

SEASON 2 TP

# Painful memories Of a polio epidemic

**SOME of you may be afraid of needles when you go to the doctor to have your jabs, or may find it a painful chore - some may even mistrust inoculations after hearing bad stories about side effects. But it can only be a minor irritation compared to the horror and heartbreak which such diseases could bring.**

Half a century ago the village of Digby was fatal proof when it was hit by the worst disaster since the plague. This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the village being stricken by a polio epidemic.

During the outbreak, 97 cases were diagnosed and there were 13 deaths, some adults but mostly children. Many who recovered were crippled and at one point even the village doctor, Thomas Smallhorn of Ruskington, contracted the disease.

By the time the epidemic subsided it had spread to Stamford.

Polio, or infantile paralysis, is inflammation of the spinal cord and struck with deadly speed in the days before systematic vaccination in schools.

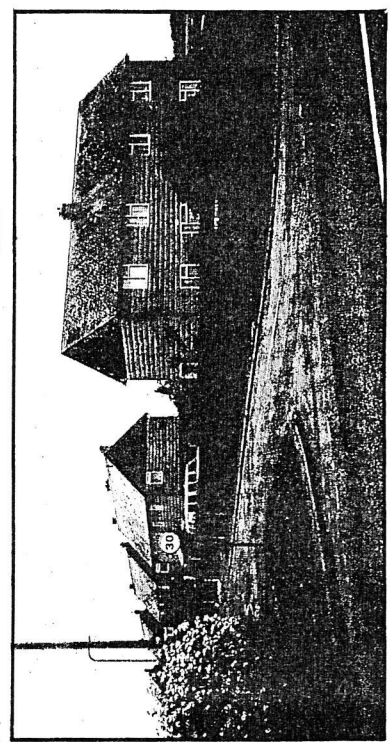
So serious was the 1950 outbreak that schools were closed, premises disinfected with "fog balls" and an all-out attack was made on the insect population by spraying insecticide on ditches and rubbish.

**Flies**  
No-one really knew where the epidemic had spread from but it went on for 11 weeks. The summer was hot and flies were everywhere, but it could have been carried in the water.

"It was almost like a plague," said the Rev Cyril Clarke of Digby in an old newspaper cutting. "Most of the young children were affected. Many of them were partly disabled."

First fatality was little Frederick Beddall, of The Pinfold in Digby, and the number of cases rapidly snowballed. Any child in a mild dose and never realised it.

Villager Linda Burden has been researching the village's history and discovered that when the plague carried off a quarter of the village population in 1604 the victims were said to have been buried on The Pinfold (then known as



**The Pinfold - also known as the Airey houses - where most young families were affected by the Digby polio epidemic. Photo by AH**

common land). It is ironic then, that a concentration of polio cases should have affected that newly built 32-house council estate on the same plot centuries later.

On July 9, 1950, four-year-old Joan Greenham, living at number nine in the Airey houses complained of "feeling funny". Her mother put her to bed. On July 10, Mrs Skelton, of number 15, noticed her five-year-old son Keith, was feverish and sweating. She put him to bed and sent a message to Dr Smallhorn, thinking it was measles.

Over the following days other children on the estate "felt funny" and Dr Smallhorn officially and calmly declared the outbreak of polio.

**Painful memories**  
For those who survived and still remain in the village, it still holds painful memories.

One woman who escaped the disease but remembers the days when the village had to be quarantined, preferred not to be named out of respect.

She said: "Every day you wondered who you would hear had gone down with it next. Dr Smallhorn was a marvelous man. We had a residential nurse too who lived here and was not allowed to leave and only tended to the polio victims she luckily didn't get it."

She knew of cases on The Pinfold estate and North Street. The new estate held most of the young families, whereas the old part of the village housed the older people - but the epidemic brought solidarity as fathers and sons were going on with the bug from the estate. There were two deaths at Rowston within a week - a father and son - and it reached Kirkby Green too.

**Provisions**  
Digby was voluntarily isolated as a precaution and the milk was delivered in waxed packets rather than glass bottles to avoid contact with the 375 villagers and possible spreading, all other provisions were left at the edge of the village or at garden gates for collection too. Medical buffs had all glasses and bottles checked for adequate disinfection and a system for screening the sewage from

the concrete clad "Airey houses" on The Pinfold was set up. It was discovered that personal contact was the main danger of infection. When the water was suspected fresh supplies were carried in from Stamford. The fish and chip van and mobile cinema were asked not to come and two local bus drivers and a conductor living in the village were given time off work.

**Attacks**  
In a 20-mile ring around the village, swimming baths were closed, telephones were cleaned and every possible hospital operation was postponed, for polio often attacks people convalescing.

Our veteran villager remembers that first public meeting called by Dr Smallhorn and fellow doctors. They stood around the village cross in the open air to cut down possible infection. He warned people of the disease and explained not to be frightened unduly.

The country's top medical experts were drafted in and had it in check by mid-August using the isolation methods. Villagers just carried on working in the nearby fields - luckily the community was largely self-contained.

"Everyone did what they could to help the victims and the ambulances were going daily taking people for treatment at Harlow Wood Hospital near Mansfield," remembers our villager. Isolation hospitals in Grimsby and Lincoln were also used and staff worked 24 hours a day on the Digby crisis.

**Great relief**  
She remembered Annie Hanson of Church Street would travel in the ambulances comforting the sufferers. "It went on for months and months and it was a great relief when it ended. It was a very frightening time."

Some had to be in hospital for weeks and were left wheelchair-bound or with affected limbs, some needing wires on their boots and special slings for their arms to get about such as Ken Skelton.

A Mrs Gresswell of North Street, who was 90-years-old was never told of the epidemic as people didn't feel like was never told of the epidemic as people didn't feel like

A newspaper reporter visiting after the all clear asked a housewife how they would celebrate now they were out of danger.

"There's nothing to celebrate," she said. "No time for celebrating anyway. Got to get my husband's supper."

A television company is now considering making a documentary on this subject.