

MISCELLANY

THE FIGHT AGAINST VACCINATION: THE LEICESTER DEMONSTRATION OF 1885

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The struggle to contain smallpox and eliminate it as a life-threatening disease was less easy in this country than might have been expected. Despite Dr Edward Jenner's discovery and subsequent research, the benefits of vaccination were more readily appreciated outside the United Kingdom. Legislation making vaccination compulsory was introduced in Bavaria as early as 1807; in Denmark in 1810; in Sweden in 1814 and in a number of German states in 1818. In the United Kingdom it was 1853 before an Act of Parliament made vaccination obligatory and it was not until the Act of 1867 that any real compulsion was applied. Under the terms of this Act local registrars were required to inform parents or custodians of the obligation to have their children vaccinated and to specify the time and place where they should attend upon the public vaccinator. Parents were allowed three months to obtain a vaccination and, if the child was considered to be unfit, could be granted a certificate deferring the operation for periods of two months at a time. The Act provided penalties for neglect and also permitted the Justices to order the vaccination of any child under fourteen. It was the element of compulsion which aroused the anti-vaccinators to redouble their efforts. There had been opposition to vaccination on grounds of inefficacy and the risks of infection from the time Jenner's work first became known. Now, the anti-vaccinators were able to argue, trespass on personal freedom had been added to the folly of adopting a fallacious and harmful medical practice.

In Leicester a branch of the Anti-Vaccination League was formed in 1869 and gradually, from a modest beginning, grew in strength. The terms of the Act were applied in Leicester with vigour and with apparent success, and in 1867 as many as 94 percent of children born in the town were vaccinated. The position soon changed; as the figures in the Table on page 65 indicate, from the early 1870's there was considerable under vaccination. A bitter struggle developed between a fierce opposition and a tough-minded magistracy which resulted in prosecutions under the Act on a scale not experienced elsewhere in the country.¹ The situation grew worse; in 1880 440 parents were fined and thirteen imprisoned, and in 1881 no less than 1,154 were prosecuted and a year later 918. In 1882 the controversy had already become an issue in the local elections and a year later in the triennial election to the Board of Guardians the anti-vaccination candidates achieved a majority. Their triumph was short-lived, for once elected, in a decision carried only by the use of the Chairman's casting vote, the members of the Board reintroduced a policy of prosecution, issuing no less than 2,274 summonses during their three-year term of office. After this rebuff, it is no wonder that the anti-vaccinators turned to other methods of influencing the democratic process and opposition took on a new form.

By the beginning of 1885 the number of intending prosecutions was said to be 5,000; feelings were running high and in this heady atmosphere the anti-vaccinators felt strong enough to consider taking over the streets of central Leicester. The demonstration they planned was brilliantly conceived. On the day of the event, 23rd March, a letter describing what would take place and claiming support from forty anti-vaccination leagues and fifty towns appeared in the **Daily News**. Some time before, the railway companies had been approached to provide special trains (which they refused to do) and an HQ arranged at the Temperance Hall. The demonstrators succeeded beyond all expectations. Factories and warehouses closed and representatives from anti-vaccination groups from all over the country and from abroad converged on Leicester to swell the numbers who took to the streets.

The description of the demonstration which follows is taken from J. T. Biggs, **Leicester: sanitation versus vaccination**. Biggs was a prominent Leicester industrialist and one of the leaders of the Anti-Vaccination League. At the Temperance Hall some 700 banners were prepared bearing various inscriptions:

