The old cliché that children made their own fun in those days seems particularly appropriate to Coley, but then Coley, with its steep hills and little alleyways, its rivers and its fields, and its open community was a natural playground. A frequent comment was that these people never really remembered being bored; in fact there were not enough hours in the day:

> Our mums would come out and call us and we used to say 'just another ten minutes, just another few minutes' then our dads used to call and we knew we had to go in then.

Children of Coley (c. 1910).

2 ~ *Health, Medicine, Illness and Death*

When one looks more closely at, for instance, the children in the two lowest classes it is noticed that for many of them the home conditions must be adverse both physically and mentally. In one of these classes the majority of the children were either anaemic in appearance or undersized, or had other evidence of poor physical condition . . .

Inspector's Report: Coley School, October 1923.

Growing up in the poorer districts of any town in the early years of this century was a hazardous business, and Coley was no exception.

Being born and surviving infancy was the first hurdle; the infant mortality rate in 1900 was 140 deaths for every 1000 births. Since families of nine or ten children were still quite common in Coley at this time, and the infant mortality rate obviously higher the poorer you were, it would seem that most families in this area could expect to lose at least one baby in the family in the opening years of this century.

Roughly a quarter of our sample remembered stillbirths or infants dying in the family, these were mainly the older interviewees from the worst housing. The most dramatic example was a family of sixteen births where only eleven survived. It is quite possible that others lost siblings, but their parents didn't talk about it. There was precious little ceremony to mark the passing of some of these children.

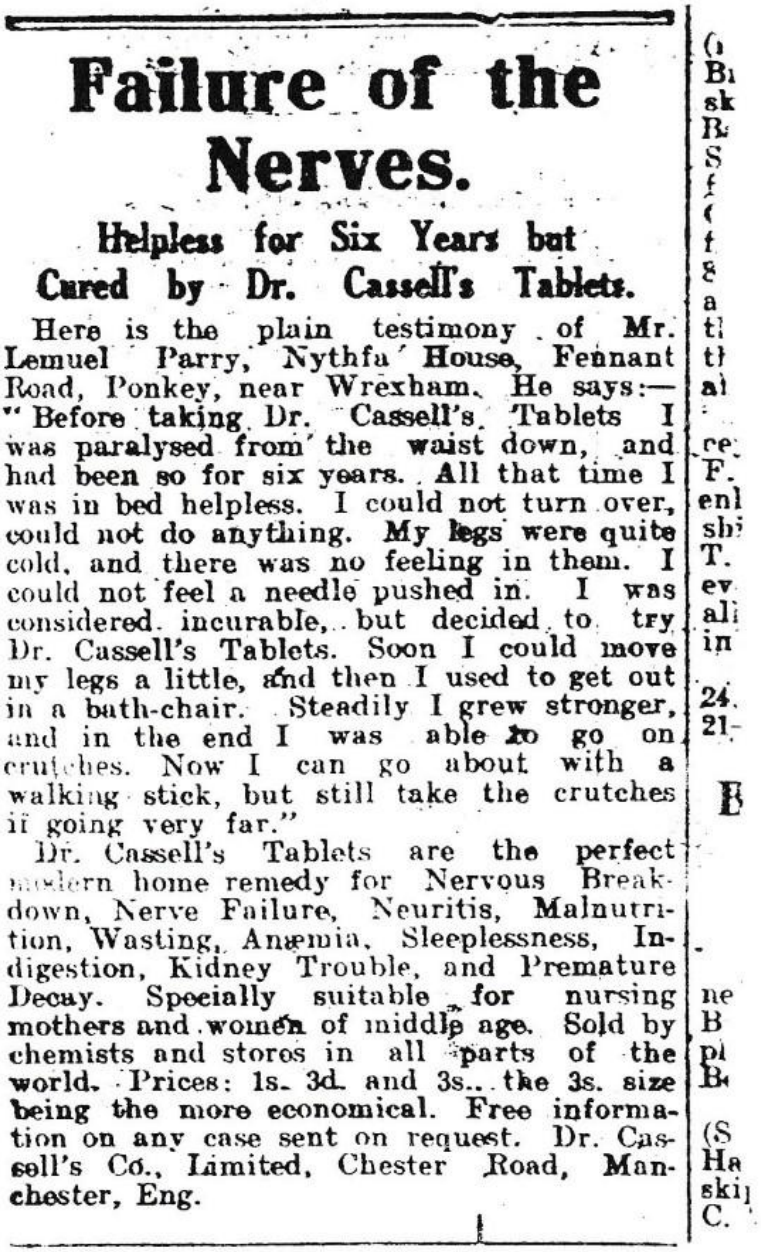
Mrs S My own father, of the two we had die in our family, he . . . made the coffin for this little baby and dressed it and put it in the coffin and strapped it on the back of his bike and took it up to the Henley Road Cemetery . . . mum had the number of it . . . say there was an open grave that day they dropped that down but you have the number of that grave.

