Getting Rid of the Stink In Albrighton

Albrighton in the nineteenth century was a small town which was essentially stagnant in population terms despite the arrival of the railway. This meant:

(a) It did not have the sanitary problems of industrial towns Wolverhampton, a market, transport hub like Shrewsbury or smaller industrial or mining towns like Madeley, Oakengates on very old towns like Bridgnorth etc
(b) The houses in Albrighton were also said to be spread out
(c) But this also meant that sanitary improvements were slow
(d) There was still a lot of water borne and respiratory infectious diseases

The population of Albrighton was as below. [Data from *Vision of Britain* website]

	People		People
1801	901	1881	1,179
1811	911	1891	1,147
1821	968	1901	1,147
1831	1054	1911	1,134
1841	1058	1921	1,076
1851	1,141	1931	1,230
1861	1,156	1951	2,806
1871	1,179	1961	3,762

The number of houses increased but before the first world war were less than 300.

Some Vital Statistics for 1902 of births and deaths per 1000 population or 1000 live births for Infant Mortality

	Birth Rate	Death Rate	Infant Mortality Rate
Shifnal (including Albrighton)	26.0	12.1	73.9
Shrewsbury	25.8	16.0	142
Oakengates	35.2	15.1	101
Wellington	28.3	15.1	72.4
Bridgnorth	24.1	18.5	150.7

Source: ***Report of the County Medical Officer of Health of the Vital Statistics and Sanitary Condition of Shropshire during 1902***, 1903

The Condition of Albrighton's Streets

'Much improvement has of late years been made in the town by the draining of the streets which were formally very inconvenient and offensive from puddles of stagnant water being suffered to remain there. A stone causeway has been

laid from the church to the eastern extremity of the town, protected by. A handsome oak railing painted white, which gives the town an air of neatness and convenience very impressive to a stranger, and there are few that would hesitate to pronounce it a pleasant village, [BUT] and perhaps as few would dignify it with the title of Borough and Market Towns did not the old market cross remind them of its pretensions'

'the roads about the town are kept in excellent repair by the care and attention of Mr. Edward Owen, an opulent grazier and butcher who lives in a venerable half- timbered house near the Market Cross, who has for several years exercised the office of surveyor of the roads and seems to take a great interest in the improvement of the town....'

This is from Blakeway's history written in the 1800s but not published until 1899.

Rev J.Blakeway, 'History of Albrighton near Shifnal' ***Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*** , Ser. 2, Vol. 11 1899, p. 33

A plus from the health side would have been the lack of a big market with animals. The were occasional fairs to which more animals would be bought but these were infrequent.

Albrighton Water IN – Sewage OUT

1. The town had to be connected with a main – water or sewage.
2. The houses then had to be connected to the main

Both involved cost.

House owners [most housing was rented] could choose to do so or they could be forced to do so because their properties were seen as nuisances.

In the case of Albrighton a better water supply came ahead of a better sewage system

Water Supply

Traditionally water came from pools, streams and wells and pumps. These wells were not deep and said to collect 'surface water' i.e. not well filtered. Albrighton would get its clean water supply at the end of the nineteenth century as an off shot of the attempt to supply Wolverhampton.

The big problem in the West Midlands conurbation was water. This began to be resolved with the laying of pipes from Wales for Birmingham from the Elan Valley reservoirs in Wales. Wolverhampton however was not part of this system. The Wolverhampton Water Company wanted to supply the town and feared the cost of bringing water from afar. It tried sinking wells at Tettenhall but they could supply not enough water.

Water was taken from Cosford brook and then a deep bore was made at Cosford in 1857 and a pumping station built with it and extended in 1889. [It is now a grade II listed building]

> 'In 1857 the Water Works which supply Wolverhampton were established at Cosford, in this parish. The engines were started on the 15th October. The building has a handsome frontage in a dip on the great Holyhead road, and the chimney shaft is a conspicuous object for miles round. The water is derived from a well of 140ft, and a deep boring of 1000 ft. in the new red sandstone. There are today five engines of 750 horsepower capable of pumping 25,000,000 gallons per week'. Rev. Thomas Priestley, 'Notes on Albrighton in the 19th century,' ***Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*** , Ser. 2, Vol. 11 1899, p. 150.

