

The Oyster saga continued

In 1902, it was said that Emsworth oysters had caused the deaths of the Dean of Winchester and one other following a mayoral banquet through typhoid occasioned by a sewage system laid in the 1890s. All sewage in Emsworth was directed through this system, part discharged into the top of Dolphin Quay, which then flowed down the eastern side of Emsworth Harbour and part discharged at the bottom of South Street ... right into the centre of the oyster beds laid along the foreshore.

It was not until the beginning of WW1 that the sewage system was cleaned up when in 1914 a new sewage system was built for Emsworth in conjunction with Westbourne parish, with the main treatment plant at Thornham Lane at the top of Thorney Island, which meant that raw sewage was not then pumped straight in the harbour.

The finger of suspicion pointed at the industry again in early 1916 when, although no deaths were involved, the allegation that their consumption had put one of His Majesty's battleships, lying at anchor in Portsmouth Harbour, out of action in time of war was equally serious. This was one of the matters that a meeting of the Warblington Urban District Council had to discuss in January 1916. The fact was that the ship's complement of officers had been incapacitated due to having consumed suspect food with the allegation that Emsworth oysters were to blame!

Taking up the case for the trade was the Emsworth Dredgermen's Co-operative Society who, refusing to accept such culpability, wrote to the Medical Officer of Health but having not received a definitive reply appealed to Lord Selborne in his capacity as President of the Board of Agriculture & Fisheries. He stated that following a full investigation he had satisfied himself that the contamination did not come from any drainage pollution in the Emsworth Channel.

Emsworth oysters were exonerated but the enquiry by his Lordship may well have been influenced by the next item on the agenda. This related to Council expenditure and the desire, in time of war, to make savings. One member ventured to suggest that the Council dispense with paid professionals, one of whom was an Engineer employed at the sewage works investigating a leak!

References:

No. 11940 *The Evening News and Southern Daily Mail*, 12 January 1916, p3

'Uncovering the Past... Emsworth, Oysters and Men' by Linda Newell, Chapter 8, pp 66-72. Copies are available in the Museum.

Philip Magrath

Sylvia Courtnage