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Top Ten Ways to Die in Victorian Britain

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By Imogen Gerard and Kelsie Root

If you lived in Leeds during the 19th century, how do you think you would have died? What disease, condition or accident would have been your cause of death? And, 100 to 200 years ago, what language would you have used to describe such illnesses or health conditions?

To help us imagine some answers to these questions, we can turn to the Leeds General Cemetery archive, held by Special Collections in the Brotherton Library. The collection includes the detailed burial records of the people interred at a cemetery which opened just before the start of the Victorian era, at a location which is now part of the University of Leeds campus (to learn more about the history of the cemetery, now known as St George's Field, see [here](#)). In 25 burial registers there are 97,000 entries spanning the period 1835 to 1969. For 82.6% of these entries, the deceased's cause of death has also been recorded. These causes of death provide us with a fascinating insight into what diseases were prevalent among those buried in this cemetery in Leeds during the 19th and 20th century, and how these diseases were described over time.

The [top ten causes of death](#) recorded in the Leeds General Cemetery burial records are as follows:

- Unknown
- Stillborn
- Bronchitis
- Consumption
- Convulsions
- Pneumonia
- Inflammation
- Diarrhoea
- Dropsy
- Natural Decay

This list of causes of death is striking for a number of reasons. You may have immediately noticed some unfamiliar words. The archaic medical terminology found in the burial records is a particular point of interest. This vocabulary allows us to see the differences between medical knowledge in the 19th to early 20th century, compared to modern medical knowledge.

You might associate the word 'consumption' with ideas of expenditure or eating. In this context it is actually an old term for tuberculosis or TB, used from the 18th to the early 20th century. The name 'consumption' arose from the idea that the body was being consumed as the sufferer wasted away. The disease is a bacterial infection, spread by coughs and sneezes, that most commonly affects the lungs leading to weight loss, fatigue and loss of appetite. Consumption was a leading cause of death in previously healthy adults in Britain in the 1800s. In the Leeds General Cemetery burial records, consumption is the most common cause of death in adults. While in the city of Leeds as a whole at the end of the 19th century, tuberculosis was the most fatal of all the infectious diseases and responsible for 11% of all deaths in Leeds. So as an adult living in Leeds during the 19th century, chances were high that you may die from TB, though you would probably have referred to it as 'consumption'!

The last two causes of death in the above list of the cemetery's top ten also have names which may seem bizarre to a modern reader. 'Dropsy' is the archaic term for 'oedema', a swelling under the skin which can be caused by a number of health condition including kidney disease, heart failure, liver disease, chronic lung disease, malnutrition and pregnancy. 'Natural decay' was the term used to express dying of old age during the 19th and early 20th century. So 'natural decay' is probably the most desirable death to be hoped for in the cemetery's top ten. Conversely, today 'old age' is not used as a sole cause of death on death certificates. A modern use of 'cause of death' is expected to be specific, beginning with an immediate and direct cause of death.

Our short analysis of these three archaic terms has already suggested some interesting differences between today and the time when these terms were commonly used, the 19th to early 20th century. We can see a different understanding of the way the human body works, and that a different set of priorities and expectations are at play in the burial registers' cause of death field. The most common cause of death entry within the burial registers - 'unknown' - underscores that the records were kept for administrative purposes primarily, perhaps placing less emphasis on the importance of cause of death. 'Unknown' indicates missing or illegible entries and appears most frequently towards the end of the cemetery's lifetime.

After 'unknown', the most common cause of death in the burial registers is stillbirth. Although it is distressing to consider, this leading cause of death reminds us of the extremely high infant mortality rate in Britain in the 19th and early 20th century. In Leeds during the period 1917 to 1927, 4.3% of all all births were stillborn. Stillbirths were so common at this time due to a number of factors including poor diet leading to malnutrition of the mother; infectious diseases passing from the mother to the baby; lack of access to healthcare during pregnancy and complications at birth. Sadly, even if a baby survived infancy, child mortality rates were still very high. Nearly half off all the people interred at St George's Field are aged 9 and under. This tragic fact is an important element in the makeup of the cemetery's burial population. In Leeds in the 19th century you'd have been lucky to make it to adulthood.

The burial registers are not the same as official death certificates, for which registered doctors were required to provide the cause of death after 1874. As such, these registers are full of oddities and mistakes. If you lived in Leeds in the 19th century, the informant of your death – likely to be a close relative - may have given a slightly strange or censored version of your cause of death to the cemetery's registrar. In many cases the informant seems to have described the circumstances of the death instead of the cause of death. For example, 'found dead in bed', 'hospital' and 'killed'. It is also likely that some of the causes of death in the registers are euphemisms. Only one person in the registers has the recorded cause of death 'syphilis'. People preferred to refer to this particular disease as 'general paralysis' in the cause of death section.

The causes of death recorded in the Leeds General Cemetery registers are rich and fruitful source of information. Being a direct result of the ways people live and practice medicine, causes of death act as a reflection of society. They evidence evolving language and developing medical terminology. For a fresh insight into life, death and disease in Leeds during the past couple hundred years, you can browse the recorded causes of death within the register's digitised index [here](#). Let us know if you find any particularly unusual causes of death in the comments section!

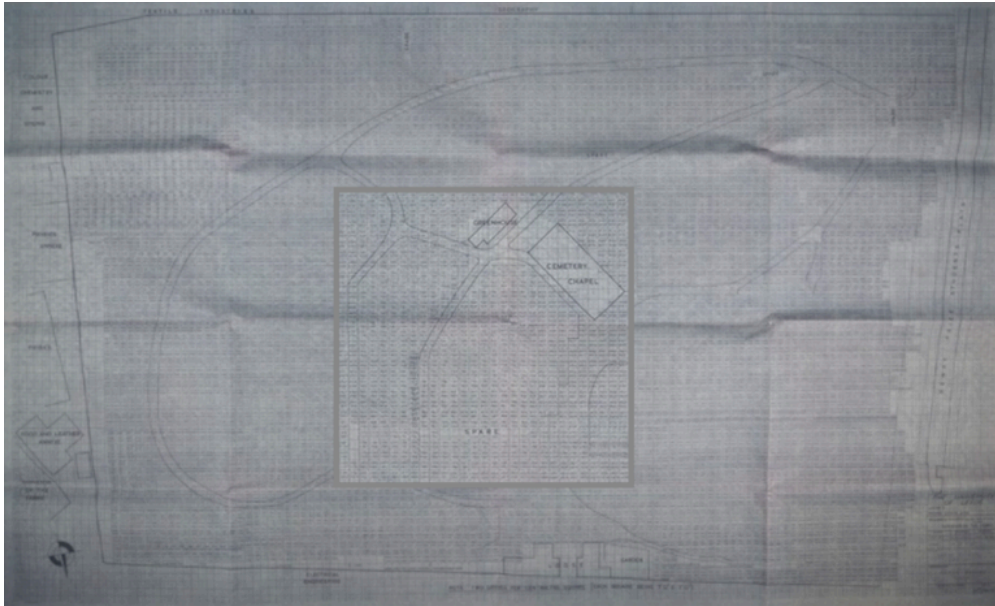


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