

**Dr. S.W. Wheaton's report to the Local Government Board on the sanitary circumstances and administration of the Neath Rural District.**

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# REPORTS

TO THE

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD

ON

## PUBLIC HEALTH AND MEDICAL SUBJECTS.

(*NEW SERIES No. 54.*)

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Dr. S. W. Wheaton's Report to the Local  
Government Board on the Sanitary Cir-  
cumstances and Administration of the  
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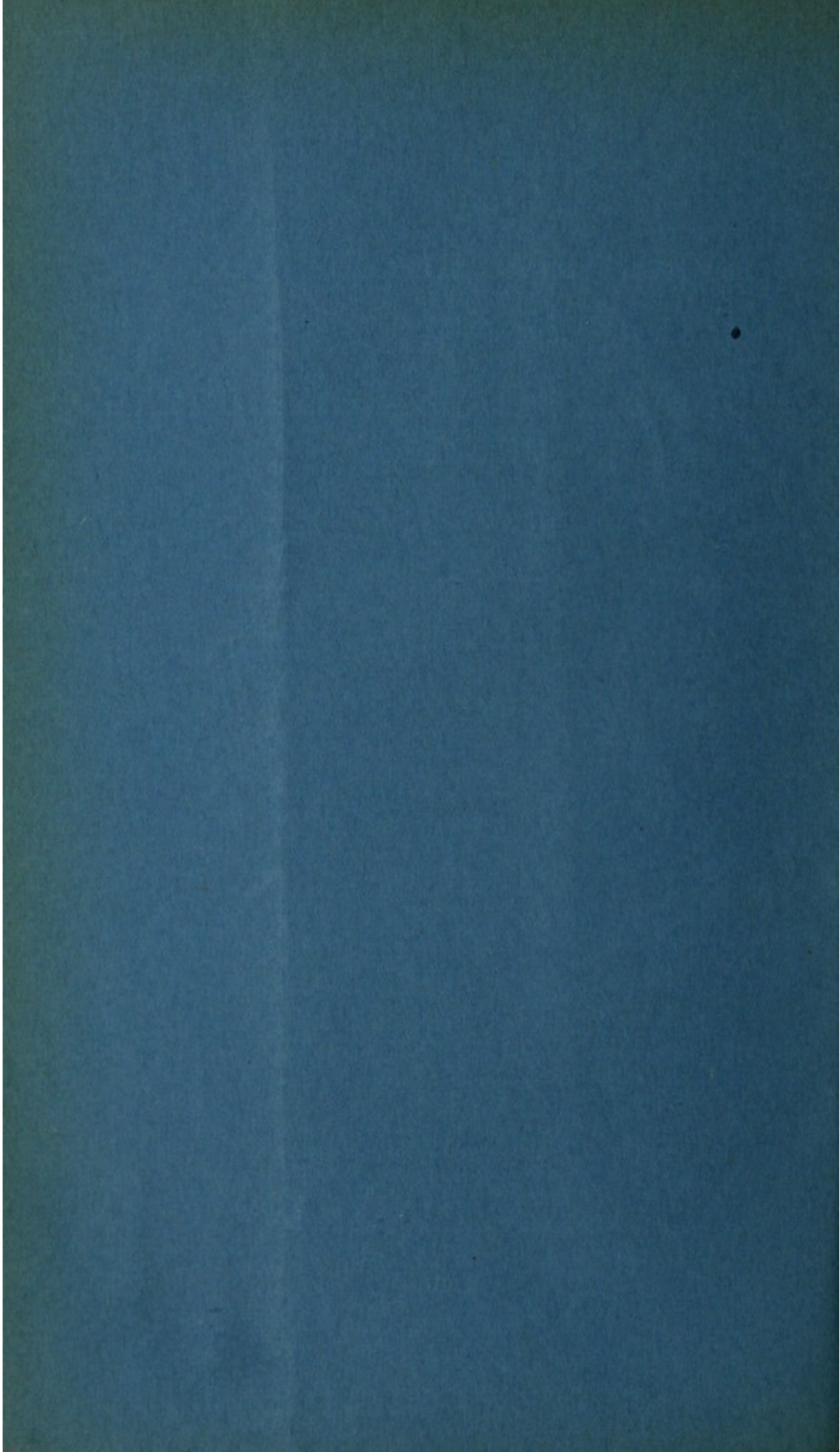


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# Dr. S. W. Wheaton's Report to the Local Government Board on the Sanitary Circumstances and Administration of the Neath Rural District.

