

**The
Wychwoods
Local History Society**



A Determined Emigrant – from *WLHS Journal Vol 11*

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The annual report of the Medical Officer of Health for Oxfordshire in 1873 describes an outbreak of fever in Ascott under Wychwood following a tragic and abortive attempt to emigrate to America:

‘In November a limited outbreak of typhoid fever occurred at Ascot-under-Wychwood under very remarkable circumstances. A man, named Eli Pratley, who had previously emigrated to America, having there lost his wife, returned with his three children, all in very wretched condition, and took up his abode in his mother's house at Ascot on November 20, bringing with him several boxes containing clothes and bedding, many of them old and filthy. The remaining inhabitant of the house, viz. his brother, was attacked with typhoid fever on November 29, and his mother (who died of it) on the following day. Eli Pratley, on being questioned, at once said that his wife had died of typhoid fever. The only other case in the neighbourhood occurred on December 5, in the person of Pratley's married sister, who had been up to the house and taken away some of the dirty things to wash. It was suggested that the brother had taken the fever at another place (Foden's Hill), where he had been to work after Pratley's return; but further enquiry quite negated that idea; for it appeared that he did not go to Foden's Hill until the 24th, and that though there had been fever in the house in July last, yet the house had changed tenants in the interval, and there had been no recurrence of fever amongst the new inhabitants. Moreover, in this case the mother must be supposed to have caught the fever from the son, and she was, as we have seen, attacked the very next day. There can, I think, be no reasonable doubt that the source of infection in this case was in the clothes and bedding brought by Pratley from America’.

However Typhus, a louse-borne infection also known as army-, camp-, famine-, ship- or trench-fever, and recognised as a 'barometer of human misery', is a much more likely diagnosis than typhoid which is usually spread by human faeces or urine. Typhoid bacilli would die rapidly on contaminated clothing, whereas Typhus rickettsiae could survive for several months in the dried faeces of the louse and are highly infectious if inhaled. It was not until early this century that microbiological tests made a differential diagnosis definite so that confusion between these infections is understandable.

Between 1821 and 1871 over six million people emigrated from the United Kingdom, nearly 90% going to North America. Pratley and his family probably travelled from Oxfordshire to Liverpool and sailed from thence to New York. Typhus was endemic in the overcrowded cities of the eastern seaboard of America and the family must have been infected there.

Eli's father was an Ascott 'woodman' whose first wife had died in childbirth forty years earlier. He had married again so that Eli had a half-brother and a half-sister as well as five full brothers and two sisters. Eli's mother died of typhus in December 1873, and his young son (another Eli) in February 1874. Apart from the married sister the rest of the family, of vigorous country stock, seem to have escaped the infection.

In the early 1870s the government of under-populated New Zealand contacted the newly-formed National Agricultural Labourers' Union, which had tried with moderate success to improve wages but which was willing to promote emigration as an alternative. In 1873 New Zealand offered free passages for suitable emigrants. There was an immediate response, and in February 1874 Eli Pratley's half-brother John's son Philip (who was only a year younger than Eli) left for New Zealand with his wife and three children. Eli himself re-married on 16 May 1874 and emigrated for the second time in September. He too went to New Zealand with his new wife and presumably one daughter, now five years old. On the same ship sailed his brother Fredrick with his wife Mary Ann (who had been an Ascott Martyr in 1873), and six children. Initially both men worked as farmhands in Temuka, South Island, about 85 miles south-west of Christchurch, but after about eight years they jointly leased 128 acres. Later they took two separate farms, Eli working a similar acreage that he first leased and then bought at Temuka, while Fredrick leased 400 acres at Winchester nearby. Both families prospered. Fredrick's wife Mary Ann died in New Zealand and he re-married an Elizabeth Simmons from Oxfordshire in 1895.

‘Eli fathered ten sons and a daughter. By the close of the century he had a thriving farm and a large family, a very different situation from that of the wretched failed emigrant of twenty-seven years previously with his 'old and filthy clothes’.