

Llangwm In The Time Of Cholera



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At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is interesting to look back on another epidemic and how it hit the people of Llangwm much harder than anything we have yet experienced during today's events.

In the early nineteenth century, cholera spread westwards from Asia, and by 1831 had reached the UK. A second epidemic reached Edinburgh in 1848, and by 1854 had reached Pembrokeshire. The *Pembrokeshire Herald* reported on November 24, 1854 "In the village of Guilford (Langum) it has raged with much greater virulence. About 20 people have died in Langum equalling [the mortality] which resulted in Haverfordwest". Indeed, perhaps as many as 26 cases occurred at a single time, including 3 cases in Castle House. The severity of that outbreak in Llangwm and neighbouring Burton (presumably Guildford and Llangwm Ferry) caused the Pembroke Union (with responsibility for Burton) to offer the Haverfordwest Union (responsibility for Llangwm) to pay half the cost of the additional medical officers they thought necessary to deal with the sick, but there was no response from Haverfordwest. On November 15, 1854, R. H. Byers (a Milford Physician) wrote to the Clerk to the Guardians at Haverfordwest reporting a further 17 cases of cholera at Llangwm. An additional three cases were reported on November 24th (Ray Jones, *Journal of the Pembrokeshire Historical Society*, 2011). W. Grenville Thomas (*The People of the Covenant*) refers to the deaths of 62 people from Llangwm and Guildford from cholera in the 1854 outbreak, which he ascribes to



Guildford, then part of the parish of Burton, depicted here in the early twentieth century. Along with Llangwm Ferry, Guildford experienced a significant number of cases.

drinking contaminated water from the “lake”, the stream that runs down from Ashdale Bottoms, past the old mill, and under Guildford Bridge, into Guildford Pill.

The epidemic then declined throughout the UK, possibly because of the 1866 Sanitary Act that empowered Local Authorities to improve house drainage and water supplies. Nevertheless, the death in Llangwm of Mary Jones aged 70, in 1866 was recorded as cholera, and in 1866, Llangwm Ferry briefly entered the national records when “*The Report of the Cholera Epidemic*” reported to Parliament as a supplementary to the Annual Report of the Registrar for Births Deaths and Marriages of England (Vol 29, in paragraph 591): “*Roose. Population 3,225. Cholera 4, Diarrhoea 4. Three of the deaths from cholera were those of a fisherman, his wife and son, who died at Langum Ferry, Burton, the son on 21st September, the wife the following day, and the father on the 24th; not one of these deaths was confirmed by a certified medical practitioner*”. These days, of course, the lack of a positive clinical confirmation would rule these deaths out of the statistics. Perhaps the Authorities were more honest in 1866. It is unclear who the victims were, but cholera was a recurrent problem in the district. Grenville Thomas (*The People of the Covenant*) records that William Pickens, who had been the ferryman at Llangwm Ferry, died of the cholera in an outbreak in January 1867. These cholera deaths must have been unexpected, as reports of the cholera epidemic in Pembrokeshire described Langum as ‘in a perfect state of cleanliness... [and] a model of cleanliness’ (*Carmarthen Journal, August 31, 1866*).

In those days it was not understood that cholera was spread by drinking contaminated water, and it was more popularly held to be spread from individual to individual, much as COVID-19 is thought to spread today.

A familiar story is of strangers entering Llangwm being repelled by stoning, specifically, of a Llangwm fisherwoman instructing her son “Stone ‘em, Jonny! He’s a stranger!” It has long been suggested that this apparent dislike of strangers was an attempt to keep Llangwm quarantined against outsiders carrying the disease into the village (or even to protect visitors from catching the disease from Langums). In keeping with that latter notion is the story that during the cholera, a black flag was hoisted at the Kilns to warn visitors.

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Extract from The Report of the Cholera Epidemic