

Smallpox

Introduction

Smallpox was a frequent killer in the Victorian era. Survivors were often left scarred and/or blinded, and 30% of those who contracted it died. In the late 18th century Edward Jenner proved the principles of vaccination against smallpox. Such was the state of medical science at the time that the material used for the vaccination was either a lymph from an infected animal, or from children actually suffering from smallpox. Some parents objected to having

their children vaccinated on religious grounds, while others felt that smallpox vaccination caused more illness than it prevented. Despite the risk to life of non-vaccination, many people were opposed to the concept and it was not until the middle of the 19th century that the government passed laws that made vaccination compulsory. People in Malton had something to say about this!

Legislation

Smallpox was a prevalent disease throughout the Victorian era but despite government attempts to encourage parents to have their children vaccinated the uptake was low. After a particularly bad epidemic an Act was passed in 1853 making vaccination compulsory for all children born after 1st August 1853. At the point of registration of the birth, the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages was required to inform the parents of the vaccination requirement. Medical Practitioners who vaccinated children were required to send a certificate in each case to the Registrar of Births, Death and Marriages. The penalty for non-vaccination within 3 months of the birth was £1. Many people however still did not share the enthusiasm for vaccination and declined to have their children vaccinated, preferring to pay the fine in respect of each unvaccinated child. In 1867 more legislation removed this 'escape route' and the

Boards of Guardians (which looked after health and some other matters in each area) had to prosecute parents who did not have their children vaccinated. In 1871 further legislation required local boards of health to appoint Vaccination Officers and confirmed that vaccination was compulsory. Any unpaid fines would lead to imprisonment or to the seizure and sale of the parent's possessions. The process would then be repeated until the person complied. This 1871 legislation probably sparked the protests in Malton.

The Vaccination Act of 1898 allowed parents to register their conscientious objection to vaccination. The Yorkshire Evening Post of Monday September 19th 1898 reports that 'The Malton Guardians have resolved, in consequence of the passing of the Vaccination Act, to give up the vaccination stations in the Union.'

Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Society

The strength of feeling against vaccination appears to have been high in Malton. An Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Society was formed (1874) in the town, an initial activity being sending the Poor Law Guardians a pamphlet asking them to 'use their influence in trying to stay those prosecutions which the memorialists think an infringement of their liberty.' [1] Little seems to have been reported

about the conduct of these meetings and their propaganda efforts.

In May 1874, at Malton Petty Sessions, the vaccination officer of the Malton Union charged William Cataneo, fancy goods dealer, Thomas Read, iron-founder and millwright, John Simpson, tailor, and Thomas Nendick, tailor, with refusing to comply

with the provisions of the Vaccination Act. All four defendants urged conscientious objections against obeying the law. The Bench said the law must be enforced, and ordered each to pay 9s fine and costs. [2]

A further response to the several prosecutions instituted by the Board of Guardians was a letter being '... sent to one of the local magistrates, in which the writer threatens to take his life if he

convicts in any further prosecution of non-vaccination' [3]

At a public meeting held in the Spittle-street school on Tuesday, 27 March 1877, a Malton branch of the AntiVaccination League was formed. Membership was 1s. Mr. J. Appleby was appointed president and Mr. Edwin Hall (photographer), secretary [4].

The Vaccination Question Extraordinary Proceedings at Malton

Transcribed from The Malton Gazette, Saturday, July 8, 1876

Some little excitement was caused in Malton on Tuesday, by the action of our local police in putting into force distress warrants issued against two respectable tradesmen of the borough, who had refused to pay fines inflicted upon them by the magistrates for non-vaccination of their children. As our readers well-know, there is a large and increasing number of anti-vaccinators in the borough, and these, following the example of their brethren in some other towns, seem to have determined to offer practical opposition to the so-called "despotic vaccination law", hence when four of their number were fined by the local bench some weeks ago for neglecting to vaccinate their children, they firmly refused to pay the fines inflicted 4s. and 7s. costs in each case. The magistrates therefore ordered distrains upon their goods and chattels, and last week the police visited the house of Mr. Richard Reed, ironfounder, one of the defendants,

and "took into custody" a clock and a large mirror. At Mr. William Blanchard's (butcher), a second defendant, they seized a saddle, and on seeking to put into force the third warrant against Mr. Francis Rawling, cordwainer, they found that he had duly made over all his goods to a friend, and that they would have to take him in propeia persona if they wanted anything. The fourth defendant, Mr. Wm. Mennell, saddler, paid his fine and costs.

