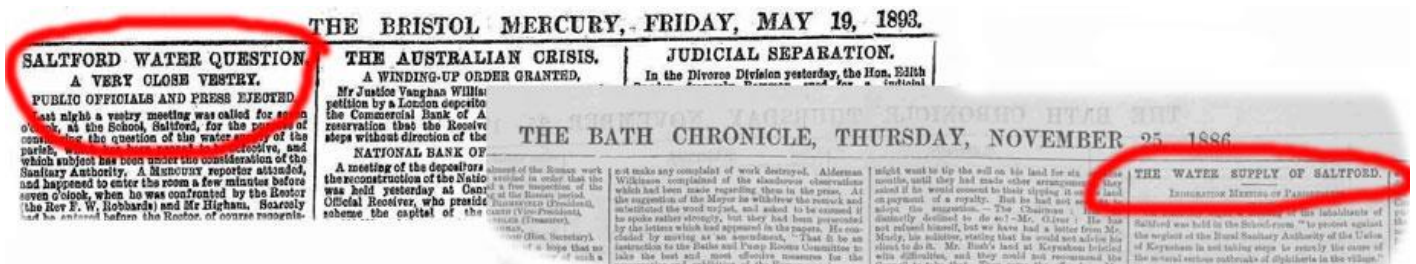


# Saltford's Water Supply in the late 19th Century



The quality of Saltford's water supply in the late 19th Century was not just a serious issue of public health for the local inhabitants but was fatal for some. Here we have reproduced the text from two local newspaper articles of the time.

These give a fascinating insight into how public affairs were conducted in Saltford in the 1880s and 90s. They also show just how dangerous the local water supply had become due to contamination from raw sewage leading "to some 30 cases of sickness" from "a population of 421" and at least 6 cases ended in death.

Please note we have reproduced the text word for word but have broken the text up into shorter paragraphs than was printed in the original articles to make the script easier to read on your screen.

## (i) Article from 'The Bath Chronicle' 25 November 1886

This provides a detailed account of a public meeting held at Saltford School to respond to the illness and six fatalities arising from sewage contamination of the village water supply. It shows the frustration of local inhabitants at the failure of the authorities to recognise and respond to their concerns despite repeated representations.



## THE WATER SUPPLY OF SALTFORD

### INDIGNATION MEETING OF PARISHIONERS

On Saturday night a meeting of the inhabitants of Saltford was held in the School-room 'to protest against the neglect of the Rural Sanitary Authority of the Union of Keynsham in not taking steps to remedy the cause of the several serious outbreaks of diphtheria in the village.'

'All the inhabitants, both men and women' were invited to attend, and the invitation was so well responded to that the room was filled to its utmost capacity, and the proceedings were remarkable for much plain speaking, unsparing condemnation of the local Sanitary Authority, great unanimity, and an earnest determination to have redress for the evils of defective sanitation from which the parish has so long suffered, and which have brought sickness and death into so many households.

The Rector, the Rev. F W Robberds, was voted to the chair, and he was supported by the Rev. E W Fenwick (the late Rector), Mr. Hugh F. Boyd, of the Northern Circuit (nephew of Mrs. Kelly, of Saltford House), Mr. W. E. Bowyer, and the principal parishioners.

The CHAIRMAN said it was with very great diffidence that he consented to occupy that position, but he esteemed himself very fortunate for two reasons: First, because although the epidemic came upon the parish just about the time he arrived to reside in it, and therefore he could have very little local knowledge of the circumstances connected with it, he was surrounded by gentlemen who had taken great interest in the subject for a number of years, one of whom (his predecessor) had taken a great deal of trouble in the matter, had written innumerable letters, seen almost all the people he could, met with rebuffs from every quarter, predicted everything that would happen, and that had happened, and still all his warnings were unheeded.

