



Devon Family History Society
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TOTNES VACCINATION REGISTER

1875-1876

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The Vaccination Act of 1840 stipulated that free vaccination against smallpox should be available as a charge on the poor rates. However, it was not until the Vaccination Act of 1853 that vaccination was made compulsory and it became the responsibility of the poor law guardians to make sure that all infants were vaccinated within four months of birth. However, the guardians were not given any powers of enforcement and had no means of ensuring that all children were vaccinated. In 1867, they were given the right to prosecute parents for non-compliance; parents could be fined and even sent to prison if the fines were not paid. Guardians were required to keep registers of vaccinations. In 1871, they were also obliged to appoint vaccination officers for their union. Their task was made easier in 1874 when birth registration was made compulsory, with the onus being put on parents to have the births of their children recorded. Following the 1867 Act, objections to vaccination increased, with many parents preferring to go to prison rather than have their children's health compromised. The procedure was dangerous by modern standards because the child's arm was scored with a lancet and viral material rubbed into the wound. A child who developed vesicles in the skin would be used to provide vaccine material for other children. This meant that vaccinated children could fall victim to infections in the vaccination wound and to diseases carried in the blood of the donor child. Parents also feared that the introduction of cow's lymph or pauper's lymph into their child's blood could make the child cow-like or degenerate. In 1898, a new Vaccination Act introduced a conscientious objection clause which meant that parents could obtain a certificate from the magistrates exempting their child from vaccination, although by this time it was clear that the incidence of small-pox was decreasing due to the implementation of the vaccination scheme.

This register covers the Poor Law Union of Totnes and the information is set out by sub-district. The sub-districts in Totnes Union were Dartmouth, Brixham, Paignton, Harberton and Totnes. The registrar extracted the entry from the birth register for each child and the vaccination officer completed the entry with the date of the certificate of successful vaccination. The births were written on forms with five births to a page. Information given is the child's name, date and place of birth, father's name and occupation (mother's if the child was illegitimate) and the date of the vaccination certificate or the date of death if the child died in infancy.