

THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF THE BUILDING THE LEOMINSTER WATERWORKS

Reduction in the mortality rate

The main measure of effectiveness of public health improvement measures in the mid-Victorian area.

In the period 1861 to 1870 (i.e. before the building of the waterworks) there were 1,033 deaths in Leominster and this fell by a third in the next ten years to 728, albeit that the size of the population had increased.

This improvement contributed to the Registrar General in his February 1882 Return for the UK being able to state: *it is most gratifying to find Herefordshire figuring as the healthiest county in England judged by rate of mortality; and this fact is to the credit of the county's sanitary authorities'.*

In the 1890s the Medical Officer was able to report quite regularly that the Borough was free of notifiable infectious disease and in February 1894 in response to a cholera scare he was able to report:

A house to house inspection was made and the result of this proved the supply of water in the borough regards quality and quantity and that the drainage of the town was also satisfactory.

In response to this the Council felt it appropriate to endorse the following statement made by Cllr. Southall:

The present freedom in the borough from Zymotic Disease was a matter for congratulation, and was no doubt due to their splendid water supply and other improvements effected during the past 20 years. Perhaps they [the people of the borough] did not appreciate as they ought the condition of things now enjoyed. Years ago they had bade epidemics, but now things had completely changed. In other towns in the neighbourhood, such as Ross and Ledbury, where fevers were persistent, the people would be glad to have a similar state of things.

Notes

1. At this time, Ross had only recently commenced a public water supply, in 1887, and Ledbury's first piped water supply didn't start until 1899.
2. Zymotic Disease was a 19th century medical term for acute infectious diseases, which included water borne diseases such as typhoid and cholera, as well as smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles and the condition of the skin, erysipelas.

Other social benefits which arose from the development of Leominster's waterworks, which would also have contributed to improved mortality rates included adequate water supply for street cleaning, sewer flushing and firefighting.



Firefighting

Firefighting benefited hugely from a reliable water supply on demand and this a key sub-theme in the stories told at the Waterworks Museum

In the mid-Victorian era, the fire brigade in Leominster, like most towns, had been managed as a private affair, in which members of the public typically volunteered their services in return for a payment from an insurance company. But the vast majority of the town's residents would not have had insurance cover. Most of the buildings were timber built, and the focus would have been more on the saving of property, not people's lives.



In June 1884 a public meeting was held to propose the formation of a volunteer fire brigade under the control of the Town Council, following the example of other towns, and the following advert appeared in the Leominster News (20th June 1884).

"PUBLIC NOTICE - AMATEUR FIRE BRIGADE FOR LEOMINSTER & DISTRICT

Volunteers for the above purpose required. The persons selected will be expected to sign an undertaking to make themselves efficient. Names of those willing to join to be sent to E Gregg, 11 Church Street, before Thursday 26th June inst."

We do not know the names of those first volunteers, but the fire brigade was reformed less than 5 years later following the resignation of Superintendent, Mr W Wall. On 4 January 1889 the Leominster News reported that most of the members of the old brigade had sent in applications with several other people in the town. The article stated that the following individuals had been enrolled under the direction of the Joseph Biddle, the Town Engineer, who also served as the Fire Station Superintendent :

Thomas Harper (Carpenter), George Noden (Carpenter), P Jones (Millwright),
Joseph Bowen (Moulder), W Gardiner (Labourer), C Davies (Millwright), J Parry (Mason),
W Mann (Carpenter), Thomas Jones (Building Labourer), E Minten (Shoemaker), H Lewis (Dealer),
J Beamand (Plumber) & Thomas Davies (Painter)

But the provision of a more reliable water supply was not guaranteed to put out a fire.

On 25th October 1895, the Leominster News reported on an alarming fire at Bush House, the home of the veterinary surgeon, Mr J Beazley, where **"the fire brigade did everything to arrest the progress of the fire, although their efforts were of no avail by the lack of pressure of the water."** This incident was later referred to in Town Council meetings which discussed the need for the further investment in the waterworks and resulted in the significant expansion of the works in 1899.

