

### The fight against smallpox & The Anti-Vaccination League

Distrust of new medical advances, the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and a distaste for State intervention in “personal liberty”, are nothing new.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries a variety of infectious diseases ravaged the population on a regular basis, especially those that killed young children. In England and Wales, the average number of deaths from small-pox, during the period 1852 to 1851, was 21.9 per 1000 deaths. An effective cure for smallpox was available, yet there was enormous resistance to the vaccination of children against this extremely disfiguring and often fatal disease, which delayed the eradication of the disease for a century.

In 1884 Shacklock Mason, a cotton mill mechanic from Embsay, was taken to Skipton Petty Sessions court for failing to have his children vaccinated – and was represented, not by a lawyer, but by a delegate from the National Anti-Vaccination League. Shacklock argued that it was his “sacred duty” not to allow the vaccination – he was fined 20s and costs.

Losing his case didn't deter him. In 1889 Shacklock's principles led to his daughter, Ada, losing her post as a pupil-teacher at the British School in Embsay [now converted to the house behind the Embsay Children's Centre] - much to the disappointment of the head teacher, who wrote in the school log: *“21 June 1889 – Friday. Ada Mason's parents strongly objecting to vaccination, she will be withdrawn from School after today. This is very unfortunate as she has already shown exception[al] ability and much aptness for teaching.”*

In 1893, 2 years after her father died, Ada must have received her vaccination, as she was re-appointed as a monitor, and became an assistant teacher in Skipton the following year. Shacklock Mason (a member of the New Jerusalem Church), lived at West Lane Top, on Pasture Road, a near-neighbour of the Reverend Edward Jones, minister of the New Jerusalem Church in Embsay, who lived in Primrose Cottage. Jones, too, was brought to court for refusal to vaccinate his child. The case was reported in the Huddersfield Chronicle (Feb 28, 1880), and again in the Driffield Times (17 April, 1880).

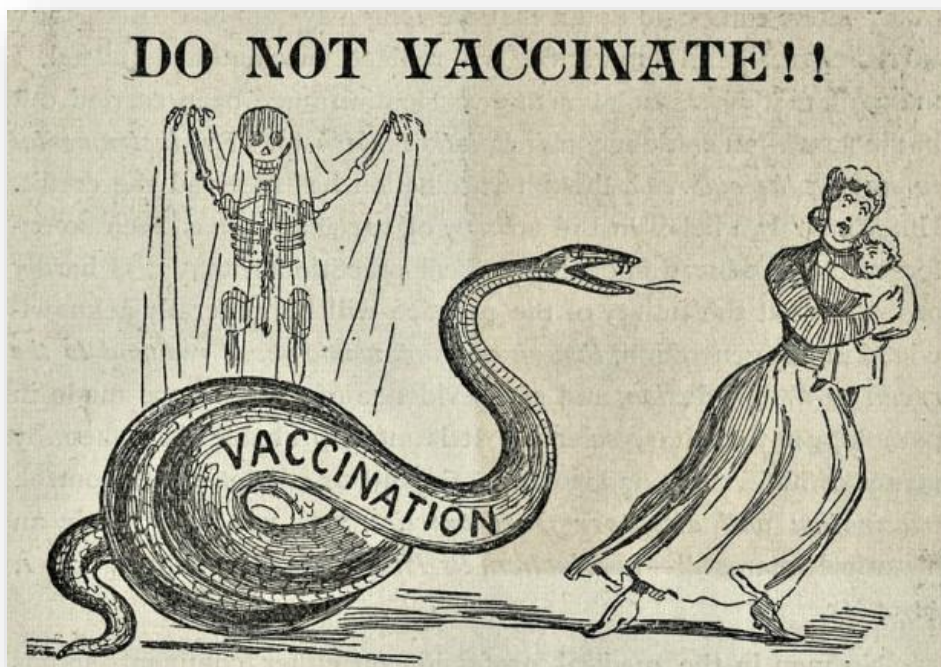
Given the opportunity to have his child vaccinated after the initial hearing, the case was adjourned several times because of Jones's refusal to confirm whether his son had been vaccinated or not, and his willingness to repeatedly pay the resulting fines and court costs. *“His grounds of objection were very simple. His child was in perfectly good health, and the Master whom he wished to serve had said that ‘those who are whole need no physician, but those who are sick.’ “*

So why were these two Embsay men so resolutely opposed to vaccination against a disease that was highly infectious, with a high risk of blindness, terrible scarring, all-over blistering, and often death?