In the event the mixing of the water from the brook and the pool and the artesian well proved a problem because the brook was polluted by sewage and filtration was all but non-existent. This issue was raised in 1890 as part of a Parliamentary Select Committee in respect of a Water Bill to improve the supply of water to Bilston which also took Cosford water. (*Birmingham Daily Post* May 14 1890)

> 'In reply to Sir Wilfred Lawson, he said the Cosford Brook water was dangerous to health. – Dr.Thursfield, who practices as a sanitary specialist, said he had visited the Cosford pumping station on April 24, and found the engineer pumping one million gallons from the book and two million gallons from the artesian well. He had taken samples of the brook, the well, and the mixed water. He found the water supplied to Wolverhampton and Bilston without any filtration, being simply passed through wire gauze to remove weeds and gross impurity. Water which passed over arable land and was dangerous without filtration. He found that the sewage of nearly 100 people drained directly into the brook, and the sewage of nearly 200 people drained directly into it. – Cross examined: Do you believe in germs? That is a question that can be discussed with end. It can be depended on to a large extent but not always. Re-examined: But here there is no filtration whatever'

The main passed Albrighton by so this was of no help in the short run. Indeed it may have made the supply of water harder in Albrighton through its negative effect on some wells. But this is not clear and would have depended on the geology. [NB in 1891 the pipe burst at Bonningale causing flooding. *Birmingham Daily Post*, Feb 17 1891]

But in the longer run Albrighton was connected to this water supply. It happened in 1895 – so almost 40 years on – by a connection to the Wolverhampton main. .

The houses then needed to be connected to the local mains supply. This took time but it was said in 1925 that 'nearly every house in Albrighton is supplied from the Wolverhampton main from Cosford Water works' Shifnal and Blymhill Rural District, *Annual Report for the Medical Office of Health for 1925*, 1926? p. 4

At first the quality of the water [though much, much safer from infection] was not always consistent but by 1932 it was said that 'The supply to Albrighton from Cosford showed considerable improvement during the year, the quality and appearance being unfirmly good.' ***Annual Report of the [Shropshire] County Medical Officer of Health 1932,*** Shrewsbury, 1933

Sewage

Privies and scavenging

Apart from what was deposited in the streets by animals (and humans) human waste would have been collected in outside privies or water closets whose contents then likely went to cess pits. When mixed with water the waste would seep into the ground. In a town this might also mean seep into other houses. This would have been less of a problem in Albrighton but it would seep into the water course and perhaps pollute wells.

Often the waste would simply accumulate. Scavengers were paid to remove waste of all kinds including human waste. These might be employed by a council or privately. It would be interesting to know if they were used in Albrighton.

A sewage system

This was the reverse of the water problem. The problem was how to get rid of waste water and waste excrement. Houses had to be connected to a main sewer and then the waste taken somewhere for treatment – usually a local sewage farm. It took time to work out how to deal with waste water and sewage and develop the amazing anaerobic systems

In his 1902 report the Shropshire County Medical Officer of Health noted (on the basis of the report for Shifnal) said that 'the sewerage of Albrighton was still under consideration' ***Report of the County Medical Officer of Health of the Vital Statistics and Sanitary Condition of Shropshire during 1902***, 1903 p. 63.

But a sewage system was gradually put in with a treatment plant and houses connected. The 1925 report said that "at Albrighton all the houses are connected, and the works are producing a very satisfactory effluent. Six connections were made during the year'. Shifnal and Blymhill Rural District, *Annual Report for the Medical Office of Health for 1925*, 1926? p. 4

However, as Albrighton's population grew in the twentieth century sewage facilities had to be extended. There was talk of this before 1939 but action was delayed by World War 2 and it became more important as the town grew after 1945.