The object of the meeting was to give the inhabitants of Saltford an opportunity of expressing their feelings on the subject, and of signifying their most decided protest against the treatment they had received. That treatment he did think had been most hard, most cruel, and almost inhuman (applause). They all knew that Committees and Boards were composed of a great many very kind-hearted gentlemen in their own homes and families, but the moment you put a very kind-hearted man indeed on a Committee or Board it seemed at once to make his feelings harder than the nether millstone (hear, hear).

It was therefore almost impossible to move Committees or Boards. Now they were in a position of great distress. They knew that they had no power to help themselves, and they also knew that when the constituted authority within the district, who ought to have helped them, were appealed to, they referred them to head quarters in London; applications and petitions were made to head quarters, and they were referred back again to the local authority. That he thought was very hard treatment indeed (hear, hear). And even still harder than that, when they were referred back to the local authority they were told that theirs was an exceptional case, that therefore they could do nothing for them, and that if they were not satisfied with that they might go to law. That was not very kind treatment he thought.

During the late epidemic there had been, speaking roughly, some 30 cases of sickness, fully 20 per cent. of which ended fatally. In those circumstances it was very little consolation and comfort to be told that they could do nothing for them, and that they might help themselves as best they could.

They were told on the testimony of three medical gentlemen that the disease from which they had been suffering was diphtheria, but when they referred to the local authority they were told that it was only diphtheritic sore throat (oh, oh). That seemed to be a very sharp and finely drawn distinction and very cold comfort to tell parents who had not only lost their children, but who saw them sicken and suffer for days and weeks, that the disease from which they were suffering was not diphtheria but diphtheritic sore throat (hear, hear).

Mr. Robberds concluded by reading letters from several gentlemen who were unable to be present, including Mr. Jno. Curtis, Jnr., of Firbank, who wrote that the object of the meeting had his full support and sympathy, that of protesting against the apathy and neglect of the Sanitary Authority and Great Western Railway Company, and that he was quite willing to serve on any committee in order to press both bodies to do their duty.

The Rev. E. W. FENWICK proposed the first resolution - That this meeting of the inhabitants of Saltford expresses its indignation at the culpable inactivity of the Rural Sanitary Authority during the recent fatal outbreaks of diphtheritic disease, in spite of the urgent representations addressed to it.

Mr. Fenwick began by remarking that the question was a poor man's question; people in higher walks of life were able to guard themselves in various ways against the evils to which the resolution was directed, but working people were not so favourably circumstanced and therefore felt the evils most deeply.

Premising that it was the duty of all classes of the parishioners to band together in the movement in which they were engaged, he addressed himself to the task of proving the culpable inactivity of the Sanitary Authority, and to that end entered upon a history of the proceeding anterior to the outbreak. So long ago as the 6th March, 1884, he wrote to the Authority describing the course of the water and drainage.

The water at the upper end of the village as it came from the Great Western Railway is supplied perfectly pure; this came down one side of the road and the drainage on the other; neither the water nor the sewage

was conveyed in any pipes; this being the case it was a matter of absolute certainty that sooner or later the sewage must contaminate the water supply.

He asked for investigation, and he warned the Authority against putting it off till the disease came upon them. He referred to the Public Health Act, 1878, which makes it obligatory on the Authority to periodically inspect the water supply, and at the same time he enclosed a copy of the report of the analyst.

The meeting was probably aware that an Inspector was provided at the cost of the ratepayers to see after sanitary matters, but probably it was not aware that the Inspector was discouraged from making any reports on any sanitary matters without being put forward to do so by someone else.

He had heard that a medical gentleman, who was a member of the Sanitary Committee, made the statement that no water, however contaminated, was dangerous to health. The same gentleman jeered to his face at his report of diphtheria, and when he called afterwards to see a child who was ill he said it was not diphtheria the child was suffering from, that it was in no danger. That was on Saturday, and on Sunday the child died. When he had to give a certificate for burial he certified that the child died from diphtheritic sore throat. What was the difference between the two? He maintained that there was no difference, and he further showed that illness resulted from persons drinking water that was contaminated with sewage.