There were 5 main principles behind the anti-vaccination campaign:-

### **Distrust of New Science:**

Although Edward Jenner had proved in 1796 that vaccination worked against smallpox, even amongst the medical profession, knowledge about bacteria and viruses was still very poor, and many leading medical men were very sceptical. Many thought that improving sanitation and air quality would be enough to conquer disease. For many early anti-vaccination campaigners the disgust felt at the “filthy” origin of the vaccine was a dominant factor – as illustrated by cartoons of small cows growing out of vaccinated people’s arms, or cow horns from their foreheads. Even in the 1880s Pasteur was still experimenting and fighting to convince fellow scientists of the very existence of bacteria. As late as the First World War the science of viruses was barely understood. In the Victorian period there were few of the stringent testing procedures for new medical treatments and medicines that are applied nowadays, and vaccines were not as safe then as they are now, which made the widespread distrust of new treatments in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century understandable. The promotion of medical treatments was up against a strong belief amongst many people that diseases were a means of purging the body of toxins, and should therefore be left to run their course.



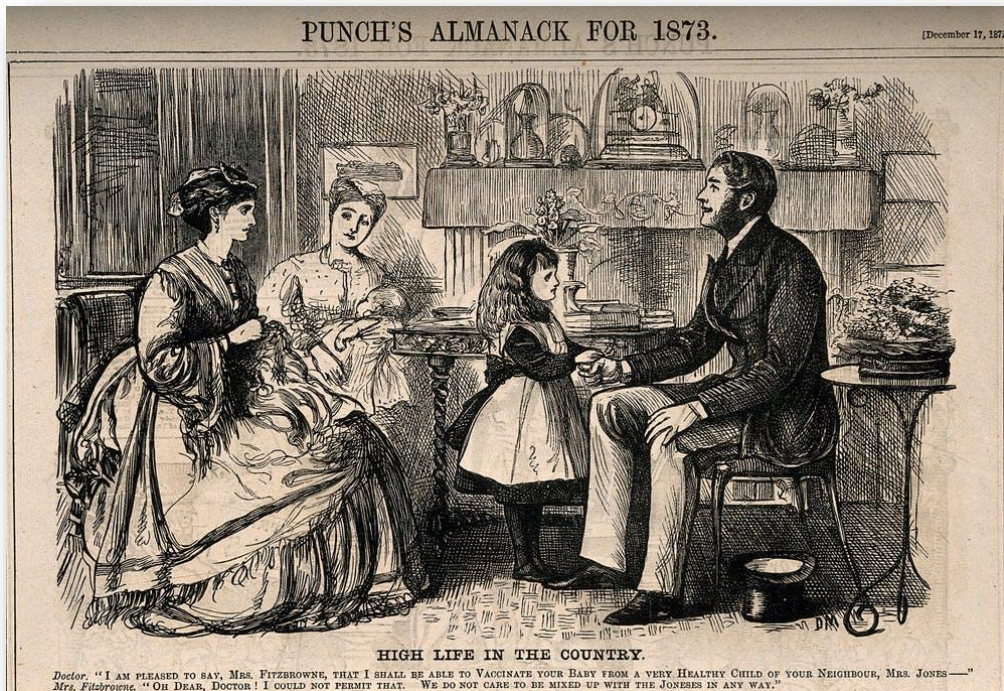
*This fear is clearly expressed in the cartoon of the vaccination “snake”, backed by a skeleton (death), about to attack a mother and her child.*

### **The Inoculation Procedure:**

In a period without a proper understanding of basic principles of hygiene, and when many “doctors” received only minimal training, or were even unregistered, their clumsy practices could be dangerous, leading to other infections being introduced into the body. In the days before the use of hypodermic syringes it is perhaps not too surprising that many Victorian parents were reluctant to put their children through the painful procedure then on offer. The

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vaccination used matter taken from the lymph of cows infected with cowpox and was administered by cutting into flesh, rather than injection – this involved making several deep scratches into the child’s arm, and rubbing the matter into the open wound. If not done properly that wound could become infected and even gangrenous, especially amongst poor families without proper sanitary living conditions. Due to the shortage of the cow lymph fluid, many doctors insisted the children be returned at a later date so that fluid from their inoculation blisters could be harvested to use in further inoculations of other children. This made it highly likely that other infectious diseases could be passed on from one child to another.