This particular baby was a breech delivery, at home with nobody but a local woman to help. As a rule in the early years most women had a local experienced woman to help them. Local authorities were not obliged to provide midwives until 1936, although there was some provision before then and a few women did have midwives or nurses to attend before that date. All births were at home.

Although it has been difficult to gather much direct evidence on this in Coley, studies done elsewhere in the country at this time (1900–1920)

show that women would usually get the worst of the food, even while pregnant and women were actually advised in some cases to starve themselves in the last month of pregnancy to make the baby smaller and hence the birth easier. Mothers would be back on their feet after a day or so as families could not afford the luxury of them lying in, although neighbours and relatives would often help out. The other children in the family seem almost to have been taken by surprise by a birth:

> *Mr M* I remember the last . . . I saw her in the garden, before I went to school lunchtime, hanging up the clothes and when I got back from school . . . in the afternoon she was in bed with the baby . . . I can see our Mum



Failure of the Nerves.

Helpless for Six Years but Cured by Dr. Cassell's Tablets.

Here is the plain testimony of Mr. Lemuel Parry, Nythfa House, Fennant Road, Ponkey, near Wrexham. He says:—"Before taking Dr. Cassell's Tablets I was paralysed from the waist down, and had been so for six years. All that time I was in bed helpless. I could not turn over, could not do anything. My legs were quite cold, and there was no feeling in them. I could not feel a needle pushed in. I was considered incurable, but decided to try Dr. Cassell's Tablets. Soon I could move my legs a little, and then I used to get out in a bath-chair. Steadily I grew stronger, and in the end I was able to go on crutches. Now I can go about with a walking stick, but still take the crutches if going very far."

Dr. Cassell's Tablets are the perfect modern home remedy for Nervous Breakdown, Nerve Failure, Neuritis, Malnutrition, Wasting, Anæmia, Sleeplessness, Indigestion, Kidney Trouble, and Premature Decay. Specially suitable for nursing mothers and women of middle age. Sold by chemists and stores in all parts of the world. Prices: 1s. 3d. and 3s., the 3s. size being the more economical. Free information on any case sent on request. Dr. Cassell's Co., Limited, Chester Road, Manchester, Eng.

Advertisement from Berkshire Chronicle (1920).

It does not in fact reopen until 25 November. The epidemic appeared again in February 1919, but this time did not close the school. Mrs N remembers:

> The only thing I can remember is 1919, and that's when they had the 'flu epidemic after the war. Well my father was very ill with influenza and I had it. I had a bed up in the corner and he had the other bed. And I can remember there was a military funeral was going to come into the church and . . . I could hear this band coming along you see, playing the Dead March, and I got out of bed to look and the next thing I know I'm on the floor in a dead faint. And I can remember my mother saying 'George, I'm sure she's dead, I'm sure she's dead. Get the doctor, I'm sure she's dead'.

