

CREMATION:—IN ENGLAND AND JAPAN.

A T a lengthy discussion on the disposal of the dead, in the section in Public Medicine at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association, in July last (reported in Brit. Med. Jour. Sept. 19th), Sir Spencer Wells, F. R. C. S., opened the discussion in an exhaustive paper. He said: It is eleven years since I brought the subject of the disposal of the dead before the members of the British Medical Association by a paper on Cremation or Burial? at the meeting at Cambridge in 1880. Six years before that Sir Henry Thompson's articles in the Contemporary Review (in 1874) had exposed the increasing evils of our prevailing mode of burial in the earth, and had drawn attention to the advantages of cremation. One of the first effects of these articles was the formation of the Cremation Society of England. Mr. Ernest Hart was one of the original members of this society. So was another member of our association, who was cremated at Woking only a fortnight ago. He, Mr. Ernest Hart, Sir H. H. Thompson, and I were the medical members of the council of the society, and we three have remained on it until now. In 1880, although we had bought land and erected a crematorium at Woking, we had been compelled, in order to avoid a prohibitory Act of Parliament, to promise that we would not burn a human body until the legality of cremation had been established in Parliament or judicially. As soon as it was established—by Mr. Justice Stephen's charge at Cardiff in 1884—the council made known their intention to devote their crematorium to the use of the public, provided certain regulations or safeguards against the possible destruction of a body which may have contained traces of poison or afforded evidence of injury were observed. But it was not until March, 1885—only six years ago—that the first human body was burned at Woking. Two others in the same year, 10 in 1886, 13 in 1887, 28 in 1888, 46 in 1889, and 54 in 1890, give some idea of the progress of

the practice. This year, up to the end of June—seven months—there have been 60 cremations, bringing up the total to 214. Some have thought this progress slow; but to my mind it is faster than any of us hoped ten years ago. The practice was opposed by the Government. Many thought it was illegal. It was opposed by medico-legal objections which deserved the careful answers they received. It was met by religious scruples, which were also answered; by the difficulty of establishing a new—or, rather, of reviving an old—custom; and by widespread and powerful sentiment. With all these obstacles to overcome, I can not think our progress has been slow.... Some of the dangers of church-yards and cemeteries are known, but perhaps not acknowledged sufficiently. I do not allude further to them now; I prefer to direct your attention to the proposition that the efforts to abolish zymotic diseases are frustrated by the burial in the earth of the bodies of those who have been killed by the specific microbes of scarlatina, diphtheria, and other infective diseases. In 1880, I gave some account of Pasteur's researches on the part earth-worms play in bringing up to the surface of the soil the specific microbes from the bodies of animals buried several feet deep.

In Darwin's paper, read at the Geological Society of London, in 1837, he proved that in old pasture land every particle of the superficial layer of earth overlying different kinds of subsoil has passed through the intestines of earth-worms. The worms swallow earthy matter, and after separating the digestible or serviceable portion, they eject the remainder in little coils or heaps at the mouth of their burrows. In dry weather the worm descends to a considerable depth, and brings up to the surface the particles which it ejects. This agency of earth-worms is not so trivial as it might appear. By observation in different fields, Mr. Darwin proved in one case that a depth of more than three inches of this worm mold had been accumulated in fifteen years,