

THE MARSH AGUE

In this article, Derek Barnard reminds us how far we have come in the last hundred years so far as health care is concerned.

I would expect that most people know that the first chapter of *Great Expectations* is set within Cooling churchyard and that on the opening page Pip, in his realisation of the identity of things, says 'To five little stone lozenges sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine - who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle - I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trouser-pockets and had never taken them out in this state of existence.' In fact there are thirteen stone lozenges grouped together in the churchyard and all are in memory of the children of the Comport family who farmed at Cooling, High Halstow and Cliffe. Seven of these stones cover the children of Michael and Jane Comport of Cowling Court and Castle.

Mary	d. Oct 1767 in infancy
William	d. May 1771 aged 8 months
William	d. June 1773 aged 7 months
Francis	d. June 1775 aged 17 months
James	d. Oct 1777 aged 4 months
Elizabeth	d. Oct 1779 aged 3 months
William	d. March 1779 aged 8 months

No one rich or poor could escape the high infant mortality rate, especially on the Hoo and Sheppey Peninsulas where many deaths were attributed to the marsh ague. Two types of mosquito breed in the stagnant pools of the marshes. The first, *Aedes detritus*, is a vicious biter causing severe skin irritation. The ferocity of these insects was experienced by Hogarth and his four friends at Stoke in 1732. "Monday, at three, awakened and cursed, our eyes, lips and hands being tormented and swelled by the biting of gnats." The second, *Anopheles maculipennis*, is the more dangerous because of its malaria carrying capabilities. The malaria was picked up from sailors returning from abroad with this disease and passed to the local inhabitants by this insect which was prepared to live in close proximity to man, biting at night and seldom out of doors. Those who survived their first bites were generally immune for life. Only the female sucks blood and is thus capable of passing on the malarial parasite to her human victims. Samuel Ireland, writing in 1793, tells of the 'aguish' air that fills this area and how this air has removed many a yeoman's wife who was not a native of the spot, sending him to seek another who was likely to meet the same fate.

Various improvements enabled malaria to be subdued. The advances in living conditions with clean airy homes drove the insects to the dirty, humid conditions of stables and other animal houses and the blood of animals which they preferred to the human variety. The extended use of quinine, which was introduced in 1840 but was only cheap enough to be used on poor people from the 1890s finally held the problem at bay.

A survey carried out in 1937 showed that it was impossible to stay out of doors on a summer evening without being bitten by *Aedes detritus*, so in 1938 spraying was introduced. It had been found that a large pool carried few larvae but the imprint of an animals hoof could hold hundreds. Spraying was therefore concentrated on the smaller pools killing both types of insect at a containable cost. The continual spraying of the marshes over the years has made the peninsular a safer place to live in. In 1929 the villagers of Cooling thought that the decline in marsh ague was

due to the emissions from the cement works, though as we see, other factors were really responsible.



Anopheles Mosquito

Sources

Great Expectations Country (W. Laurence Gadd, 1929)

River Medway (Samuel Ireland, 1793)

The Martial, Medical and Social History of Rochester (J.O. Murray, 1952)