There had not, he said, been a single case of disease at the opposite side of the village where the water came from a different source; did not that fact commend itself to them as reasonable men and women that the water had been the main cause - he did not say the only cause - of this disease?

On May 27, 1884, he wrote to the Chairman of the Sanitary Authority. He had heard that the Board excused themselves from taking action because there had been no further complaints, and one gentleman said that all water was impure. In reply to his request that the Board should take some steps for their relief the Chairman wrote unofficially that he had little faith in analysis, that 'the Great Western water would be good if the village refuse was not turned into it.' But how could it be turned into it if the water were properly brought down there?

Then he went on to say that if the water was found to be tainted they must call in the Inspector to trace the taint and order the pollution to cease. He also stated that the cost of laying down pipes to convey the village sewage would be trifling.

On June 5 he (Mr. Fenwick) wrote again, pointing out how the water was polluted and insisting that it was the duty of the Authority to protect the water; and again on July 14 calling upon them to take such steps without delay, but nothing was done.

Coming down to the present year he read a letter he wrote to the Sanitary Inspector telling him of another death from diphtheria, and alluding to the neglect of their duty by the Sanitary Authority he said 'he would not see constructive murder done by a set of imbeciles if he could help it' (applause).

In giving some particulars of the epidemic Mr. Fenwick mentioned that there had been 6 deaths, and 19 other persons had suffered more or less from the disease, and this out of a population of 421.

They were now told by the Authority, he said, that having appealed to the Local Government Board they could do nothing; in 1884 he did not appeal to the Local Government Board and the local Authority did nothing for them. This was a heads I win, tails you lose sort of business; they could not do right whatever they did. He was afraid that as the epidemic died out through the cold weather and other causes, interest in the matter would flag, and people would go to sleep till the whirligig of time brought back sickness and death into their midst. He wanted them all to combine as one man and demand redress from the evils which they had endured and not to rest satisfied until they had obtained it.

The resolution was seconded by Mr. GEORGE MITCHELL, a young man, who it was stated had lost his only two children from the disease, his wife being also in consequence brought to death's door. The poor fellow, who spoke with deep emotion, said the doctor told him that the water they were using was not fit to

wash the house with. He reported the badness of the water to the sanitary Inspector between two and three years ago, and he told him that he wrote several letters to the Board but no action had been taken.

Mr. HOLDER supported the resolution which was carried unanimously.

Mr. H. F. BOYD justified his appearance at the meeting by the interest he felt in the parish, which he had known from his boyhood, and his kinship to Mrs. Kelly, who he said would have been present but for her age; she desired him, however, to express her interest in their proceedings and hearty sympathy with their cause. Mr. Boyd proposed the second resolution in the following terms:

That a notice having been served on the G.W.R., signed by six householders, as required by the Act, calling upon them to bring the water to and through the village in proper pipes, impermeable to sewage, we, the inhabitants of Saltford, now call on the Local Sanitary Authority (in the event of the G.W.R. failing to comply with the terms of the said notice) to carry out the necessary works, and to take such steps as they may deem expedient for enforcing the liability of the G.W.R.

Mr. Boyd expressed his unbounded indignation at the supineness of the local Authority, who, he said, were made aware of the state of things so long ago as June, 1884, by their own medical officer (Dr. A. E. W. Fox). In his report Dr. Fox stated that 'the main sewer is under one side of the road and the main water course under the other, within a few feet. In consequence of there being houses on both sides of the road there must of necessity be constant crossing of both sewage and water to the evident contamination of the water, since both sewage and water are conveyed through what are locally called 'gouts instead of proper pipes.'

Four samples of the water having been analysed by Mr. Stoddart, were found to contain sewage products, and to be unfit for domestic use.

