During the recent office moves one scrapbook and two registers were found dating from the 1930s to the 1950s. The books were the property of Bexhill Borough Council and Battle Rural District Council and recorded the activities of the Public Health departments of that time. The scrapbook contains newspaper cuttings and reports from the Bexhill Observer on the debates of elected members and on the progress of various public health campaigns. The registers record each nuisance reported to and investigated by BRDC. This archive shows the victories and the defeats of our predecessors in making this part of England a cleaner safer place to live.

The Medical Officers annual report of 1937, as published by the Bexhill Observer, reported that one hundred and thirteen children under age fourteen had been vaccinated against smallpox in that year. (The Medical Officer of Health was a qualified doctor who was in charge of the Public Health department). Smallpox, which was known as “the demon” or “the scourge” had been endemic in Sussex for centuries, but had been at its worst in the Eighteenth century. The virus was highly infectious and there was no effective treatment.

Smallpox was the most feared of diseases as it did not depend on insanitary conditions to flourish - it affected both rich and poor alike. Mortality was high, especially among children, the weak and elderly. Epidemics could break out anywhere for no apparent reason. Those affected were isolated into “pest houses” to prevent further spread of the disease. Food and water was left for the infected person but they often died alone and in great pain.

The smallpox virus was spread through the sneezing and coughing of an infected person and through their contaminated clothing and belongings. This had been known for centuries and was used by invading armies to decimate native populations in the Americas. The authorities in England kept a strict watch on the infection and there are many recorded epidemics in Chichester, Brighton, Lewes and Rye. In 1713 smallpox claimed the Mayor of Winchelsea and in 1716 it accounted for half the deaths in Rye. Winchelsea was, with Glynde, the first town in Sussex to inoculate all its residents in 1767.

At this time, Thomas Frewen of Rye operated a private hospital for his inoculated patients at “Farthings” in Northiam. He took the pus from an infected individual and placed it into the skin of a well person, with the aim of inducing a mild form of the disease and so conferring immunity. This treatment was not without risk and a safer way of protecting people against smallpox was found in vaccination by the early 1800s. However opposition to vaccination was strong and so parliament made it a legal requirement for all children to be vaccinated in 1853. There was constant pressure on the authorities to achieve a high vaccination rate but they were constantly challenged by organised and sporadic opposition.
Between 1890 and 1893 the Rye Board of Guardians regularly debated whether or not to prosecute parents who did not have their children vaccinated. One of the guardians, Edmund Austen was violently opposed to vaccination and he refused to have his own children vaccinated. Tempers rose and another guardian Mr Hayles challenged Mr Austen to a fight outside. The resolution that parents in Rye be prosecuted was lost by one vote. Two years later, Mr Austen was brought before Rye County Bench for not vaccinating his children and was fined 14/-. 

In 1898 parliament bowed to pressure and allowed parents to refuse vaccination for their children and instead to register as “conscientious objectors”. This anti vaccination movement was also active in Bexhill and the Bexhill Observer reported “disturbances attended attempts to enforce the vaccination law”. Whilst the public health department achieved 113 vaccinations against smallpox in 1937, there were 112 conscientious objectors in the same year. 

The effectiveness of this vaccination programme was tested in 1949 when there was an outbreak of smallpox centred on Bevendean hospital near Brighton. The first case was an elderly man, who was a taxi driver. He died in Bevendean hospital shortly after his admission. Very quickly all those on the original ward where he was admitted were infected. No specific treatment could be offered. The source of the smallpox was thought to be a goat skin rug brought back from India by the boyfriend of the taxi driver’s daughter. There was a widespread panic and constant rumour that the disease had reached Bexhill. The Bexhill Observer reported that the rumours were untrue and that the Public Health department “were keeping a close watch on the situation in Brighton” and that “there is almost no danger to those who have been vaccinated in the last year”.

Bevendean hospital was isolated as thirty five cases of the disease developed. The quarantine continued for five weeks to the end of January 1950. A total of 100,000 people were vaccinated by emergency clinics in Brighton and Lewes. Ten people died. This was the last outbreak of smallpox in Sussex. Although there have been cases of smallpox associated with medical research, the last natural case of smallpox was in 1977 in Somalia. The WHO declared smallpox eradicated in 1980.

Today there are two official repositories of smallpox, Atlanta America and Kostovo Russia. A top Russian scientist who defected to America in 1992 revealed that smallpox had been turned into weapons by the Soviet military. Despite all the work to eradicate this disease it seems we are again vulnerable to the threat of smallpox. With thanks to the Bexhill Observer and the Wellcome Institute library. For further information “Defying the Demon” Smallpox in Sussex Diana Crook