

Buriton and the Spanish flu

A hundred years ago, from early 1918 to early 1920, the world was in the grip of a pandemic that came to be known as 'The Spanish flu'. The first recorded case was reported in a US Army base at Camp Funston, Kansas, on 4th March 1918, the last in March 1920. Difficulties in contemporary diagnosis mean that the true number of pandemic victims and fatalities will never be known, but it is estimated that 1 in 3 people alive were infected (500 Million) and between 50-100 Million died (Laura Spinney, 2017, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, Vintage, London). The carnage of the first World War, 17 Million dead, is small and insignificant by comparison.

The 'flu may have had an impact on the course of WW1, for by May 1918 – just before the Allies' final victorious push - as many as 1 million German soldiers on the Western Front had succumbed to the 'flu, compared with only 50,000 British troops (Robert Gerwath 2016, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End 1917-1923*, Allen Lane).

And on the 9th October 1918, *the Hants & Sussex News* reported that outbreaks of 'flu in the district necessitated the closure of local schools until further notice. (Owing to press censorship, the pandemic was not much reported in the UK wartime press or in other Allied nations, but in neutral Spain, with no press censorship, the pandemic was widely reported.)

The reporting of the *Hants & Sussex News* coincided with a significant spike in the number of deaths registered in the Petersfield Registration District (within which Buriton is located).

In the first three quarters of 1918, a total of 183 deaths were registered in the District. In the final quarter-year, between 1st October 1918 and 31st December 1918, 260 deaths were registered in the District (General Registry Office data, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk).

In the first quarter of 1919 (1st January to 31st March), 160 deaths were registered in the Petersfield District. In the remaining three quarters of 1919, only 116 deaths were registered. The large increase in deaths registered in these two quarters coincides with the second, and most virulent phase of the pandemic.

The pandemic exhibited distinct phases, as the virus mutated, and did not have an even geographical spread – as the victim statistics either side of No Man's Land illustrate. And geographical variation is also demonstrated when the possible effect of the pandemic on Buriton is examined.

The data-sets are not directly comparable because the registration of *deaths* across the District is being compared with the register of *burials* in Buriton. Burial within the District does not necessarily denote that death took place within the District. For example, both William Beagley and Samuel Francis are buried in the churchyard at St Mary's Buriton, but William died within the Amesbury Registration District (of pneumonia and exhaustion, 9th February 1918; buried 15th February 1918) and Samuel was aboard the SS Guildford castle, somewhere on the Irish Sea, being repatriated for demobilization having spent his war in Aden (died of influenza, 24th November 1919; buried 29th November 1919). Also during the

pandemic years, Evelyn Holmes from Petersfield and Harry Treagus from Clanfield were brought from their respective extra-parochial places of death to be buried at Buriton.

Between 1911 and 1921 the Buriton burial registers record an average of 6.72 burials per year. In 1917 nine persons were buried in Buriton; in 1921 eight persons were buried in Buriton. But from March 1918 to March 1920 (the period of the pandemic) only ten persons were buried in Buriton; in 1919 and 1920 only four burials took place each year.

Absent evidence that a significant number of persons died in the village but were buried elsewhere, the village burial records would seem to indicate that Buriton did not experience the same increase in mortality that was experienced across the rest of the Petersfield Registration District during the pandemic period. On its face, the pandemic seems to have passed Buriton by.

Corroboration for this interpretation can be found in the causes of death recorded for those persons buried in Buriton during the pandemic period (Death Register entries, images provided by the GRO). Only three have influenza recorded as a contributory factor in the causes of death. And even these three cases out of ten do not withstand scrutiny.

Samuel Francis cannot properly be regarded as a Buriton victim of the pandemic because he was either abroad or on board ship when he contracted the virus. He had been absent from the village since 16th September 1916. Given the speed with which the 'flu claimed its victims (usually in conjunction with pneumonia as a consequential complication), Samuel most likely contracted the virus after he boarded the ship bound for England on 5th November 1919.

Likewise, for whatever reason Evelyn Holmes was buried in Buriton she cannot be regarded as a Buriton victim of the pandemic: she died at 7 Charles Street, Petersfield, the address from which her widower husband, Pte 353845 Charles Holmes, Army Service Corps, claimed his WW1 campaign medals on the 6th February 1920 (Army Medal Rolls Index Cards). Evelyn died on the 19th February 1919 having suffered from the 'flu for nine days, on the fourth day of her illness she contracted pneumonia as well. Both virus and lung infection are recorded as causes of her death. She was buried at Buriton on the 22nd February 1919.

The only person living at Buriton who died of 'flu during the pandemic period was Edward George Mitchell, who lived with his parents at Old Ditcham Cottages. Aged just four months, and having suffered the 'flu and pneumonia for just 4 days, Edward died in the presence of his mother on 19th December 1918 and was buried two days later.