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ARTHUR NEWSHOLME,

Medical Officer,

June 30th, 1911.

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The Neath Rural District has on several occasions been visited by the Board's Medical Inspectors. In 1877 the late Dr. Airy enquired into the sanitary condition of the Neath Registration District, and with reference to Neath Rural District he reported that there was a general want of administration, great prevalence of unsanitary conditions, and absence of isolation hospital accommodation. The late Dr. Spear visited the rural district in 1890, in consequence of a very fatal outbreak of scarlet fever in the parish of Coedfranc, in which over 25 per cent. of the cases had a fatal termination. He reported that there was no hospital accommodation for infectious diseases, no system of sewerage, no public scavenging of privies or earth closets, and great inaction on the part of the sanitary authority. The district was also visited in 1885 and 1886 by Dr. D. S. Davies, at that time one of the Board's Inspectors, in the course of the General Cholera Survey. On each occasion recommendations for the sanitary improvement of their district were made to the rural district council.

For some years past the Board's attention has been directed to the prevalence of infectious disease in this rural district. Nearly all the common infectious diseases have from time to time been prevalent in the district, and the reports of the medical officer of health have afforded no evidence of effective action for their prevention. On the other hand these reports have shown that unwholesome conditions were frequent in the district and that preventable nuisances were common. The quarterly returns of the Registrar-General for the quarters ended December 31st, 1908, June 30th, 1909, and March 31st, 1910, showed excess of mortality from fever, scarlet fever, and diphtheria respectively in certain parishes in the rural district.

Under these circumstances I was instructed to make a detailed inspection of the sanitary condition and administration of the rural district. I visited the district on January 31st, 1911, and following days.



## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT.

The Neath Rural District is in the county of Glamorgan, but the parish of Ystradfellte in the county of Brecon is also administered by the Neath Rural District Council. In 1908, when the greater part of the Gelligaer and Rhigos Rural District was formed into an urban district, the parish of Rhigos was added to the Neath Rural District. As thus constituted the Neath Rural District would have had in 1901 a total population of 28,831, of which 14,828 were males and 14,003 females, an area of 75,211 acres, 5,739 dwellings, and 52 dwellings in course of building. At the recent census, 3rd April, 1911, the population was 42,246. The rateable value of the whole district is £168,671; the assessable value £156,502. There are 17 civil parishes included in the rural district, which is roughly oblong in shape, and extends from the sea shore of Swansea Bay to the summit of the Breconshire Beacons, a distance of 24 miles. Its greatest width is about seven miles. At its south-western extremity are three urban districts, which are almost entirely enclosed by the rural district. These are the boroughs of Neath and Aberavon, and the urban district of Briton Ferry. The district comprises nearly the whole of the valley of the River Neath, with that of its tributary, the River Dulais, and the valley of the River Avon. The greater part of the area is barren mountain land, the population being gathered into a number of small towns and villages situate in the valleys. Two main lines of railway intersect the district, following the valleys of the Neath and Dulais Rivers, the Neath and Brecon and the Great Western (Vale of Neath branch). Except in the extreme north-eastern portion, where the Old Red Sandstone and Carboniferous Limestone exist, the whole of the district is underlaid by the Coal Measures. The subsoil upon which houses are built consists of decomposed rock (Pennant Grit), clay, sand, and gravel deposited in the river valleys. The principal industries are coal mining, tin, copper, steel, and brick works. The climate is damp and the rainfall heavy. The names of the populous places in the district do not as a rule correspond with those of parishes. The more important places are Skewen, Resolven, Melincrythan, Cwmavon, Glynneath, Seven Sisters, Neath Abbey, Cadoxton, Onllwyn, Aberdulais, Tonna, Crynant, Cilfriw, and Clyne. I visited all these, as well as other places of less importance.

