

Swept under the carpet of history

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IN human cost, it was the most devastating and tragic episode of the 20th Century yet, remarkably, it remains almost forgotten and buried in the history of the past 100 years.

The Influenza Pandemic which swept the Western world in 1918 and 1919 is believed to have claimed as many as 25 million lives in nine months, primarily in the USA and across Britain and Europe.

I discover from the Berrow's Journal bound archives that there were almost 100 flu deaths in Worcester alone during just one fortnight in November, 1918. The victims were mainly under 35.

Clearly, the pandemic - an epidemic on a world-wide scale - should rate in prominence alongside the Holocaust and the carnage of two world wars in 20th Century history books but, alas, it doesn't.

The extraordinary explanation for this is that the most deadly wave of the pandemic came in the last weeks of the First World War when all the headlines and media attention - international, national and local - were focused on the final battles and on the Armistice.

Ironically too, another peak in the flu death toll during February and March, 1919, coincided with what was considered to be more pressing headline news concerning peace treaties and victory celebrations.

Thus it was that the pandemic was largely overlooked and forgotten, except to the relatives and descendants of the many who fell victim to the virulent disease.

The flu pandemic came as a double-edged sword of death, claiming the lives of millions at the very same time as vast numbers of young men were being killed in the trenches and on the battlefields of Europe. The children, young wives and parents of the troops engaged in the First World War were among the victims of the deadly flu.

I am ashamed to confess that it was not until seeing a TV programme three or four years ago, that I had any knowledge of the pandemic.

And it was not until recently that I was moved to go searching in the Berrow's Journal archives for evidence of the impact locally in 1918 and 1919. I was prompted to do so by an arresting letter from Derek Fearnside, a freelance social work counsellor of Northwick Road, Worcester.

His interest in the "Spanish Flu" Pandemic has become so intense that he is currently carrying detailed personal local history research into its impact on the people, who lived in and around Worcester at the time.

He points out that "between August 1918 and March 1919, the flu epidemic spread world-wide claiming more than 25 million lives - more people than were killed in the fighting of the First World War.

"Although many of the people who died were in the prime of their lives, the flu pandemic is largely forgotten today," stresses Derek. "From the limited research I have done so far, it seems the peak of the second, and most deadly wave of the pandemic struck Worcester in the same week as the Armistice. It appears to have received little attention in the newspapers of the time, though the death rate in the 15 to 35 age group showed a very dramatic rise."

Derek suggests that the devastating pandemic captured little media and public attention because its peak coincided with news of the Armistice and because the British people had become so used to the tragic loss of millions of young lives on the battlefields of Europe during the previous four years.

Derek has a poignant family connection with the devastating flu virus.

George, the 15 year-old brother of his late mother, Mrs Marion Fearnside died in October 1918, just two days before she was born.

"He was sick for only 24 hours, and his sudden death obviously had a huge impact on the family coming so close to the arrival of a new baby."

Tragically, Mrs Fearnside's husband Norman, was a victim of the flu epidemic of late 1968 and early 1969. He was aged 62.

My own researches into the Berrow's Journal archives largely bear out Derek's observations.

The Berrow's Journal edition of November 2, 1918, carries two pages of war news and a long list of Worcestershire men killed, missing, wounded or decorated on the battlefields of Europe.

Just three paragraphs are to be found hidden away on the back page under the heading Influenza Epidemic.

"Although the number of deaths from the influenza epidemic in Worcester is still considerable, it is believed the disease has passed its zenith and is now on the wane," declared the Berrow's.

"The City Medical Officer of Health, Dr Mabyrn Read tells us that the medical men of the city state that fewer fresh cases are now being reported.

"On Wednesday and Thursday of this week there were 10 deaths in Worcester from the disease or from pneumonia arising from the disease. So far, the number of deaths reported in the city from influenza during last week and the first four days of this week is 40."

The next edition of Berrow's Journal - for November 9, 1918 - carried the only significant report I can find of the local impact of the pandemic.

"The growing death roll seems incompatible with the statement recorded at the end of last week that the disease is on the wane.

"There were 33 deaths last week - 17 male and 16 female, including one baby, 10 children and 10 others under 25. There have since been a further 15 deaths over last weekend, and another six were reported on Tuesday.

"Not only doctors but local chemists have all been working at unusually high pressure. One chemist was so hard pressed that he had to ask people to return in two hours' time for prescriptions. All Worcester's elementary and Sunday schools are to remain closed for at least another week.

"On the advice of the Medical Officer, visits to Worcester Workhouse have been suspended, and all children of inmates are being kept from school."

Berrow's referred to some of the desperate personal tragedies behind the flu deaths.

"One soldier was recalled from the Army to be at the bedside of his wife and two young children, struck down by the influenza. His wife has since succumbed, and the children remain ill."

