

Serious health problems in wigan in 1900



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Wigan was a town that developed rapidly as the result of the Industrial Revolution.

It was situated on the South Lancashire coalfields, and many of its inhabitants either worked in the mines, or in mining related industries. The coal produced was “ exported” to other towns in the region, firstly by canal, and then by the railways. Wigan was on the Leeds Liverpool Canal, the west coast main railway line, and a local railway network linking all major north west towns. Much of this railway network has since been dismantled. The other main industry in Wigan in the 19th century was the cotton industry.

These industries brought many people into Wigan during the early part of the 19th century. The population increased from ten thousand, around 1800; to forty thousand in 1840. In order to provide accommodation for all these people, a large number of poorly built houses were constructed in the town. These were built of cheap materials, and were as close to the pit, factory, or mill as possible.

They were very cramped, and generally had no sanitation. This led to the spread of disease, and high death rates particularly amongst very young children. There were three main types of houses built during this period. “ Cellar houses” were built with cellars, in which people either lived, or worked as weaver’s workshops. Another common type was “ court housing”, where the houses were built behind the streets around a small courtyard.

The third type was “ back to back” housing, which were terraces built with a common back wall. They only had one outside wall. Many houses had attics which people also lived in. In the second part of the 19th century, houses

were more likely to be built as terraces, with small backyards and access to a narrow rear passage way. The worst housing was found in the Scholes and Standishgate areas. Diagram of “ Back to Back”, and “ Court” housing.

In those days families with ten children were not uncommon, and so all types of housing were over-crowded. Most houses didn't even have a supply of drinking water, and only wealthy people had houses with toilets and drains. The conditions were very much like mediaeval England as raw sewage was left in “ middens”, or simply thrown in the street. To make matters worse, there were slaughter houses in the middle of the houses, which often sold infected meat.

Wigan Records Office recorded in “ those dark satanic mills” that there were “ at least 25 small, privately owned slaughter houses situated in the poorer parts of the town”. The same source recorded that there was “ meat infected with tuberculosis”. They also left piles of offal and animal dung outside their premises, which were another source of disease. To try and deal with problems like these through out the country, the Government passed the 1875 Public Health Act. This enabled local authorities to introduce vaccinations against diseases, and to carry out inspections of food, housing, and the clearance of waste left on the streets as not every part of the country had a public health authority it was not very successful. The town of Wigan was growing too fast, at this time for these measures to be a success.

The 1875 Public Health Act gave local authorities the power to appoint a Medical Officer of Health. Many towns, including Wigan, didn't appoint anyone, so conditions didn't improve. Diseases like Tuberculosis (TB) and

Smallpox were common, and killed many people if there was an outbreak. The Wigan Observer recorded on January 15 1903 that “ in addition to the 5 cases of small pox, under treatment in the sanatorium, all of which came from (Paul) Scholes, three fresh cases were admitted to the institution on Wednesday.

These were all from a house in Aspull... “. Children, especially those under the age of one, were particularly likely to be killed by these diseases.

The infant mortality rate in Wigan in the 19th century was 158 per thousand, but this dropped to only 35 per thousand for children between 1 and 5. Adult death rates in Wigan at the end of the 19th century averaged 21. 5 per thousand, which was worse than major cities like London (16. 3), Manchester (16. 0), and the country as a whole (16.

9). this means Wigan was 25% worse than the average for the country. The effects of Tuberculosis were apparent well into the 20th century, as Wrightington TB Hospital opened in 1933 with no shortage of patients. Death Rates For Wigan – Average death rates in other towns Per 1000 of Population over the same period of time Infant Mortality Rate in WiganThe main causes of these diseases were the lack of a clean water supply, and proper drainage systems.

In 1900, the Borough Surveyors Department reported that Wigan had 40 privvy middens, 8300 pail closets, and only 1927 water closets. As the privvy middens were used by the poorest people in the town, it is clear that poverty and disease went together. In 1903 the Chief Sanitary Inspector reported that of 7670 houses inspected, 2574 of them had public nuisances like

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defective pail closets, were over crowded, were filthy, or had no real ventilation. Many others had defective spouts and roofs, or defective walls. Many of the structural defects in the houses were caused by mining subsidence, as well as poor quality building.

Description of Nuisances Dealt With – From the Annual Report of the Chief Sanitary Inspector 1903 To try and improve the sanitary conditions in the town, Wigan Borough Council decided to build a sewage works at Newburgh and improve the drinking water supply. The Medical Officer of Health reported that this would “ enable us to adopt a water carriage system gradually in place of the pail system”. Sewage had previously drained into streams which ran in to the River Douglas. As water had been taken from the River Douglas, for drinking and other purposes; it was clear to see how diseases could be spread rapidly. In 1909 Wigan Borough Council responded to the Housing and Town Planning Act, and resolved to replace the slums with better quality housing. Because there was nowhere to re-house people to, when the slum houses were knocked down.

It was very difficult for the Council to improve the situation. Because of this, housing conditions got steadily worse. Many people lived in old caravans, or single decker busses, which needless to say had no water or sewage facilities. Most caravans, had to use communal water pumps, which also helped the spread of disease. In conclusion, I have found out from studying many different sources of information that Wigan experienced severe problems with both Housing and Public Health as a result of its expansion during the Industrial Revolution.

Houses were badly built and over-crowded, and often suffered from subsidence. Most of these houses had no fresh water supply or mains drainage. Slaughter houses were mixed in with residential properties. These factors produced conditions in which diseases were common. Diseases like TB and Smallpox caused the deaths of many people, particularly babies and young children. Wigan Council responded to these problems by building new sewers, installing mains water supplies and starting a slum clearance programme.

However it took many years before any large changes in the Public Health of the town came about.