drugs. I was taken to hospital at nine o'clock at night, but it was like the middle of the night to me.

My mother had to have the bedroom fumigated, as well as my clothes, as it was very contagious. I was put into the fever hospital, which is now Bevendean hospital, and I was not allowed any visitors. My mother and grandmother had to stand outside and look through the window. Visiting hours were Wednesday and Sunday afternoons.

At the height of the illness I went blind for three days. I can remember sitting up in the cot screaming that I couldn't see, they put me in a small room and pulled the blinds so that the light wouldn't hurt my eyes.

After three days my sight started coming back and I started getting better. I was allowed to get up and sit in a chair each morning. Eventually I was allowed home, but was very weak, and not allowed back to school for some time. When I was, it was only on condition that I didn't do any drill, as P.T. was called in those days, or run or play games, as the illness had left me with a weak heart. If only they had seen what I used to get up to when I was playing with other children!

*L. Scarborough - Backyard Brighton*

#### Midge's Death

I had two brothers and a sister, who were much older than me, and a twin sister Gladys, or Midge as we called her. Unfortunately she died when she was seven from diphtheria. It was a custom on May Day to dress up in paper and go out to see people. Midge complained of a sore throat after we had been 'Maying' and she was buried on 6th May.

I then became very close to my mother and would sleep in her bed. When we heard my father's footsteps coming from the pub I would quickly run into my own bed.

*Dorothy Betteridge - Backyard Brighton*

#### The outbreak of Smallpox in the 1950s

Towards the end of 1950 there was one of the biggest scares ever to hit Brighton, which in some ways was even worse than the bombs we had during the war.

It all came about when a serviceman, I believe he was an airman, smuggled a fur coat into the country for his girlfriend. If that was not bad enough, the fur coat also harboured the deadly disease of smallpox.

At least this was the story that we heard in the shop, and the people who gave us this information got their privileged knowledge from "friends of friends". As the people started to be diagnosed as having this contagious disease, so the panic swept across the town.



## **Poverty**

### **Brighton plagues - continued**

By the 10th January 1951 there were already twenty-six cases of smallpox, of which quite a few had died. Vaccination was widespread, but not compulsory and over a hundred thousand people in Brighton and Hove were vaccinated in a fortnight. People were asked not to leave the town in the hopes of confining the disease.

There were so many close contacts to the original source of the outbreak, that it was unbelievable. Some of these contacts were customers in our shop. Although we had all been told to get vaccinated because of our vulnerability in being in touch with the general public, we were still very skittish at serving certain people - especially touching their ration books.

On February 6th the smallpox all-clear was given, but by that time there had been twenty-nine confirmed cases and ten people had died. It was the biggest outbreak in the area for decades.

*Kathleen Wilson - International Rescue*



## Poverty

### Tales before and after the NHS

The doctor would want 1/6 every time he visited you. The parents could not afford to pay...Therefore death would happen. Thoughtful doctors who studied the poor set up some surgeries in various parts of the town so that the patients could visit them, instead of having to go to the doctors' private houses. These surgeries were empty old shops...painted a very dark brown...because this would not show the dirt.

*Albert Paul - Poverty, Hardship but Happiness*

The Doctor was a notable horseman and rode to visit his patients. He was mostly paid for his services with gifts of fruit, vegetables, eggs or even a truss of hay. There was no health service then, only the sick fund that was run at the Bull Hotel.

*Doris Hill - Growing up in Ditchling*

I remember the new National Health Service in 1948, because I went down with scarlet fever, and I remember my grandmother saying its lucky the Health Service is here, otherwise we would have to pay for the doctor. I always remember being confined to the house, in a room on my own, with a thick blanket over the door with some carbolic on it or something.

My grandmother looked after me as my Mum went out to work full-time. I never came home to an empty house and still can't get used to it now.

*Alan Jeal - Back Street Brighton*



## **Poverty**

### **Products to keep you healthy: then and now**

When I watch television nowadays and see the choice of products advertised which are considered absolutely essential, I have to smile and wonder how we grew up without getting dishpan hands and leather-look skin!

It was possibly due to the medication we were given: daily doses of cod liver oil and malt in the winter, sulphur tablets in the spring for our blood and castor oil once a week. Goose-grease was rubbed in if chesty, and sometimes something called Russian tallow, which was like candle grease. This was spread on brown paper and applied with a warm iron for bronchitis. The use of strong smelling camphorated oil in a warm atmosphere guaranteed you a seat on your own!

*Marjory Batchelor - [A Life Behind Bars](#)*