Dr. Fox was 'of opinion that an entirely new system of water supply and drainage by pipes is absolutely necessary, as the surrounding soil must be more or less saturated with sewage.' From the date of the report to the present not a step had been taken by those whose duty it was to attend to such matters, and the state of things as described by Dr. Fox existed now as it did when he made his inspection. After giving particulars of the water, and quoting the analysis of Mr. Stoddart to show its impurity, Mr. Boyd informed the meeting of the steps he had taken - up to the present he confessed in vain, - by letters, by interviews with the local Authority and with the officials of the Local Government Board in London - to bring the Authority to a sense of their duty.

Canon Ellacombe, in a letter to him, said that the powers of the Authority were uncertain, but this he (Mr. Boyd) denied. Their duty was prescribed by Act of Parliament, and they were bound to carry it out.

The Great Western Railway Company were under liability to supply the village with pipe water, and, if they failed to do so, he maintained that it was the duty of the Authority to carry out the necessary works and then to proceed against the Company for the recovery of the cost. If the Authority failed to do this, as he had told Mr. Ireland, a mandatorne would certainly be applied for to compel them to do their duty.

Mr. HANCOCK briefly seconded the resolution, which was carried by acclamation.

The third resolution, moved by Mr. BOWYER, seconded by Mr. T. SMITH, and adopted with the same unanimity as its predecessors, was as follows:-

That this meeting calls upon the Rural Sanitary Authority to cause the main sewers of the village which have vested in them under section 12 of the Public Health Act to be constructed, covered, ventilated, and kept so as not to be a nuisance or injurious to health, and to compel the proper junction of house drains therewith by the several owners of property.

**(ii) Article in The Bristol Mercury  
Friday 19th May 1893**

This provides an account of a public meeting of ratepayers, a "vestry meeting", held at Saltford School about the polluted state of Saltford's drinking water where much of the time appears to have been spent arguing over who should be permitted to attend...

THE BRISTOL MERCURY, FRIDAY, MAY 19, 1893.

<p><b>SALTFORD WATER QUESTION. A VERY CLOSE VESTRY. PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND PRESS EJECTED.</b></p> <p>Last night a vestry meeting was called for seven o'clock, at the School, Saltford, for the purpose of considering the question of the water supply of the parish, which has been proved to be defective, and which subject has been under the consideration of the Sanitary Authority. A MERCURY reporter attended, and happened to enter the room a few minutes before seven o'clock, when he was confronted by the Rector (the Rev. F. W. Robbards) and Mr Higham. Scarcely had he entered before the Rector, of course recognizing that he was not one of his faithful parishioners, inquired if he was a ratepayer.</p>	<p><b>THE AUSTRALIAN CRISIS. A WINDING-UP ORDER GRANTED.</b></p> <p>Mr Justice Vaughan Williams yesterday granted a petition by a London depositor for the winding up of the Commercial Bank of Australia, but with the reservation that the Receiver should not take any steps without direction of the court.</p> <p><b>NATIONAL BANK OF AUSTRALASIA.</b></p> <p>A meeting of the depositors to consider a scheme for the reconstruction of the National Bank of Australasia was held yesterday at Cannon street hotel. The Official Receiver, who presided, said that under the scheme the capital of the new bank would be</p>	<p><b>JUDICIAL SEPARATION.</b></p> <p>In the Divorce Division yesterday, the Hon. Edith Sedgwick, formerly Rowman, sued for a judicial separation from her husband, the Hon. Henry Frank Sedgwick, brother of Lord St. Leonards, on the ground of adultery. The suit was undefended. Counsel for the petitioner said the marriage took place in 1879, and there were six children. They first lived at Harpton, Yorkshire, and then in America, where the respondent became addicted to drink, whereupon the petitioner returned to her father in England. Afterwards she lived with respondent again at Lytton, but he resumed his former habits, even drinking methylated spirits, and one day</p>	<p>TE N A the cook prom form room the half- a stun</p>
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A MERCURY reporter attended, and happened to enter the room a few minutes before seven o'clock, when he was confronted by the Rector (the Rev. F.F.Robbards) and Mr Higham. Scarcely had he entered before the Rector, of course recognizing that he was not one of his faithful parishioners, inquired if he was a ratepayer.

