

HD **Heroes battled the plague**

BY Alan Betteridge delves into Maryborough's tragic encounter with the pneumonic plague.

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Brave nurses died in tragic circumstances undertaking their duty in Maryborough

AS THE turn of the twentieth century approached, the thought of an epidemic of bubonic plague was the last thing Australians worried about.

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Even after an outbreak in New Caledonia in 1899, most gave little thought to it.

That was to change later that year when a **group** of South Sea **Island** labourers from the area brought the dreaded disease with them to Sydney.

In Queensland, authorities were quick to place all ships that had travelled from that region under a strict 14-day quarantine.

The Maryborough Chronicle reported: There can be no doubt that it is a highly infectious disease and that the infection may be conveyed by clothes and bedding, as well as by direct contact with the sick. In all epidemics, it has been, of course, observed that the unhealthy conditions produced by poverty and filth are extremely favourable to the disease.

Maryborough in 1900 was vastly different to the city you see today.

At the time, there was no sewerage and putrid open drains were scattered throughout the town.

Add to this the practice of merchants dumping rotting vegetables and all manner of food scraps into the drains and one can quickly realise the potential for disaster.

The area had a high rate of poverty, with many families having little money to **buy** food and living by any means available to them – this included scavenging from the dumped waste in the open drains.

By March 1900, the plague outbreak in Sydney had become worse, with 82 having contracted the disease. Eight succumbed.

Queensland had instigated an inoculation campaign against those most at risk, but the serum was almost as deadly as the disease. Even Queensland's official bacteriologist, after being inoculated, became seriously ill. To be prepared, the council voted to build a plague and quarantine station. They **purchased** a derelict timber mill in Dundathu for the purpose.

As it transpired, the **site** was never to be used, as it was deemed to be too far from Maryborough to be of any use.

By May 1902, it was clear that the disease was moving closer to Maryborough as an increasing number of cases were reported in Brisbane.

In the early 1900s, it was widely believed that bubonic plague was carried and transmitted by rats – a rodent which was in no short supply in the port city of Maryborough.

The Maryborough Chronicle reported: Plague is a dirt disease and is spread through the agency of rats. They further reported: It cannot be too strongly impressed upon all householders that even small collections of rubbish about the house or yard will attract rats, especially now that they are being systematically hunted down.

On June 3, 1904, came the first confirmation that the disease had reached Maryborough.

A **Chinese** man was taken to the Maryborough Hospital suffering from an illness which, according to locals, could have been the plague.

The man died shortly after admission but hospital and authorities stated he may have died from phlebitis.

A few days later, on June 8, came official acknowledgement that it was indeed a case of plague.

Government Medical Officer Dr Penny ordered the fumigation of the house in which the man had become ill, the disinfection of his clothes, and the fumigation of the isolation ward at the hospital where he died.

All material which may have come into contact with the patient was burnt.

The body of the man was taken to the Maryborough cemetery where it was buried in quicklime.

On June 13, John Rillie, a baker, was also taken ill with symptoms of the disease.

Two nurses from the Colmslie Plague Hospital were despatched to Maryborough and took over the care of the victim.

John Rillie was to recover from the plague and Maryborough was to be free of the disease for almost a year.

However, the reprieve was short-lived - and when it returned in May 1905, it was in its most terrifying form.

To understand the extreme danger Maryborough residents now found themselves in, it is necessary to understand the difference between bubonic and pneumonic plague.

Bubonic plague begins simply as an infection in rats and is then transferred by plague-infected fleas as they desert the rat's carcass.

Pneumonic plague, however, is not spread by fleas, but moves from host to host on tiny particles. A simple sneeze from an infected person could almost certainly become a death sentence for anybody nearby. There were few doctors in Australia in 1905 that had experience with the diagnosis, or treatment, of pneumonic plague.

A tiny cottage on the corner of Pallas and Sussex streets was occupied by a wharf worker by the name of Richard O'Connell and his family of seven.

O'Connell was a known drunkard whose wife had died some 18 months earlier, leaving him to raise their seven children. John O'Connell at 17 was the eldest boy, his sister Kate was about a year older. The other children included James, 15, Ritchie, 10, May, nine, Ellen, seven and Mary, three.

The family lived in abject poverty and what little money O'Connell made was spent on alcohol, leaving the children to scavenge for food from the open drains and rubbish dumps.

The cottage in which they lived was small and cramped with most of the family sleeping on the floor on hessian bags. The building was infested with mice, rats and cockroaches.

On May 25 Dr Crawford Robertson was called to the O'Connell house to treat John, who had been ill for five days.

