

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...**

### **SMALLPOX**

It is the autumn of 1871 and Brandon is sick. Residents' bodies are aching and they have a fever, some are vomiting uncontrollably and people's skin is covered by a rash. The most unfortunate ones have died. In fact, many have died. Brandon did well to avoid the pandemic that has swept the nation for as long as it did, but now the spread of smallpox has infected the town. Smallpox is a notifiable disease, meaning anyone who has it, or thinks they have it, are legally compelled to let the local council know. The infected person will then be quarantined at home and after the infection has passed, be that a full recovery or death, the person's clothing and bedding will be disposed of. Disposal usually means being chucked on a fire.

Locals believe the disease was brought into town by a homeless vagrant, whose clothing was not destroyed by the council. The trouble is, since the coming of the railway three decades ago, many people freely travel in and out of town. Whilst it is true, they did so before the railway, usually by horse-drawn coach, the railway has reduced the time to travel, meaning people come from further distances. They also travel in larger numbers, meaning larger inns were built to accommodate them. So, in reality, who knows who brought the disease to Brandon, nonetheless the vagrant is getting the blame.

The disease incubation period lasts a week or two, meaning people often cannot pinpoint who they caught it from. During this time, the person feels fine and there are often no symptoms to betray their impending illness. Then, the fever, aching, headaches and vomiting start, usually lasting a few days. It is now that people retire to their 'sick' beds. A few red spots appear in the mouth and on the tongue, which in time, turn to sores. The spots will then spread onto the skin, radiating out into a rash. Ironically, the victim may actually begin to feel better, the fever can even lessen, however, the worst is to come. The spots turn to sores, which in turn fill with thick cloudy puss, and the fever returns. The weakest townfolk will have succumbed by the end of this stage, but for those who survive, they can expect those puss-filled sores to scab over, leaving a pock-marked skin. Survivors of smallpox are easily recognisable by this trait. All in all, the disease can last up to a month. If you are sick, you cannot work. No work means no money, which in turn means no food on the table. You can bet that if one of your family get it, then others will do too. There is little that can be done, other than try to steer clear of those with it and nurse your family back to health.

Many in Brandon die from the disease, pushing up the town's mortality rate and keeping the grave diggers busy. Victims are buried at night and those laying them to rest fortify their courage at the Brandon alehouses before starting their shift. Although their resolve is stiffened and they go about their work quickly, the beer does have an effect on their sense of direction. Their cart, piled with bodies, clatters into headstones of those already buried in St Peter's churchyard. Even today, if you walk through the churchyard, you may see these lopsided headstones.