The reporter explained that he represented the MERCURY, whereupon the Rector wished to know at whose invitation he was present, stating that the meeting was one for ratepayers only, and he had therefore no right whatever to be there. It was explained that it was customary to attend to report matters of public interest at vestry meetings, and that it was only as a matter of duty in fulfillment of instructions that the reporter had put in an appearance, the subject of the water supply being one of interest in the parish.

Mr Higham, whose feelings appeared to be considerably disturbed at the reporter's presence, said he should object to his remaining. What, he asked, did they want a reporter there for? They did not want to be made a puppet show of, and, moreover, in his long experience, extending over a period as he stated of over 40 years, a reporter had never been present at a vestry meeting in the parish.

The Rector said he had no personal objection to the proceedings being reported, if those who assembled desired that it should be so. This incident somewhat prepared our representative for what followed. A few minutes afterwards a number of ratepayers came in, including Messrs Fedden, J.C.Gilmore, Arthur, Brimble, Lock, and others; and Mr S.F. Andrews, clerk to the Keynsham Rural Sanitary Authority, and Mr Marten, engineer to the West Gloucester Water Works Company, were also in attendance. About 20 persons, altogether, were present.

The RECTOR read the notice convening the meeting, after which, casting ominous glances at the reporter, he said they were met there that evening in compliance with the notice he had read to attend a vestry meeting.

Now, a vestry meeting was a meeting of ratepayers, and the very essence of a vestry meeting was rateability. No person could be present or vote if he was not a ratepayer, or, if so, was in arrears for his rate. The law was there, said the Rector, placing his hand firmly on a volume evidently relevant to Parish law, and if anyone questioned his statement the law could be applied to. As there would in all probability be

a diversity - and perhaps a great diversity - of an opinion that evening, he would bespeak for everyone a calm and patient hearing. They were Englishmen and liked a fair field and no favour. Therefore, no matter what a person's opinion might be, let them hear it. They need not vote for it. The question first was - Was that a vestry meeting? Were they all ratepayers or not? If not ratepayers they had no business there.

Our reporter immediately explained that he was not a ratepayer, and informed the meeting of the capacity in which he was present.

Mr HIGHAM thereupon exclaimed - I shall object.

Mr ANDREWS - I am not a ratepayer, but I come here by invitation.

The RECTOR - May I ask by whose invitation?

Mr ANDREWS - By Mr Lock; and the Sanitary Authority agreed I should come here and attend if thought desirable. Of course, personally, I would much rather be home. I came here supplied with facts which I am prepared to lay before the meeting from the railway company's formation up to the present time.

The RECTOR - we can't hear you now. The question is whether we are all ratepayers or not.

Mr GILMORE thereupon rose and proposed that the reporter, Mr Andrews, and Mr Marten be allowed to remain as spectators.

Mr LOCK seconded the proposal.

Mr HIGHAM - I move that they be not allowed.

The RECTOR - Will anyone second Mr Higham's amendment?

Mr GILMORE - That is no amendment, it is a direct negative.

The RECTOR repeated his question.

Mr HIGHAM - I don't see why this little meeting should be made a puppet show. We are met here as parishioners. It is a puppet show altogether, and reporters should not be present.

Mr ARTHUR - But we require all information we can get.

Mr HIGHAM - The reporter can't give it.

Mr MARTEN said he was invited to attend. He came as the engineer of the Waterworks Company at the invitation of Mr Andrews.

The RECTOR - But Mr Andrews can't decide; it is for the meeting. Will you take a show of hands? There are three gentlemen present who are not ratepayers of Salford. Is it the wish of the meeting that they be present during the whole proceedings, or not?

Mr LOCK - They are not here to vote; they are here to give us information.