'Northampton bore witness that "Compulsory vaccination is a usurpation of unjust power" and Brighton that "Truth conquers". Kent, with its rampant horse and legend Invicta, set "Parental affection before despotic law", and demanded "the repeal of the Vaccination Acts, the curse of our nation," clenched with the adjuration, "Men of Kent, defend your liberty of conscience; better a felon's cell than a poisoned babe". Kettering pronounced for "Freedom," and Halifax that "Jenner's patent has run out." Middleton set on high "The crusade against legalised compulsory medical quackery"; whilst Oldham called for "Health and liberty," and exhorted beholders to "Be just and fear not," assuring them, truly enough, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." Finsbury and Banbury united in the advice, "Stand up for liberty!". Southwark called for "Entire repeal and no compromise," and Barnoldswick for "Sanitation, not vaccination." Truro pertinently asked, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" Keighley, ever to the fore, said, "We fight for our homes and freedom." Earlstown asked for "Pure blood and no adulteration," and Lincoln averred, "We protect our offspring." Eastbourne advised, "Cease to do evil, learn to do well." St. Pancras sent "Cordial greeting and sympathy to the heroic martyrs of Leicester." There was a well-appointed hearse with a child's coffin inscribed "Another victim of vaccination," and the observation of Sir Joseph Pease in the House of Commons, "The President of the Local Government Board cannot deny that children die under the operation of the Vaccination Acts in a wholesale way." A banner bore the prayer, "From horse grease, calf lymph, cowpox and the Local Government Board, good Lord deliver us." Another had "A dead swindle — a vaccination death certificate." The origin of cowpox in horsegrease was illustrated by a mangy horse with bandaged heels and a heifer on a dray. The varieties of virus, indifferently and ignorantly used for vaccination, were represented in six labelled jars, the original Jennerian

grease being inscribed, "Tis grease, but living grease no more." Mr Golding of Leytonstone, marched with a model of Holloway Prison, wherein he had recently suffered incarceration for saving his child from vaccination. There were numerous banners with piquant local allusions, which would require more or less interpretation outside Leicester. A fine banner from Belgium bore the inscription in French, "Neither penalties nor prison can prevent vaccine being a poison and the vaccination laws an infamy — Dr Hubert Boëns." On the other side was a babe in a cradle and a doctor with an ass's head vaccinating it.'

The weather was fine and the crowd good humoured and a procession of many thousands set out from the Market Square. In addition to the banners and placards, there were:

'trolleys and carts containing tangible things, like diseased cows and horses, showing that a supply of "lymph" might still be had without dealing with the foreigner — a great comfort to the faculty, this piece of news, no doubt, in case of a possible blockade in these days of rumours of war. Of course there was an opposition doctor, who sniffed both at horse and heifer, and proudly bestriding his own donkey, offered "Pure moke lymph" at the figure of "a guinea a dose".

Other trolleys contained "furniture seized for blood money," showing that the State had effected a compromise, and that somebody was sleeping without a bedstead, and sitting down to dinner (if he had one) without tables and chairs, instead of baby being vaccinated. One trolley appeared to have negotiated the loan of a gallows and scaffold from the county jail for Dr Jenner's sole and particular use; and the execution was carried on without the slightest hitch, about every twenty yards through some miles of streets, amid strong manifestations of popular approval ... Then there were wagons and carriages of various kinds, loaded with parents who were fighting or had fought the battle of pure blood against experimental butchery upon their defenceless little ones; and crowding great vans with their bright happy faces, or riding on ponies or carried in arms came large deputations of the five or ten thousand "infantile law-breakers," to whose honour the day was devoted, looking so fresh, and wholesome, and free from blemish, that many and many a warm heart must have cursed the horrid tyranny which threatened them with a peril worse than an enemy's siege of Leicester ... So, with banners before them, banners behind them, banners to right of them, banners to left of them, and banners above them — hung out from topmost windows from side to side of street after street as far as eye could reach in every direction — so rode the enviable children of Leicester, waving their own tiny bannerettes and cheering with delight — on a day they will cherish the memory of when their rosy faces are wrinkled with another three score years, and their sunny locks are grey — and when "the great dragon" (whose discomfiture they saw on Monday well painted on a banner of St George) has long been slain.'

After the procession the crowd, estimated at from 80,000 to 100,000 people, assembled in the Market Place to hear addresses from the luminaries of the movement — Councillor Butcher of Leicester, William Young, secretary of the London Society, and Mr Joseph Brown of Dewsbury.

