

One hundred years ago

Anti-Vaccination Leagues

Vaccination against smallpox seemed to be so reliable a prophylactic that in Britain in 1853 it was made statutory for all newborn children. At first the law was not rigidly enforced, but during a minor epidemic in 1864–8 the earlier legislation was tightened up, the Boards of Guardians being given the task of ensuring that it was implemented and prosecuting parents who failed to comply with it.

By this time, however, severe and sometimes fatal side effects of vaccination were being reported, and with the outbreak of epidemics in various places in the early 1870s, which threw doubts on its efficacy, a campaign of opposition to the operation, on both medical and ethical grounds, began to grow. Leicester was one of the many towns in which Anti-Vaccination Leagues sprang up, demanding repeal of the compulsory clause in the Act, and advocating other measures for dealing with the disease, such as total isolation of patients and of anyone who had come into contact with them. In spite of this, the law was reinforced still further in 1871, provoking yet stronger opposition, which continued for two decades. In Leicester alone during this period 6000 prosecutions were said to have been brought, of which the following, reported in the Leicester press in 1884, are typical:

'Melton Mowbray Petty Sessions: Edward Irons was summoned for neglecting to comply with an order for the vaccination of his son, aged two years. He said he had a conscientious objection to conforming to the Vaccination Act, and he was also acting under the advice of his doctor, who stated that vaccination was not conducive to the child's health, nor would it benefit him. One of his children had been vaccinated, and she had suffered considerably from the effects of it, and he could not allow the boy to undertake the same risk. He then gave the opinions of several medical gentlemen on the evils of vaccination, and said he thought it would be inadvisable for the Bench to enforce the law upon a conscientious objection. The Chairman said there were few questions which had given rise to more varied opinions than the subject of vaccination. It had been proved beyond doubt that vaccination had caused smallpox to show itself in a much milder form. The Bench were unanimous in their opinions upon the question. They acted upon public grounds, and decided that the order should be enforced within a fortnight. If the order were not complied with, defendant would be liable to

a penalty of twenty shillings. That course would be taken with all cases that came before them.'¹

'George Banford had a child born in 1868. It was vaccinated and after the operation the child was covered with sores, and it was some considerable time before it was able to leave the house. Again Mr. Banford complied with the law in 1870. This child was vaccinated by Dr. Sloane in the belief that by going to him they would get pure matter. In that case erysipelas set in, and the child was on a bed of sickness for some time. In the third case the child was born in 1872, and soon after vaccination erysipelas set in and it took such a bad course that at the expiration of 14 days the child died.'²

For refusing to hazard a fourth child Mr Banford was fined 10 shillings with the option of seven days in prison, which was the usual penalty imposed by the Leicester magistrates. Some parents were taken to court repeatedly and paid the fine every time. Others chose the harsher alternative. The *Leicester Mercury* reported a demonstration which took place in one of the main streets of the city.

'By about 7.30 a goodly number of anti-vaccinators were present, and an escort was formed, preceded by a banner, to accompany a young mother and two men, all of whom had resolved to give themselves up to the police and undergo imprisonment in preference to having their children vaccinated. The utmost sympathy was expressed for the poor woman, who bore up bravely, and although seeming to feel her position expressed her determination to go to prison again and again rather than give her child over to the "tender mercies" of a public vaccinator. The three were attended by a numerous crowd and in Gallowtreetgate three hearty cheers were given for them, which were renewed with increased vigour as they entered the doors of the police cells.'³

A further penalty, which fell most harshly on those least able to bear it, was to have the fine for non-compliance and the cost of the prosecution forcibly extracted from them by the seizure and sale of their furniture.

'A man named Arthur Ward had two children injured through vaccination and refused to submit another one to the operation. A fine was imposed and on 24th November two police officers called for the penalty, or in default to ticket the goods. The husband was out at the market, and the poor woman had no money to pay. The goods downstairs were considered

insufficient to cover the amount, and the officers demanded to go upstairs. The woman refused to allow this, and an altercation took place, and harsh language was used by the officers, who threatened to take her husband to prison, terrifying Mrs. Ward. At that time she was pregnant, and the shock to the system, and the fright, were of such a character that symptoms ensued which ultimately led to a premature confinement, and on 26th December she gave birth to a still-born child. She never recovered and last week she expired. The doctor who had attended Mrs. Ward said that although he believed in vaccination he did not think it was the duty of any professional man to carry out the laws in the outrageous and brutal manner in which they were enforced.⁴

The stand taken by parents who feared for the lives of their children was reinforced by the claim that vaccination was not only dangerous in itself but was not the most appropriate way to fight smallpox. In 1884, with outbreaks occurring in several towns and cities including Sunderland, Birmingham, and Liverpool, and 1400 patients under treatment in London alone, a correspondent wrote to the *Leicester Mercury*:⁵

'It must strike the reflective observer as rather singular that all the recent smallpox outbreaks have made their appearance among populations where the laws enforcing vaccination have been rigorously and systematically carried out. 96% of births in London are protected by vaccination. May I venture to ask whether medical men who have defended and fostered a system of medical procedure which eighty years' experience has demonstrated a disastrous and humiliating failure ought not to feel honourably bound on public grounds to retrace their steps and confess that vaccination, like other once popular prescriptions of inoculation, bleeding and mercurization, is a serious and mischievous blunder. Every municipality is in possession of evidence establishing the fact that zymotic diseases originate in and are fostered by insanitary conditions, and are preventable by personal and municipal cleanliness.'

By 1884, when these reports and comments were published, the campaign against compulsory vaccination was succeeding in its aim. Figures for the last six months of 1883 showed that in Leicester

there were 2281 births, and only 707 children vaccinated; 1138 remained unvaccinated, 280 died unvaccinated, 20 vaccinations were postponed on production of a medical certificate, and 3 vaccinations did not 'take'. A speaker at a public rally commented on these figures.

'It was the fact that many of the infants in the town of Leicester were unvaccinated, and he did not know that there was another town in the kingdom that could make that statement with truth. One of their magistrates had declared last week that he would not sit on another vaccination case. They not only wanted the other magistrates to follow his example. They wanted to bring Boards of Guardians to the side of anti-vaccinationists.'

'The parents and burgesses of Leicester passed a resolution expressing "heartfelt satisfaction at Alderman Stratton's outspoken defence of parental rights against believers in vaccination and the medical despotism which is aiming to acquire control over every household in the country. We are glad that you have stepped nobly forward to raise your voice in a cause which is that of the old English right of private judgment, and of the duty of the enlightened conscience of intelligent men to preserve untainted the health of their children to the best of their ability.'" "

In 1885 Leicester was the scene of a huge demonstration made up of representatives of the Anti-Vaccination Leagues of many other towns and cities. While prominent men such as Lyon Playfair and Sir Charles Dilke championed the cause of vaccination, Leicester's Radical members of Parliament led and ultimately won a battle to have the relevant legislation examined by a Royal Commission, following whose report compulsion was abolished and exemption allowed on grounds of conscience.

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References

- ¹ *Leicester Mercury*. 3 March 1884.
- ² *Leicester Mercury*. 10 March 1884.
- ³ *Leicester Mercury*. 10 June 1884.
- ⁴ *Leicester Mercury*. 30 January 1884.
- ⁵ *Leicester Mercury*. 3 July 1884.
- ⁶ *Leicester Mercury*. 20 May 1884.