The family could not afford a doctor and had delayed in calling one in the hope that John recovered on his own.

Dr Robertson incorrectly diagnosed dengue fever. He left the house and promised to return within 48 hours to check on his patient. During the night, John's condition worsened and by morning he was dead.

Mrs Leticia Edwards, a neighbour, and a family friend, Miss Schafer, helped lay out John's body and the children were taken to Mrs Edwards home for the day and returned to the home that night. They crept

into their makeshift beds beside the body of their brother, where they slept the night. This was to be the beginning of the end for some of these children.

John remained unburied for 36 hours before authorities removed the body to be buried in a pauper's grave. By May 28 four other O'Connell children had become ill, all showing the same symptoms as John.

James and Ellen were very ill. Kate and her sister May were not quite as sick.

The children were immediately taken to the Maryborough hospital. The two remaining children were sent to the home of Miss Schafer.

That evening Mrs Edwards, the neighbour, also become ill.

The following day the two remaining children were taken from Miss Schafer and placed into the hospital as they too had fallen ill.

Two doctors and all the nurses and patients at the Maryborough hospital were now at risk and still no accurate diagnosis had been made.

One of the nurses who immediately volunteered to care for the children was Rose Adelaide Wiles, known affectionately as Nurse Adela.

On May 31, the tragedy deepened when James and Ellen's conditions worsened and both died within hours of each other. Shortly later, Mrs Edwards, still sick in her bed at home, passed away. Four people had now died under mysterious circumstances.

By now the hospital had sent for further nursing assistance to care for the children. One nurse to be summoned was Cecelia Elizabeth Bauer.

Nurse Bauer had started her nursing at the Maryborough hospital in 1902 and had only three months of ward duty to complete before her course was finished.

When summoned, she was enjoying a holiday with her family and her mind was filled with her impending marriage to William Hastings. The wedding had been planned to take place just eight weeks later. The nurses caring for the children and the patients themselves were now semi-isolated in their own ward.

Members of their families were not allowed near them, although it appears other medical staff were given free access to the ward.

Ritchie O'Connell soon succumbed to the disease and his body was taken to the hospital morgue.

On the evening of June 2, doctors carried out the first post-mortem on his body. What they found confirmed their worst fears. Tests would still have to be conducted by the pathology laboratory in Brisbane, but the corpse now revealed all the indications of pneumonic plague. On June 3 the youngest child, Mary, died. She was just three and a half years old and the sixth victim of the plague outbreak.

Her body was taken the morgue where a post-mortem was carried out, again indicating all the signs of pneumonic plague. On the same day nurse Bauer, who had been with the children from the onset of the plague, finally showed the first signs of illness.

On Monday June 5 nurse Rose Adelaide Wiles developed plague symptoms and nurse Bauer's condition was worsening each hour.

It had now become obvious that more specialised help was needed and two more experienced nurses were despatched from the Colmslie Plague Hospital to Maryborough. On their arrival at the hospital the two infected nurses would not allow the Colmslie nurses to come near them.

The Maryborough Chronicle reported: The Colmslie nurses did all they could for the Maryborough nurses in their last hours of this terrible illness, knowing all the time how hopeless it was. The sick nurses pleaded with the Colmslie girls to keep away in case they too caught it, for they said: We know how dangerous it is and we are just as ill as the children were.

ON June 6, Nurse Bauer, who was just 22-years-old, died, with her funeral cortege leaving the hospital morgue at 2.45 pm on the same day. The sexton of the Maryborough cemetery ordered that Cecelia's grave be dug far away from the main cemetery area and that the grave be significantly deeper than the usual six feet. He also stipulated that the coffin be smothered with the contents of several bags of quicklime after the interment.

On Monday June 12, a third nurse was rumoured to have caught the disease and to compound the misery, nurse Adelaide Wiles died with her body being taken and buried with undue haste. The sexton repeated his instructions and nurse Wile's coffin was also buried deeply and in quicklime.

On the 24th day of the outbreak (June 16) the third nurse, Nurse Sprague, had sufficiently recovered and was discharged.

No further cases of plague were reported in the city, or at the hospital, and after some consideration the hospital was taken out of quarantine.

Cecelia Elizabeth Bauer and Rose Adelaide Wiles gave their lives in the service of nursing. In later years the matron of the Maryborough hospital, Matron Tolmie, stated that at the time of the outbreak, all of the nurses had been frightened, but not one flinched from doing the duties allotted to them.

A fountain on the Town Hall Green commemorates the sacrifices made by Nurses Bauer and Wiles.

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