'The vast audience, led by the united bands, then sang "The cause that is true", written for the occasion by Mr Louis Breeze, jun. Mr J. P. Biggs produced a copy of the Vaccination Acts which was suspended from iron bars and burned, and the ashes cast to the winds ... As the concourse broke up, a few adventurous spirits seized the effigy of Jenner, and tossed it about. Two constables secured it, and threw it down the staircase under the Exchange. Hardly had they turned their backs when the dummy was again produced and tossed afresh. A second time the constables entered the crowd, and having secured the "Doctor", solemnly marched him off to the police station, minus his head, which had disappeared and could not be found'.

The public meeting that evening was an emotional affair. It began with a rendering of 'The cause that is true' and speaker after speaker spoke to the motion 'that the compulsory Vaccination Acts, which make loving and conscientious parents criminals, subjecting them to fines, loss of goods, and imprisonment, propagate disease and inflict death, and under which 5,000 of our fellow townsmen are now being prosecuted, are a disgrace to the Statute Book, and ought to be abolished forthwith'. It was a heady occasion for the Leicester residents who pledged themselves to oppose the unrighteous law. The motion was carried unanimously.

'The proceedings closed with singing the hymn written by Mrs. Clant for the occasion:

"Brothers in heart united
Raise we our voice today,
Now let our vow be plighted
To sweep this law away."

The hymn was sung to a fine organ accompaniment to the tune, "Wait till the clouds roll by."

The following day (March 24th 1885) a conference of delegates was held in Waterloo Hall.

The organisers must have been encouraged by the response to the demonstration. The **Leicester Daily Post** described it as 'the greatest and most representative demonstration against the Vaccination Acts ever witnessed in this country'. **The Times** was equally impressed and drew attention to the 5,000 persons in the process of being summoned for refusing to comply with the law. The most important outcome of the demonstration emerged the following year at the triennial election of the Guardians, the body responsible for the enforcement of the Vaccination Acts. The anti-vaccinators swept the field and the new Board pledged itself to non-compliance with the law.

In the years which followed Leicester became notorious for its policy; to most outsiders it was regarded as negligent. Of course opinion within Leicester was not unanimous and in particular the Medical Officer, a strong vaccinationist, was in despair. As he wrote in his annual report for 1886, 'The sad feature about the whole business is that it is the young children of the town who are growing up in thousands unprotected, and are running a risk to their lives. They have but to come in contact with the first breath of infection of smallpox to at once contract this loathsome disorder'. But the Board of Guardians stood firm and in the face of their resolution, despite the warnings of their Medical Officer of Health, the Sanitary Authority felt itself powerless to act. In fact, as the duty of carrying out the Vaccination Acts rested upon the Board of Guardians, the courses of action open to the Medical Officer and the Sanitary Authority were limited.

In the event the Sanitary Authority adopted what became known as the Leicester system. This originated in the mid-1870s at the behest of the Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Johnston. In his report for 1877 he describes the system as follows:

'In any house where a smallpox case occurred I endeavoured to impress the inmates with the fact that the removal of **all** the members of the family to the hospital was the best course to adopt, not only as regards their own individual welfare, but also that of the town at large. And I am glad to say that all complied with my request, left their infected habitations, and became inmates of the hospital. Altogether twenty-two unaffected cases were thus admitted into quarantine, and of these three after admission sickened. The first in forty-eight hours, the second in seventy-two hours, and the third on the twelfth day. All these cases must have been infected before admission, as smallpox appears on the skin on the fourteenth day after the infection of the disease has been received into the system. The epidemic had got firm footing in the town, as it expressed itself in no less than six different streets. The suppression of what might otherwise have proved a widespread epidemic was entirely due to the **early** information received of the cases affected and the promptitude observed in their removal.'

In subsequent years this treatment of the disease again proved itself and the operation was greatly assisted by the acquisition of powers of compulsory notification of infectious diseases which Leicester achieved by means of a local act. (Leicester was the third town in the country to be granted such powers.)

