



THE [Scally family](#) grave in the Cromwell cemetery tells the tragic story of a [family](#) decimated by an outbreak of typhoid.

Five children and their 29 year-old mother all died in the space of 13 months.

Finding evidence of epidemics in cemeteries is not easy. In only a few cases is the cause of death inscribed on the tombstone and this is almost always for an accidental death, such as a drowning, shipwreck, mining cave-in, explosion, fall from a horse, or railway accident. The cause of death being disease was, at best, intermittently listed in burial records kept by cemetery authorities but such records are now rarely found. Cromwell Old Cemetery, and Waitati Cemetery did keep such records and in both cases there is evidence of epidemics.

Headstones showing more than one [family](#) member has died within a very short space of time, possibly even on the same day, is usually evidence of an epidemic, which will have affected a large number of people in a community.

The Mitchell [family](#) memorial in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery is one of those showing multiple deaths in a short time. Two young children who died about the same time feature on the adjacent Hendry and Turner [family](#) headstones.

Mothers dreaded the outbreak of infectious diseases. [Families](#) were devastated by diseases that just over a century later we take very lightly, due to advances in medicine and public health. Nevertheless these diseases are still prevalent in many third-world countries.

The Dawson [family](#) in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery also experienced deaths in an epidemic.

The burial records reveal that in this plot lie Hannah and Benjamin Dawson, of Ravensbourne, and four of their children.

The ages of the children or their parents were not recorded but we can see from the records that all four children died within the space of two and a-half weeks.

A search of the Papers Past website reveals that a measles epidemic was prevalent and that many children died.

Between February and April 1874, 110 people of Cromwell's total population of 376 suffered from typhoid or enteric fever — this was 31% of the population.

Prior to immunisation, diphtheria was a major scourge. There was an epidemic in Dunedin in early 1890 that occurred at the same time as the opening of the Dunedin Exhibition. An article in the Tuapeka Times accused the Dunedin newspapers of keeping the news of an epidemic very quiet in order to continue to encourage country people to attend the Dunedin Exhibition. There may be some truth in the claims, as information about this outbreak is very hard to find.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries

Conservation Trust of New Zealand

from information on its website

[www.cemeteries.org.nz](http://www.cemeteries.org.nz)