## SANITARY CIRCUMSTANCES.

*Condition of Dwellings.*—Houses are for the most part in continuous rows with yards in the rear. The amount of space in the rear varies, in some instances it is large, in others small, the tendency being to restrict it in the newer houses. Houses generally have sufficient air space and free exposure to light and air throughout the district. The newer dwellings are as a rule well built of stone or brick with through ventilation, but the older houses are badly built of rough unhewn stone the interstices of which are filled in with mortar, without dampcourses, and with very small windows. There are several rows of such dwellings without back windows or back doors. A large proportion of the houses, both



old and new, have been built by colliery proprietors or other employers of labour. There are numerous houses which are in a condition of general dilapidation from age and continued neglect, with very filthy interiors, especially at Cwmavon and at Cadoxton. Some of these have been improved of late under the orders of the rural district council, and others are about to be dealt with in the same way. Where dilapidated houses are owned by a company there is not so much difficulty in securing repairs, but where there are small owners there is great opposition encountered. At Cwmavon where, I am informed, dwellings built many years ago by a smelting company were, on the cessation of operations of the company, sold at a cheap rate to the tenants, great difficulty is found in getting the tenants to place them in repair.

At Onllwyn there are several galvanised iron huts in occupation. In the older houses dampness is almost the rule; this arises from absence of dampcourse, absence of eavespouting for carrying rainwater from the roofs, defective or absent paving of the ground around the house, and also often from defective flooring consisting of stone or brick laid on the ground. Defects of paving around houses are also often found in newly built dwellings. Overcrowding of persons is common in the district, owing to the great activity of the coal and tin trades, the custom of two or more families living in one house, and the taking in of lodgers. I did not see one house empty which was fit for occupation by the working class, many of whom have to go long distances to their work by train or other conveyance.

*Streets and Roads.*—Many of the streets are unmade and without sidewalks. The centre of the road is often occupied by a depression in which rainfall collects and to which ashes and refuse are thrown. In their efforts to obtain a temporary dry footing people put ashes outside their front doors, and in wet weather the whole street is converted into a slough, through which the people have to wade to reach their houses. There are few back streets or back ways; where such exist they are unmade and often covered with refuse, which in some instances includes the contents of privies. The main roads are in fair condition.

*Water Supply.*—This is mainly derived from upland surface water and springs impounded on the mountains and conveyed to the villages by gravitation. There are several such supplies, all of which are under the control of the district council. In addition, water from disused mine levels is piped to houses, there are wells, public and private, fitted with pumps, spouts conveying land drainage or surface water drainage from fields, and dip wells. Melincrythan and parts of Cwmavon are also supplied from the mains of the Neath and Aberavon Corporations respectively. As to sufficiency nearly all the supplies are liable to shortage in dry summers. But few houses have water laid on; in most instances water has to be fetched from standpipes in the streets, the distance between which varies from 50, to 100 and 150 yards and upwards. There are very few baths in houses, in very few houses can hot water be obtained except by boiling it in a kettle on the fire, so that there are great difficulties in securing that personal cleanliness



which is so necessary in a colliery district. There are no baths at the coal pits, and no public baths or washhouses in the district.

As to quality—the smaller sources of supply are liable to pollution. The outbreak of enteric fever at Onllwyn in 1908, which comprised 26 cases, was due to the use of water from old mine workings which had become polluted by surface soakage. The water from the private wells is of unsatisfactory quality, usually extremely hard, and in some instances liable to pollution by soakage from adjoining cesspools. In some instances analyses of the water of these wells have been made, but usually when pollution occurs the quality of the water becomes so bad that it is undrinkable.

By the Ystradfellte Water Act, 1902, the rural district council obtained powers to construct reservoirs in the parish of Ystradfellte and other places, to collect water from an area of 2,240 acres of moorland on the Breconshire Beacons, and to supply the whole of their district. They have also power to supply the Boroughs of Neath and Aberavon and the urban district of Briton Ferry. The works are now well advanced, and it is expected that water will be supplied from this source during the next twelve months. At present, owing to the insufficiency of water supplies, sanitary progress in the district is greatly impeded.

