



Above: The Salop Infirmary in Shrewsbury

THE SILENT KILLER



*In his unparalleled **News From the Past** series, local newspaper archive sleuth and BBC Radio Shropshire producer **Richard Tisdale** digs up an uncomfortable history of the use of anaesthetics in Shrewsbury*

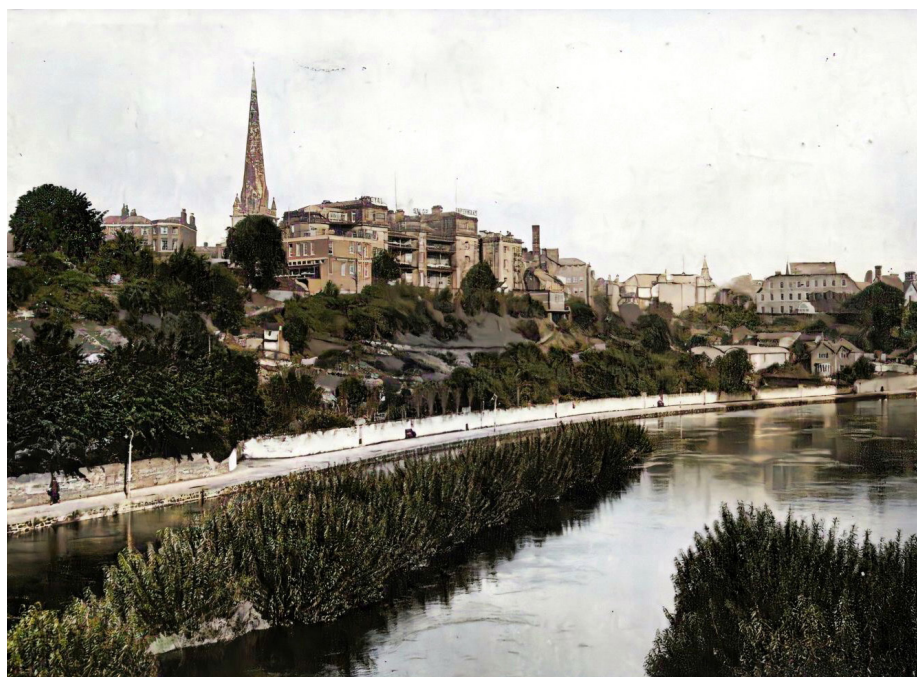
**NEWS
FROM
THE
PAST**

In December 1849 a Welsh woman Mary Jones from Craven Arms was lying on a bed in the operating theatre at Royal Salop Infirmary.

Mary, 38, was suffering from an eye infection that was so bad her surgeon W. J. Clement decided the only option was to remove the eyeball completely.

Just two years earlier, this would have proved an excruciating operation, but could now be carried out pain free, thanks to a new miracle, anaesthetic. However, this was one that carried its own deadly risk. Mary, wife of wheelwright Edward Jones, had come to Shrewsbury for medical help and saw Mr Clement on Tuesday, and with the eye degenerating so badly he decided it was best to operate as soon as possible and set the date for the next day at 1pm.

Scared and in great pain, she arrived at



ROYAL SALOP INFIRMARY FROM ENGLISH BRIDGE.



Superintendent Registrar's District *Shrewsbury*
 Registrar's District *Saint Mary Shrewsbury*
 18 44 DEATHS in the District of *Saint Mary Shrewsbury* in the County of *Salop*

No.	When Died.	Name and Surname.	Sex.	Age.	Rank or Profession.	Cause of Death.	Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.	When Registered.	Signature of Registrar.
2016	20th Decr 1847	Mary Jones	Female	38	Wife of Edward Jones	Apoplexy from Chloroform	Spencer Gordon Esq. Surgeon Shrewsbury	Twenty eighth of November 1847	Nich. Sims Registrar

Above: The death certificate for Mary Jones, 38, the first person in Shropshire to die after inhaling chloroform

“The patient stated that she felt as if she had been in the other world”

Below: Extracts from the Eddowe's Journal and General Advertiser for Shropshire from 1847 highlighting the use of chloroform in Shropshire

MARDOL HEAD, SHREWSBURY.

TEETH.

MR. H. M. JONES,
 SURGICAL AND MECHANICAL DENTIST,
 (ELDER BROTHER AND FORMERLY PARTNER OF THE LATE MR. GRENVILLE JONES.)

MAY be consulted daily, at his residence, Mardol Head, Shrewsbury, until further notice.
 Natural, Artificial, or Terro-Metallic Teeth fixed from one to a complete set, warranted to answer every purpose of mastication or articulation.
 H. M. J. has adopted the use of CHLOROFORM in all painful operations; and having been in practice for the last TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, he trusts will be a sufficient guarantee to those patrons who may honor him with their confidence.
TERMS STRICTLY MODERATE.

and the operation commenced. But very shortly she began to stir.