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refused to allow their children to be inoculated, and, for repeat offences, they could be imprisoned for up to a month.

By the 1870s and 1880s the main objection of the anti-vaccinationers was to this element of state compulsion. It was seen as an unacceptable extension of the government's power over the rights of the individual, especially the right of the parent to decide what was best for their child.

*The illustration is taken from an anti-vaccination journal, and uses the image of a skeleton. As it hovers over the child with an inoculation scalpel, a policeman threatens the reluctant mother.*



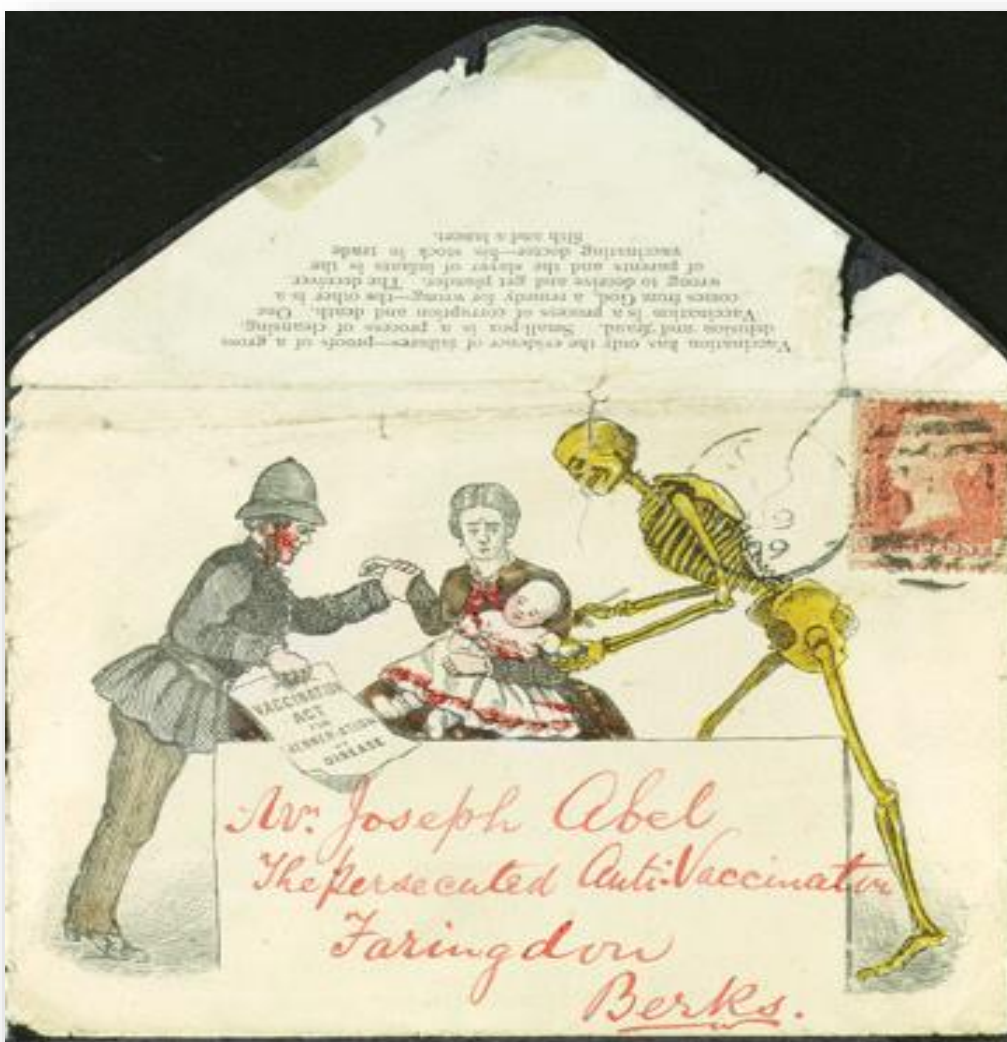
### Religious Conviction.

For many people there was a genuine fear that the use of cowpox to create the vaccination would contaminate the pure bodies of innocent children. This was further promoted by religious groups such as the New Church of Jerusalem (also known as the Swedenborgians, a popular Christian sect in the West Riding of Yorkshire during the late Victorian period). It was based on the concept of the human body as a divine creation that should never be violated by the introduction of "unnatural" or "foreign" elements. The Swedenborgians were very prominent in the anti-vaccination movement because their founder, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), had believed that the soul and the body were intimately connected. The corruption of one, he declared, led to the corruption of the other. For men like Shacklock Mason therefore, vaccination apparently introduced an evil influence, a poison, into the pure and innocent body of the child. For him, and for Reverend Jones, the power of healing was

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supposed to radiate outward from within. This is why so many Swedenborgians were early advocates of homeopathy.

