

Smallpox Vaccination

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. Many people however still did not share the enthusiasm for vaccination and declined to have their children vaccinated, preferring to pay a 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. Any unpaid fines would lead to imprisonment or to the seizure and sale of the person's possessions. The process would then be repeated until the person complied.

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. Anti-Vaccination Leagues were set up and in Malton the 'Malton Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Society' was created. Little seems to have been reported about the conduct of these meetings and their propagandist efforts but in the *The Malton Gazette*, Saturday, July 8th, 1876, there is a report covering 'The Vaccination Question - Extraordinary Proceedings at Malton'

The Vaccination Question Extraordinary Proceedings at Malton.

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. Menell, 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 put in force in the Market Place, on Tuesday, July 4th, 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:-

COMMUNICATION

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 the 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.

The Malton Gazette, Saturday, July 8th, 1876