*Sewerage.*—There are sewers at Skewen and Melincrythan, the sewage in each instance passing untreated to the tidal River Neath. In the rest of the rural district, with one exception, there is no systematic sewerage. At Banwen Colliery, where the proprietor has sewered a street of 50 houses, the sewage discharges to a septic tank the effluent from which passes through filters of clinker. The final effluent from these works appeared good, and these are the only satisfactory sewage works in operation in the district. The village of Seven Sisters has also been sewered by the same individual, who has erected large filters for sewage disposal which are not yet in operation, and has handed the whole over to the district council who are now commencing to require house drains to be connected to the new sewers. At Resolven some years ago some sewers were laid and small filters constructed, but these are now disused. In the greater part of the district liquid refuse escapes into streams, ditches or roadside channels, or after running in surface channels for some distance soaks away into the subsoil. Upwards of £34,276 has been borrowed for works of sewerage, but a great deal of such work still remains to be done.

In the case of newly built houses cesspools are provided where there are no sewers, and in many populous places nearly all the houses drain to cesspools. The cesspools are situate at the backs of the houses in the yards. They are constructed of pieces of stone and allow the liquid filth to soak away into the ground. Cesspools are never emptied unless, as sometimes happens, one becomes watertight and sewage flows back through the house drains, or escapes on the surface, causing nuisance. The occupier has then to empty the cesspool; there is no scavenging of cesspools by the district council.

*House Drainage.*—This is often absent or defective in the older houses. In the newly built houses it is usually satisfactory, the



drains being properly ventilated and provided with fresh air inlets. Yard gulleys of glazed earthenware are usually provided.

*Excrement Disposal.*—This is effected in almost every way that is possible. There are slop-water closets, pail privies, privies with fixed receptacles of various forms, and water-closets with and without a separate supply of water for flushing. This matter has been left almost entirely to private choice. The commonest method is by means of a privy with fixed receptacle; in most instances this is some form of cinder-sifting privy, and has been introduced by the colliery proprietors. Unfortunately the cinder-sifting apparatus is hardly ever employed, and no earth, ashes, or other deodoriser is applied to the contents of the privy. The contents of the receptacles are in most instances semi-liquid and give rise to much nuisance. There is no inducement for people to use the cinder sifter, because fuel is so cheap that the cinders are valueless, and the people have not been educated to understand the need for the exertion necessary to add earth or ashes to the excreta contained in the privy. Water-closets are usually hand flushed, and since the water supply is very scanty they are often found to be in very foul condition, the pans covered with dried filth, and very offensive. The slop-water closets are of very old-fashioned form and unsatisfactory; they are principally found at Skewen. Privy buildings are often very dilapidated and filthy; especially is this noticeable at Cwmavon, where are many pail privies constructed of rough boarding only. The scavenging of privies is left to private individuals, except at Cwmavon, where it is undertaken by the parochial committee, who employ a contractor. The contractor removes the contents of the pail privies from the lower lying portion of this place and conveys them to a field where they are used as manure. In the upper part of Cwmavon the contractor empties the privies, but does not carry the filth off the premises, simply burying the contents in a hole in the yards of the houses. Elsewhere in the district the contents of privies usually accumulate until overflowing, a hole is then dug in the yard as near to the privy as convenient and the contents of the privy are placed in it and covered up. Many yards are so small that it is hardly possible to find a place to make a hole for this purpose, and privy contents are sometimes collected in a heap in a corner and covered with a little earth or stones. Wherever available the numerous streams in the district are used more or less extensively as recipients for privy filth, which is also thrown about on waste places and in back streets. The people do not appreciate the use of the filth for manurial purposes; and moreover it is very exceptional for the soil of yards or gardens to be cultivated, consequently the ground around houses becomes saturated with filth. When a small yard, measuring  $15\frac{1}{2}$  feet by  $14\frac{1}{2}$  feet, part of which may be paved, has to be used for the disposal of all the excrement from a large household, and also contains a soakaway cesspool receiving all liquid refuse and rainfall from the house, the conditions can only be called horrible, especially since the yards, the fences between which are commonly broken down, form a common playground for the children. Should a series of dry summers, or other favouring circumstances,



occur, the conditions described might readily lead to devastating epidemics of enteric fever.