It was clear she wasn't "insensible" and a drachm more was added to the sponge for her to inhale for a few seconds.

Being supported by Mr Heathcote, the operation was about to continue, but suddenly she made a "peculiar" sound, and said something in Welsh, but it happened so fast they didn't understand. She stopped breathing. They tried to revive her but couldn't.

The inquest was held at the Crown Inn on Pride Hill where the cause of death was put down to "apoplexy caused by inhaling chloroform". It was as if she had been given "prussic acid" said Heathcote... cyanide!

Mary was the first person in Shrewsbury to die of this "subtle vapour", but she certainly wouldn't be the last.

The substance itself was first discovered in America in 1831 and used as a pesticide, but in November 1847, almost exactly two

Above: Inside a ward at The Salop Infirmary

years before it was used on Jones, Scottish Professor James Simpson demonstrated its powerful properties as an anaesthetic to a group of fellow medics.

Passing the bottle around he invited them all to inhale, and one by one they passed out, much to his delight, the medics coming in amazement.

Word spread and within a week or two it was being used in across the country, including here in Shropshire.

In fact it was first used at the Salop Infirmary on Tuesday, November 23, 1847 on an unnamed female patient, to remove her left breast.

"The patient, after a few minutes' inhalation of the Chloroform, fell under its influence, which did not appear to be in the least interrupted by the operation; and after it was concluded, and she was recalled to consciousness, upon being asked what she had felt, she stated that she felt as if she had been in the other world, but that the sensation had been by no means disagreeable or unpleasant.

"The medical men present were unanimous in opinion that the experiment was perfectly successful, and that the discovery was most valuable, and must entirely supersede the use of Ether."

It wasn't just surgeons using it. Dentists were quick on the uptake too.

Mr H.M. Jones of Mardol stuck adverts in the local papers telling his patrons, and everyone else, that he'd now adopted the use chloroform in all painful operations.



CONCERNS

It wasn't long though before concerns started being raised about its safety.

Even when Mary Jones died just two years after its introduction, the papers described her as "another victim to this subtle vapour".

However, the practice didn't stop; it seemed the benefits outweighed the risk in the minds of the medics and the patients. But over the years stories continued.

In 1871 painter and decorator David Rennie from Mardol had shocking abscesses on his legs.

The doctors at the infirmary wanted to operate but he was terrified, and the procedure kept being delayed.

However, he deteriorated to such an extent that doctors visited him at his home, and agreed to do the operation there.

He demanded something for the pain, and they gave him chloroform. He stopped breathing very soon, they attempted to resuscitate him; pulling his tongue out and dousing his chest in cold water.

He revived a little but stopped breathing again and died.

The inquest found the doctors did all they could and were praised for their efforts.

In 1915, after the sad death of a teenage



The former Royal Salop Infirmary site today – The Parade shops



The former Salop Infirmary site today from the English Bridge

LITANY OF DEATHS

1890 – the Landlord of the Fox Inn at Bayston Hill, Mr Langford, died while undergoing treatment on a tumour in the throat.

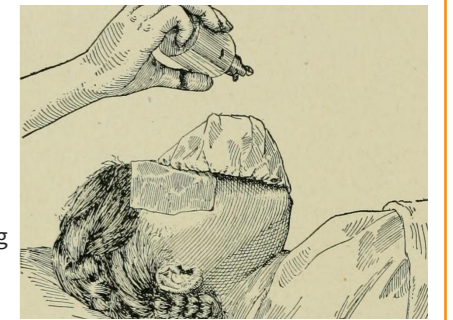
1895 – a famous singer and comedian Mr T F Perks, 40, went to the Salop infirmary for an operation. He had always dreaded chloroform but was in so much pain he agreed to the procedure. He died soon after the chloroform was administered. There was a large outpouring of grief in the town.

1900 – 13-year-old Victor Pritchard, a healthy boy, died while having his tonsils out.

1905 – Mary Ethel Ashley, aged 22, died while having some of her bottom teeth taken out.

1910 – 28-year-old Charles Henry Williams from Coton Hill, had already had three operations on an injured leg, he didn't survive the fourth one. The surgeon who'd only been working there a few months went on to have a distinguished career in the army.

1914 – an eight-year-old girl from Wem, Alice Margaret Ridgeway, died at a nursing home in Shrewsbury while undergoing an operation on her adenoids.



boy in Market Drayton, doctors told the inquest that chloroform was still the best for of anaesthetic for children.

Chloroform remained popular into the 1920s until eventually other alternatives were found.

A study in the 1930s revealed the death rate from chloroform in operations was 1:3000.

Modern medicine has come on leaps

and bounds, and although no surgery is without risks, going for an operation is no longer as perilous as it once was.

However, it is easy to understand the dilemma facing chloroform's early victims: suffering from great pain, unable to work, facing poverty and death, the only hope being a risky, but pain free operation.

What would you do?