The RECTOR - I must put it to the meeting. The law says they have no right. I am not going to object; but if the meeting objects I am bound to declare the law. He was then proceeding to put what he termed the amendment of Mr Higham, whereupon Mr GILMORE pointed out that it had not been seconded.

Mr Higham appealed to Mr Brimble to second it, but Mr Brimble declined, stating that he should like to hear the information it was desired to place before the meeting.

The RECTOR then asked for a show of hands as to whether the reporter and Messrs Andrews and Marten be permitted to remain at the meeting, with the result that he declared 13 votes against and 4 in favour.

The non-ratepayers then withdrew. It was subsequently ascertained that a lengthy and heated discussion followed, but the meeting apparently discovered that the information which Mr Andrews and Mr Marten could have supplied no one else present could give; and Mr Higham moved - 'That matters remain as they are' and this received a seconded in Mr Brimble, but was not put [to] the meeting.

A proposition by Mr ARTHUR, seconded by Mr FEDDEN, that the meeting be dissolved was agreed to; and it was decided to constitute the meeting [with] one of parishioners, Mr Gilmore being voted to the chair.

A messenger was sent for Messrs Andrews and Marten and the reporter, who were informed that they might enter the room.

Mr GILMORE asked Mr Andrews if he would kindly give the meeting what information he could on the question.

Mr ANDREWS said he would not say anything of the circumstances which led to his retirement, and then proceeded to give a history of the water supply. Having referred to the fact that when the railway was made the Great Western Railway Company agreed to supply as good and wholesome a supply of water to the inhabitants as they enjoyed when the railway was cut, he said that should the supply be deteriorated or diminished through any fault of the railway, any six of the inhabitants might take steps to call upon them to fulfill their contract.

He read a lot of correspondence with regard to the water supply, which was now proved to be polluted in the village, and said the company contended that they were not liable, inasmuch as the water was pure at the source, but became polluted at the wells in the village, for which they said they were not responsible, The Sanitary Authority, who were responsible for a pure supply, had taken the question up, and had communicated with the West Gloucester Water Company, who were willing to supply pure water subject to a 10 per cent guarantee on the outlay. The authority had, however, deferred the consideration of the question until after that meeting.

Mr FEDDEN asked if it was likely the Great Western Railway Company would contribute to the expense if the water were brought to the village.

Mr ANDREWS said it was a question which might well be pressed upon them by the Sanitary Authority.

In answer to further questions, Mr ANDREWS explained that the Sanitary Authority were empowered to pay a small balance, if necessary, from the rates in order to make up the 10 per cent, guarantee required by the company supposing the income from the water rents was not sufficient. If the annual payment required from the Authority was £15 or £20, it could be paid out of the poor rate, but if it was larger than at the rate of 1d in the pound a special rate would have to be made.

Mr HIGHAM considered it would be hard for those who took in the water to have to pay a water rent and additional rates as well (hear, hear).

Mr MARTEN gave some particulars as to the cost of taking the water of the Gloucester Water Company. He estimated it would be £800, and the company would want a guarantee of 10 per cent, on that amount. So far as he had been able to ascertain, the rents would be £15 or £20. The cost would be for a house rated under £10 a year 2d a week; from £10 to £20, 7.5 per cent; £20 to £40, 6.5 per cent; and above this 6 per cent.

Mr ANDREWS said that it would mean about a half-penny a half-year on the poor rate if the Authority were to pay about £17 or £18 towards the guarantee.

After all questions had been answered, the CHAIRMAN said as they were not a legally summoned parish meeting they could place no resolution.

The RECTOR - Then in what state shall we separate?

The CHAIRMAN - Matters remain as they are, to quote Mr Higham's resolution (laughter). He added that they could call another parish meeting. He said personally he was very much obliged to Mr Andrews and Mr Marten for coming to supply them with what information they could (hear, hear).

The meeting then broke up.

**Transcriptions by Debbie Cini, 2015.**

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