*House Refuse.*—In certain portions of the district large public ashbins are provided at varying distances to which refuse can be taken by householders. In the greater part of the district also refuse which is placed in receptacles in the street is removed at stated periods, usually three times weekly, by contractors who also empty the public ashbins. The refuse is placed in the streets in boxes, tins, tubs, or pans. There are no private ashpits and proper movable receptacles for ashes are not provided. The refuse is removed to tips. The arrangement is not a successful one, and a great part of the refuse is not removed, but is thrown about in heaps in the yards at the backs of the houses. Many thousands of cart loads of house refuse are thus accumulated in the neighbourhood of dwellings in the district. No doubt much of the animal matter is removed by rats, crows, and jackdaws, but the vegetable matter remains and decomposes, causing much nuisance. The reasons for this accumulation about premises are various, and include the following:—The contractor does not enter upon any premises to remove refuse; the people do not trouble to collect their house refuse in a receptacle, but just throw it down as close to the house as possible; the people say they have no receptacles for refuse; the contractors decline to remove waste coal, of which there is a large quantity; the contractors are paid a yearly sum for the whole work, including the removal of road scrapings and sweepings, hence it is not to their advantage to encourage the removal of refuse from premises. A large number of houses are situate on the banks of streams, and here the refuse is thrown to the river; a large amount is also thrown about on waste places.

*Isolation Hospital Provision.*—There is no hospital for the isolation of cases of infectious disease, except the small-pox hospital, where a few cases of enteric fever have been received. This small-pox hospital is at Cimla, in a fairly central position for the district. It is a temporary building of galvanised iron built out of current rates, and is capable of accommodating twelve patients.

*Disinfection.*—There is a Washington Lyon's disinfecting apparatus at the small-pox hospital, but it is only used in exceptional cases. Houses are disinfected by fumigation with sulphur or formaline vapour, and disinfectants are supplied to occupiers of infected houses.

*Slaughterhouses.*—There are 16 in the district, all of which are registered. Attention has been directed to them of late, and most of them are in fair condition. The principal defects are absence of proper lairage in some instances, and absence of covered receptacles for offal in most cases.

*Of Bakehouses* there are 27 in the district. The medical officer of health has devoted special attention to them of late, and for the most part they are satisfactory. The principal defects noted in several were absence of a separate store for the flour, and dusty, defective flooring; also the presence of nuisances in proximity to



them, such as uncovered manure pits, and in one instance a privy abutted on the wall of the bakehouse.

*Common Lodging Houses.*—There are none in the district, but several in the borough of Neath, which serve for the rural district.

*Cowsheds, Dairies, and Milkshops.*—The number of these is not known and there has been no attempt to keep the register up to date. The condition of milkshops has received attention of late, and they are fairly satisfactory, but the cowsheds and dairies are unsatisfactory. Those cowsheds which I visited were very defective in many respects. The defects noticed were almost complete absence of lighting, ventilation, and drainage; defective flooring, absence of receptacles for manure, and in some instances overcrowding.

There are no offensive trades in the district.

*Nuisances.*—These are prevalent in the district, and are in many instances the inevitable results of the methods of excrement disposal, the limitation of the scavenging of privies to occupiers, who have often no means of disposing of the filth, and the defective structure of the privies themselves. The absence of sewerage gives rise also to many nuisances. In 1910, 470 informal notices were given to abate nuisances and 482 formal (statutory) notices for the same purpose. All of these are said to have been complied with, but it is to be feared that under the existing circumstances many of the nuisances will recur again and again.