The number of deaths from childhood illnesses declined rapidly up until the Second World War, deaths from measles declining most rapidly to 217 per million under fifteen year olds in 1938. Diphtheria, however, does not seem to have declined at anywhere near the rate of the others and was the most deadly childhood disease of all by 1938; the school records two serious outbreaks that year and two deaths of pupils over that winter.

> *Mr A* I can remember four or five dying of diphtheria, we had just before the war, a diphtheria epidemic.
> *Mrs S* Yes I remember that. And when whoever it was died, they used to send somebody along from the council and they used to fumigate the house all out, didn't they, spraying it and things.

Amongst the general population though, the disease responsible for more deaths than all the others put together in the first half of this century was tuberculosis, known as TB or consumption. In 1910 alone, 51,000 people died of the disease, and although this had almost halved to 27,000 by 1940, it was still a substantial killer. Mrs N remembers her 28 year-old sister.

> *Mrs C* She died of what they used to call consumption.
> *Mrs N* That's right yes, TB.
> *Int* And was that before the Second World War?
> *Mrs N* That was yes . . . I used to go and see her when she was at home. She used to come in here for a day and she used to have a terrible cough.

The only 'cure' of the time was rest, sunlight and fresh air, as is reported in a contemporary encyclopedia, *The Book of the Home*, vol. iv, p. 93

> *Consumption.* – Much may be done to limit the spread of this scourge of the human race. The health of those at all predisposed to the disease should be maintained at the highest level possible. They should spend all available time out-of-doors, and gradually accustom themselves to sleeping with bedroom windows open as well in the winter as in the summer. In the case of children, gymnastic training should be directed to strengthen the respiratory muscles and to increase the chest capacity.

Sunlight and fresh air, however, were not things to be found in abundance in the slum areas of Coley.

Mrs S It used to be terrible, didn't it; they used to have them out in the garden, didn't they?
Int Did they? What, to sleep?
Mrs E Yes, yes. They used to have a shed at the bottom of the garden, most people, didn't they? If they really had TB.

But once caught, there was really no reliable cure:

Mr G Yes it was always fatal, TB was.
Mr K Nine times out of ten I think. You see our mothers used to whisper in those days 'consumption' she used to say then. It was always taboo for some reason or other.

The disease continued to cast its shadow long after it had declined as a real threat.

Mrs R (talking of the late fifties) (mum) always used to say to us 'Now look, if you get tired you'll end up with TB'. That was always her fear when we was teenagers because it used to happen to them you know.

The government had been so concerned about the physical state of the recruits for the Boer War that they set up the Interdepartmental Committee on the Health and Physique of the Population. As a result of its recommendations several measures were passed. One was the Education (Provision of Meals) Act of 1906. In 1905 the Reading Education Committee made enquiries about seriously under-fed pupils and Coley School returned six names, their addresses read like a catalogue of the slums: Castle Hill Place, Rose Court, Bosier Square, Commercial Hall, Box Court and Somerset Place. On 12 December 1905 free breakfasts were provided for needy pupils, served at The British Workmen's Hall six days a week. Ninety children qualified for this out of 180. These were however discontinued in 1909. More permanently the Southampton Street Feeding Centre was opened in 1906 in response to government legislation. This provided free school meals for needy Reading children; about 30–40 Coley children used to attend at this time. There can be little doubt that access to free school meals from this time on had a major influence on the general health of children from poor homes, affecting not only their weight and height but also their ability to resist disease.

Another measure was the Public Health Amendment Act of 1907 which set up the School Medical Service and the first medicals were held at Coley School in 1908. From then on regular medical and dental examinations of the children took place, a certain Dr Taylor doing the inspections for many years. There were also the more routine 'Nitty Nora' inspections for head lice. Children who attended the Southampton Street Feeding Centre had their weight and height closely monitored.

Beyond this, medical care was more problematic. From 1913 most workers who paid their stamps were entitled to some sort of free medical care and by 1928 this had extended to 15 million workers nationwide.