*The image of the skeleton and policeman was also printed on stationery such as envelopes, (see illustration) as an effective means of spreading the propaganda. The message on the back of this envelope includes the tirade: "Smallpox is a process of cleansing. Vaccination is a process of corruption and death. One comes from God, a remedy for wrong – the other is a wrong to deceive and get plunder. The deceiver of parents and the slayer of infants is the vaccinating doctor – his stock in trade filth and a lancet." This adds another dimension to the anti-vaccination campaign – the belief that the programme was run for profit by the medical profession (despite the fact the treatment was offered for free).*



The National Anti-Vaccination League was a widespread popular movement from the 1860s, gaining momentum in the 1870s – spanning all social classes, and including many leading scientists and medical professionals. They remained a very strong influence until well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In North Yorkshire it was particularly strong in Keighley. In 1875, an effigy

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of the pro-vaccination MP for Craven, Sir Mathew Wilson, was burned by a crowd, to the accompaniment of a brass band, in support of a Glusburn shoemaker who went to gaol for a month rather than have his child vaccinated. The following year, seven of the Keighley Poor Law Guardians went to gaol rather than enforce the vaccination programme. Their journey to the railway station on their way to prison was thronged with sympathetic crowds.

At first the Guardians on the Poor Law Union Board in Skipton were split over the issue, and some tried to stop the vaccination programme, on the basis of civil liberty, as well as the popularly held belief that many children had died from the treatment. As the incidence of smallpox increased, in 1877 a committee was formed (including some of the opponents to vaccination) to gather statistics and case studies on the local effects of vaccination. The results clearly showed that it had successfully rid Craven of smallpox. Of the 2,691 children vaccinated in Craven over the previous 3 years, not one had died or suffered illness as a consequence, despite widespread rumours to the contrary based on a few stories of sick children – these cases were investigated and found to be entirely unsubstantiated. The exceptions were found to be the un-vaccinated children - who died of smallpox at the rate of nearly 50%. A Craven Herald editorial noted that many anti-vaccinationists based their position on exaggerated rumours, “*rash and unfounded assertions*”, and was able to show that the specific cases quoted by them as “proof”, when properly investigated, could be shown to have no foundation in the facts. Yet in Burnley, where resistance to vaccination had been very strong, the disease was so virulent the town was in what we would now call a lockdown, with strict quarantine rules being applied to infected workers. The results of the Skipton survey were reported in newspapers nationwide. Nevertheless the anti-vaccinationists continued to remain so strong in places like Burnley, that it cost another pro-vaccination Craven MP, William Morrison, the parliamentary election in 1900.

Subsequently, the Skipton Poor Law Guardians followed government directives regarding vaccination, and the Skipton Petty Sessions often imposed heavy fines on parents who refused to vaccinate their children. In October 1876 alone there were 13 parents prosecuted. Many more were prosecuted in the following years, until legislation in 1898 permitted parents to refuse on the grounds of conscientious objection (which required registration for a magistrate’s certificate). By 1907 exemption certificates were granted to 25% of all births in England and Wales. Indeed, the anti-vaccination movement was still so strong in 1900 that its aims became part of the Labour Party’s election manifesto. Fortunately, by then the disease was well on the way to being eradicated, despite a small resurgence before the First World War. The vaccination programme and improved sanitation together successfully removed the scourge of smallpox from the world.

CONVINCING FACTS!			
THOSE WHO DISBELIEVE IN VACCINATION SHOULD PONDER THE FOLLOWING FIGURES ISSUED BY THE HEALTH COMMITTEE OF GLOUCESTER:			
TOTAL ADMISSIONS TO HOSPITAL FOR SMALLPOX			350
UNVACCINATED	-	-	319
VACCINATED, BUT SO LONG AGO AS TO BE UNPROTECTED	-	-	18
VACCINATED DURING INCUBATION PERIOD OF DISEASE	-	--	13

'THE TIMES,' JULY 25, 1923.

Poster which appeared in *The Times* newspaper, 1923 [Wellcome Collection]

Further reading:

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