#### SANITARY ADMINISTRATION.

The medical officer of health is Mr. Thos. P. Whittington, L.R.C.P., L.R.C.S., Edin. He has held office for 21 years, and receives a salary of £300 per annum, half of which is repaid from county funds. He does not engage in general practice; the only other post which he holds is that of Medical Officer to the Monmouth and South Wales Employers' Mutual Indemnity Society. Mr. Whittington has a good knowledge of his district and for years past has advised the rural district council to take action with regard to sewerage various places in the district, providing hospital accommodation for infectious disease, and other matters, but little result has followed. He does not receive the support in his duties to which he is entitled from the rural district council.

There are two inspectors of nuisances.

Mr. David Jones acts for the eastern portion of the district and Mr. Sidney McNeil for the western. Mr. Jones has no certificate in sanitary science, and was formerly a farmer in the district. He has held office for many years and receives a salary of £104 per annum with railway season ticket. Mr. McNeil has held the post for one year only. He has the certificate of the Royal Sanitary Institute and a certificate for training in meat inspection. He receives a salary of £104 per annum and £5 per annum towards cost of a bicycle. The inspectors of nuisances have a fair knowledge of their districts. They keep journals but not report books. Reports are sent in monthly on sheets of paper. A considerable portion of their time is taken up in supervising the work of the various scavenging contractors. The inspectors have commenced an inspection of their districts under sub-section (1) of section 17



of the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909, but so far only 16 houses have been dealt with under section 15 of this Act, and 57 under section 17.

*Byelaws in force in the district :—*

Subject.	Allowed of the Board on		
Nuisances ... }	in parishes of ...	...	April 18th, 1881
New Streets and Buildings }	Blaengwrach.	...	
	Blaenhonddan.	...	
	Coedfranc ...	...	April 18th, 1881
	Dyffryn Clydach.	...	
	Dylais Lower.	...	
	Llangonoyd Higher.	...	
	Llantwit Lower, Margam.	...	
	Michaelstone Higher and Lower.	...	
Cleansing of Footways and Pavements, Removal of House Refuse, Cleansing of Earth Closets, Privies, Cesspits and Cesspools.	Neath Higher and Lower, Resolven.	...	
	whole district ...	...	April 18th, 1881
Common Lodging Houses	...	...	April 18th, 1881
Slaughter Houses ... }	parishes of ...	...	April 18th, 1881
	Blaengwrach.	...	
	Blaenhonddan.	...	
	Coedfranc, Dyffryn Clydach.	...	
	Llangonoyd Higher, Llantwit Lower.	...	
	Margam, Michaelstone Lower.	...	
	Neath Lower and Higher, Resolven.	...	
	Ystradfellte.	...	
New Streets and Buildings (Public Health Act, 1890).	whole district ...	...	March 2nd, 1894
Nuisances (Keeping of Animals).	in same parishes as nuisances with exception of Margam and Llangonoyd Higher.	...	June 13th, 1901
		...	
Nuisances (whole district)	amended to prevent nuisances arising from private scavenging.	...	Sept. 6th, 1901

The Infectious Disease (Prevention) Act, 1890, has been adopted, also part 3 of the Public Health Acts Amendment Act, 1890.

The average infantile mortality for the years 1899-1908 was 142·7. That for 1910 was 135·2. The Notification of Births Act has not been adopted. There are no arrangements for visits to the mothers of new born infants, by female Health Visitors or otherwise, in the district.

During 1910 there were 34 deaths from phthisis, but only two cases were notified to the medical officer of health by district medical officers, and there was no voluntary notification. No register is kept of notifications of infectious diseases, so that particulars as to ages, &c., of sufferers cannot be obtained. The council have made regulations for dairies, cowsheds and milkshops, dated 1887.

*The midwives* in the district are under the control of the county council, but on receipt of notification of puerperal fever, the medical officer of health of the rural district, if he finds as the



result of enquiry that a midwife is in charge of the case, takes action as follows:—

He gives instructions to the midwife, directs her to confine her attentions to the infected case, causes disinfectants to be supplied and the house to be disinfected on the termination of the case. Only two cases of puerperal fever were notified in 1910, with one death.