Having made the seizure, the police prepared for the sale of goods, and small hand-bills announcing the same were issued last Saturday stating they would be sold "under a warrant of distress for non-vaccination." Matters remained quiet until the following Tuesday – the day of the sale – when the anti-vaccinationists put out the following manifesto and also sent the bellman round to "cry" the sale:-

THE TYRANNICAL VACCINATION LAWS

Notice is hereby given, that the people of Malton will have an opportunity of seeing the above despotic law th

put in force in the Market Place, on Tuesday, July 4, 1876, at 12 o'clock, at which time and place the household goods and effects of several respectable inhabitants will be sold under magistrates' warrant, for refusing to pollute the blood of their children with diseased matter originally from the greasy heel of the horse. (x Dr. Jenner's work on Vaccination), and one of our Townsmen is expected to be committed to prison.

Fellow townsmen: How much longer is this Tyrannous Persecution to continue? and how many more times are the same persons to be summoned and placed in the felon's dock because they cannot comply with this iniquitous law?

Of course this was the means of drawing together a large company, and there were several hundreds of persons in the Cattle Market, near Mr. Boulton's office door, where the sale was to be held. As soon as the police appeared with the goods, and the

auctioneer attempted to speak, the crowd set up such a "boo-ing" and groaning that for some time nothing could be heard. Mr. Boulton all the time held in his hand a sheet of paper he had just before received from Mr. Thomas Read, and on telling

them it was “from their own party,” the noisy ones so far subdued their cries as to let the auctioneer read the following:-

The Members of the Malton Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Society are desirous of informing the public that, in accordance with a resolution passed last night, whatever may be their feelings respecting the Compulsory Vaccination Law they are most anxious that the proceedings of to-day should be witnessed in a quiet and decorous manner, without any attempt at violence to persons or property; that in their estimation, neither the police nor auctioneer are to blame in this matter, but simply discharging an unpleasant duty in carrying out a bad law, with neither justice nor common sense to back it out; and that ere long it is intended to hold a public meeting, when the thoughtful people of all classes will be cordially invited to hear a thorough discussion of the whole question, and until then you are politely requested to reserve your judgment.

A Voice: Who wrote that? Who wrote that note?
Mr. Boulton: Mr Thomas Read.

The police here held up a clock as the first article for sale, and the auctioneer asked for a bid. A second or so elapsed, and Sergeant Stellings offered 5s., another voice offered 6s., the Sergeant responded with “seven,” and for that the clock was knocked down to him, amid hootings and groans. The ice now being broken, the other two articles were quickly sold, the mantel-mirror (for which somebody offered the magnificent sum of “a haupenny”) to Mr. Saltmer for £1, and the riding saddle to Mr. Monkman for £1 1s.

As soon as the sales were effected, the crowd renewed their hootings and groaning, and, unfortunately, proceeded to stronger measures, as we can testify from painful experience. Somebody in the crowd threw eggs at the police, and being near the place where they stood, we had far more

than our share of the badly- thrown missiles. For some time afterwards the crowd lingered about, talking in groups of the novel scene they had witnessed, and as the anti-vaccinators were present in full force, they did not fail to improve the opportunity. In justice to them, however, we should state, that so far as we saw, they carried out the professions made in their communication inserted above. Rather an unfortunate incident, we may state, happened to the clock immediately it was sold. The purchaser put it down in one end, and not very safely, as it fell over and smashed the glass cover of the face – not an omen of its future behaviour, it is to be hoped.

We understand that Mr. Rawlings, the third defendant, expresses his firm determination to go to prison, rather than pay, and it remains to be seen what further steps will be taken in his case.

Next Steps

Mr. Rawlings, cordwainer, of Malton, was sent to Northallerton Gaol for seven days for refusing to comply with the law. On his return, thousands lined the streets from the railway station to the Market place where a meeting took place and the boisterous gathering broke windows at the town hall [5]

In 1902 there was a national outbreak of smallpox. The Sanitary Committee of the Malton Urban Council recommended that ‘a special smallpox hospital should be built for the urban district alone’ [6].

References

- [1] York Herald 14 February 1874.
[2] York Herald, 11 May 1874

- [3] York Herald, 4 September 1875
[4] York Herald, 31 March 1877

[5] Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 2
October 1876

[6] Leeds Mercury, 10 February 1902