



The Midhurst Society

The Stedham/Iping Smallpox Outbreak 1883



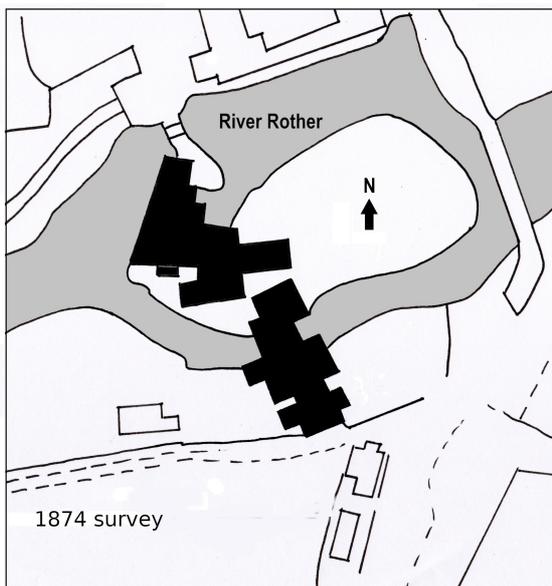
The Victorian Rag Trade, Smallpox and a Sussex Paper Mill

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We tend to think of recycling as a modern invention, but in the past it was commonplace. Nowadays we might repurpose rags as no more than cleaning cloths, but in the 19th century and earlier times they were utilised in a variety of ways. One of the most important of these was in the manufacture of paper, where cut-up rags were used in huge quantities – it took just over one ton of rags to make one ton of paper.

The West Sussex village of Iping was home to a paper mill that operated for at least two centuries, between the 1720s and 1925, when it was destroyed by fire. This water-powered mill was sited on a small ‘island’ in the River Rother, just west of Iping Bridge. At one time, in the earlier part of the 19th century, it was said to have supplied *The Times* with newsprint. By the 1880s its sole product was blotting paper.



The rag trade that supplied the 300+ paper mills of Victorian Britain was vast, and took in old clothing, sheets and other items from both this country and abroad. In the case of Iping mill, rags were mostly shipped to the railway station that once existed at nearby Elsted, and then taken by cart to Iping. The ‘rag-loft’ where the rags were first processed was probably on the south side of the mill, nearest the road to Elsted.

Most of the rag-loft workers in the paper industry were women, who undertook the sorting and cutting of rags, with the assistance of male porters, who shifted the rag

bales. There was normally a foreman in charge, though female overseers were not unknown. The atmosphere in a rag-loft was often dusty, the air filled with dirt and fibres. The place could also be very smelly, because rags usually arrived in an unwashed state. The rags were only disinfected by boiling and bleaching *after* sorting and cutting.

In the spring of May 1883, a new consignment of rags arrived in the Iping rag-loft. It was contaminated with smallpox, and now infected some of the rag-loft workers.

The course of the subsequent epidemic was traced in forensic detail by Dr Charles Kelly MD, FRCP, the Medical Officer of Health for Sussex. He identified those who caught the disease by their first names, followed by the first letter of their surnames, though in some cases it is possible to identify victims from the 1881 Census.

The first local person known to catch smallpox was 25 year-old Fanny 'L' from the Knap, who caught it around 5th May 1883. She recovered. The second sufferer was 15 year-old Clara Booker of Iping. Poor Clara was not so lucky; she came home on 8th May feeling ill, and died on the 12th.

Smallpox was once commonplace across the world, a deadly and disfiguring disease, though it was finally beaten in the 1970s. Vaccination played a huge part in this. It was developed in the 1790s by the English physician Edward Jenner, and was in widespread use by the mid-19th century. It didn't grant automatic protection – not all injections seem to have 'taken' – but in the case of the Iping outbreak it undoubtedly played a major role in stopping it.

To begin with, though, the Iping epidemic spread rapidly. There were six primary cases by 18th May, and three of these had died. People in Iping, Stedham and The Knap were falling ill. Fifty-two people were exposed to infection in this first phase of the outbreak, though fortunately most did become sick. Dr Kelly moved fast, and instituted a re-vaccination campaign, along with household quarantines. Men were also hired to act as messengers for quarantined families and as gravediggers. In some cases, mothers stayed at home to care for sick family members, while fathers moved with the uninfected children.

However, by late May a second wave was brewing. Kelly established a tented isolation hospital for sufferers on Stedham Common, staffed by a couple of (unnamed) nurses, and made arrangements for food supplies, washing facilities and other necessities for the patients. The peak number of hospitalised patients was reached on 14th June, with 27 sick people and their families in residence., and the oldest victim of the outbreak died the following day, 68 year-old George 'C' from The Knap. George, however, was the last to die. The outbreak began to decline and people gradually went home. Everyone was well by 30 June, and the hospital was taken down. In total, the two waves exposed 59 people to infection, and nineteen of these fell

ill. Five died, but it could have been a great deal worse.

The 1883 Iping outbreak was stopped by swift and effective medical intervention, and by the courage and compassion of health workers and local people. It has echoes today.

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This piece is a summary of a longer paper originally published in *The Quarterly*, The Journal of the British Association of Paper Historians, No 115, July 2020, pp 37-44. If you would like to know more, including the frankly disgusting background story of the rag trade and paper mills, a longer version of this piece can read on my history blog at:

<https://ianfrielhistorian.wordpress.com/2020/11/19/the-victorian-rag-trade-smallpox-and-a-sussex-paper-mill/>

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