*Action for Prevention of Spread of Infectious Diseases.*

Each morning the medical officer of health, who is not provided with an office or with any clerical staff, meets the inspectors of nuisances at the council offices. He directs the inspectors of nuisances to visit houses where cases of infectious diseases are notified, and if necessary visits these houses himself. The inspector of nuisances supplies disinfectants for use in infected houses and gives instructions for isolation of the patient as far as possible. It need hardly be said that such isolation in a small house, with probably a number of children, perhaps occupied by two or more families, or accommodating several lodgers, can only be very imperfect. The people of the district are very careless in the matter of preventing spread of infection. Often children are taken about in an infectious condition, and the mixing of the children in common yards at the backs of the rows of dwellings greatly facilitates the spread of infectious disease. The fact that the district council does not attempt to isolate cases of ordinary infectious diseases in hospital cannot but have a bad effect in fostering the view that these diseases are of little importance and that all children *must* have them. The arrangements for notification of infectious disease in the public elementary schools are imperfect, but in the absence of isolation provision all measures of this sort must necessarily be of less importance. The medical officer of health does not notify cases of infectious disease to school teachers; and the latter do not notify him of cases of suspicious illness among children attending school, as recommended in paragraph 9 of page 7 of the Joint Memorandum on Closure and Exclusion from School by the Medical Officers of the Local Government Board and the Board of Education. When the child appears to have recovered, the inspector of nuisances disinfects the room occupied by the patient, who is then allowed to return to school. I am informed that during 1910 nearly all the schools in the district have at one time or another been closed on account of prevalence of infectious disease among the scholars. Measles was made a notifiable disease in the rural district in 1891, but after ten years' trial this was discontinued. The number of cases notified was extremely large. In 1900, 1,503 attacks were notified, but under the conditions of administration existing in this rural district, no benefit was obtained from notification, although the cost was considerable.

It is difficult to account for the extremely unsatisfactory sanitary condition of this rural district. Other rural districts in the county with like features as to population and occupations of inhabitants, and with similar collections of dwellings urban in character are in a much superior sanitary condition. Throughout their existence



the council appear to have shown want of initiative, and to have left untouched many matters which needed their close attention. The consequences, especially as respects excrement disposal and sewerage, are lamentable. With respect to excrement disposal privies have been erected throughout the district which are quite unsuitable, inasmuch as they have fixed receptacles, the contents of which cannot be removed from the premises in most instances except by carrying them through the houses. Owing to absence of sewers houses have been largely built with soakaway cesspools, and consequently the ground beneath the dwellings is becoming saturated with filth, which may have injurious effects for some time after the premises have been properly sewered. Where parts of the district have been sewered this has mainly been done by private individuals.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS.

The chief need in this district is efficient sewerage for the more populous places, together with the provision of water-closets.

##### (1.) Sewerage.

The council should proceed with the work of sewerage all populous places in the district, and should dispose of the sewage in such a manner as to avoid the pollution of watercourses. Those places where most building is in progress should be dealt with first, so as to avoid the construction of a larger number of cesspools. All cesspools now under construction in parts of the district where sewerage is at present impracticable, should be made watertight, and the district council should undertake to empty them at regular and sufficiently frequent intervals.

##### (2.) Excrement and refuse disposal.

Pending the provision of a water-carriage system of sewerage, the rural district council should themselves undertake the scavenging of all populous places in the district, both the removal of excrement and refuse. There should be a scavenging department with an official in charge to devote his whole time to the work. Pending the provision of sewers and water-closets, in those parts of the district where privies are so situate that excrement cannot be removed from the premises without passing through the house, receptacles with covers should be employed for the filth so as to lessen the nuisance in the process of removal. The council should cause the whole of the accumulated house refuse on premises to be removed as soon as possible.

##### (3.) Hospital provision.

The council should provide an efficient hospital for the isolation of infectious diseases other than small-pox.

##### (4.) Dairies and cowsheds.

The condition of these should receive attention throughout the district.

(6.) The council should take the necessary steps to require streets to be properly made and provided with side walks.

S. W. WHEATON.