In 1883 Dr Johnston reported,

'In the last seven years there have been no fewer than seventeen importations of smallpox into the town. ... Notwithstanding this large number of importations the disease has always been stamped out, and the town thus saved from the distress and mortality which has hitherto accompanied its prevalence.'

Table 1 Vaccination and Smallpox in Leicester 1872-1901

Year	Vaccinations			Births	Smallpox	
	Public	Private	Total		Cases	Deaths
1872	2,466	1,990	4,456	4,162	—	346
1873	2,145	1,547	3,692	4,447	—	2
1874	2,377	1,387	3,764	4,375	0	0
1875	2,072	1,455	3,527	4,260	0	0
1876	2,080	1,346	3,426	4,781	0	0
1877	2,010	1,643	3,653	4,753	12	6
1878	2,004	1,368	3,372	4,779	8	1
1879	1,942	1,204	3,146	4,687	0	0
1880	1,960	926	2,886	4,830	1	0
1881	1,998	1,419	3,417	4,860	6	2
1882	1,710	1,396	3,106	4,856	29	5
1883	1,203	755	1,958	4,787	12	3
1884	994	769	1,763	4,921	3	0
1885	908	934	1,842	4,652	8	0
1886	611	511	1,122	4,857	1	0
1887	196	275	471	4,679	9	0
1888	72	242	314	4,787	21	0
1889	27	145	172	4,789	0	0
1890	12	119	131	4,699	0	0
1891	6	86	92	4,790	0	0
1892	12	121	133	5,816	38	6
1893	44	205	249	6,006	308	15
1894	29	104	133	5,995	8	0
1895	12	63	75	5,962	4	0
1896	19	67	86	6,212	0	0
1897	11	70	81	6,252	0	0
1898	12	80	92	6,152	0	0
1899	56	100	156	6,273	0	0
1900	155	188	343	6,207	0	0
1901	148	209	357	6,169	4	0

By 1901 the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Millard, was able to write, 'The essential characteristic in the method of combating smallpox in Leicester is the entire absence of **compulsory** vaccination, which is regarded as so all-important in most places. Against this it has been urged that vaccination has to some extent been resorted to in Leicester. This no doubt, is true. A handful of the population, including the medical men, sanitary staff, smallpox nurses, etc., are as well vaccinated in Leicester as in any other town, so that a cordon of protected persons can at once be drawn round any case of smallpox which may occur. Persons accidentally brought into contact with the disease also frequently submit to the operation, and amongst the well-to-do classes vaccination and re-vaccination are freely practised. But all this is quite voluntary, and it may be truly said that compulsory vaccination does not exist. The vast majority of the children and young persons amongst the masses are unvaccinated, and it is in this respect that there is a radical difference between Leicester and most other towns.'

The statistics which the Leicester Sanitary Committee was able to present in support of its policy certainly appear to justify the claims made for the success of the Leicester experiment though it would require a detailed analysis of the vaccination policy pursued in the area surrounding Leicester to ascertain the extent to which the urban area was enjoying the benefit of its neighbours' actions. Comparison with a town of similar size where vaccination continued to be practised during the 1890's would also be interesting.

NOTES

Note. This account of the Leicester demonstration and the Leicester experiment is taken from **Leicester: sanitation versus vaccination**, J. T. Biggs, JP, and **Leicester and smallpox, thirty years experience**, Thomas Windley, Chairman of the Sanitary Committee (a pamphlet read at the Royal Institute of Public Health, Exeter, 1902).

1. See Returns of Prosecutions under the 1867 Act, **Parliamentary Papers 1871, LVIII; 1875 LXI; 1880 LIX; 1890 LIX**. See also the report of the Select Committee on the operation of the 1867 Act, **1871 XIII**. From the mid-1870s Leicester emerges as the town with the greatest number of prosecutions under the terms of the 1867 Act.

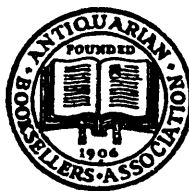
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