The young wife of a soldier held by the Germans as a prisoner-of-war also died of the flu, as did several other local officers and servicemen, who had survived the horrors of the trenches.

The next Berrow's edition of November 16, 1918, was packed with news of the Armistice and contained no mention whatsoever of the latest effects of the flu pandemic. The same goes for the edition of November 23, 1918.

Even so, death notices in the paper's births, marriages and deaths column continued to tell part of the sorrowful tale.

For instance, we learn of the deaths "from influenza" of Charles Jenkins (27) of Diglis Avenue, Edith Nancy Fidoe (26), wife of Trooper Hugo Fidoe, a prisoner-of-war, Robert Day (18) of Lansdowne Crescent, Mary Elizabeth Rimell (30) of Bromyard Road, Elsie Mary Stinton (23) of Spring Gardens, Francis Edginton (38) of The Hill Avenue, Doris Muriel Ashfield (13) of Britannia Square, Leonard Darke (40) of Worcester, Keith McBean (20) of Hallow Park, Jane Berrow (26), Albert Whiteman (34) departmental manager at R.H Collins and Sons' factory in Northwick Road, Lieutenant Stuart Coombs (27), son of Dr and Mrs Wellesley Coombs of Foregate Street, Mary Bryan (38) of Hylton Road, Stephen Roberts Day (18) of Lansdowne Crescent, Mabel Teresa Rippington of Southfield Street, wife of 14 months of Bombardier Rippington, Douglas Owins DCM

of Washington Street and late of the Worcestershire Regiment, Hubert Albert Jackson (28) of Porter's Mill, Robert Charles Kesterton (30) of Hindlip Court Farm, Corporal Edward Fellows (27), son of Mr and Mrs H. Fellows of Malvern Terrace, Tallow Hill, Arthur Edward Zealley (32) son of Mr and Mrs A. Zealley of Bromyard Road, William Jones (41) of Belmont Walk, Fanny Barnett (42) of Rainbow Hill, Hubert Cyril Mitchell (30) of Comer Gardens, Lily Basford (23) of Brook Farm, Ombersley, Corporal James Jones (28), son of Mr and Mrs Jones of The Row Farm, Holt, and Leslie James Wyatt (two years old) of Saleway Farm, Himbleton.

Except for just two paragraphs about Anti Influenza Precautions, I can find no Berrow's Journal reports at all on the local effects of the next wave of flu deaths during February and March 1919. All the headlines were devoted to peace treaties and victory celebrations.

Again, only death notices gave an insight into the continuing death toll locally.

Derek Fearnside is appealing for the help of older readers of Memory Lane in his researches. He wants to add people's direct recollections to information gathered from newspapers and records of the time.

He would dearly like to contact people born around or before 1906 and those who were residents of Worcester in 1918 and can recall the events of that year and 1919 around time of the flu pandemic.

Anyone prepared to talk to him about their recollections should contact Derek at 192 Northwick Road, Worcester WR3 7EQ (telephone 01905 456277).

I have looked at the Berrow's Journal pictorial supplements for the weeks of late 1918 and early 1919, when the two deadliest waves of the worldwide influenza pandemic struck, but can find only one certain photograph of a victim of the disease.

He was Arthur Edward Zealley, aged 32, the distinguished scientist son of Mr and Mrs A. Zealley of Deriston, Bromyard Road, Worcester.

He died of influenza in Cape Town, South Africa, as he prepared to sail home to England, to offer himself for military service.

A past pupil of Worcester's Royal Grammar School, he was an Associate of the Royal College of Science and a Fellow of the Geographical Society, and had been working for the Rhodesia Geographical Society.

He is on the left of the line-up of four photographs - above - of local men who had recently died when the Berrow's Journal pictorial supplement for the week ending November 16, 1918, was published.

The other three men were, second from the left, Mr J. Young "for 43 years butler to the late Mr A.R Hudson of Wick"; Capt H.L Evers MC of Worcester "killed in action," and "the late Mr J.S Barnett of Worcester."

It is difficult to guess whether the latter was a flu victim or he had been killed in action. He is photographed in uniform.

The other pages of the same small weekly supplement carried two wedding pictures and harrowing rows of photos of 18 local servicemen - 12 killed in action (from Worcester, L/Cpl J. Haynes, Pte JE Lewis, Pte S. Phillips, Pte WC Staples, Pte WE Summers, Pte HF Brittle and Pte PC Gardner, from Evesham, Gunner FW Heritage and Sgt AM Gisbourne, and Sgt AH Wilcox of Martley, L.Cpl J Hunt of Peopleton and Cpl W Edwards of Pershore, two wounded, two taken prisoner, and two awarded the Military Medal - Sapper TH Gould of Droitwich and Cpl CH Wharton of Holt Heath.

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