NURSING IN THE 1946 SMALLPOX OUTBREAK IN LIVERPOOL

Susan McGuire

At the end of the Second World War a national sigh of relief could have been wiped out by the dangers of servicemen returning from abroad carrying life-threatening diseases, particularly smallpox. It must have felt like the end of the First World War all over again when the Spanish Influenza brought death to many who had escaped it in the trenches.

Post Covid we are all very aware of the sudden and rapid spread of frightening infectious illness and we can all imagine the scenarios this piece of Liverpool history contains. There are desperate attempts to trace cases, suspension of visits to hospitals and care homes, people dying without the comfort of relatives, confusing figures reported in the press, reassurances followed by panic measures and exhortations to come for vaccinations.

Liverpool would always be especially vulnerable to disease carried from afar. In 1896, for instance, a gunboat had to be deployed to stop unauthorised movements of quarantined shipping. At that time '*Liverpool docks handled over 40% of the world's maritime trade'*.[1] The creation of the Port Sanitary Authority in 1874 was a vital part of keeping the city safe. In 1947, in an article reviewing the smallpox outbreak of 1946, the extent of preparedness of the port was described. This included a list compiled from weekly returns of cases notified from all foreign ports throughout the world. The master of any vessel approaching Liverpool from an infected port messaged the port before arriving, regardless of whether there had been illness on board during the voyage. A medical officer would board and obtain a declaration from the master of the ship concerning the health of all passengers and their onward destinations. [2]

This article describes how a smallpox outbreak following the return of servicemen to Liverpool was contained. It uses press accounts from the time, Medical Officers' annual reports and the first-hand account of one of the nurses involved.

Nurse Hannah Heery

Our family lost an important member in February 2022. Hannah Heery was 98 when she passed away peacefully in a nursing home. Until around 96 years of age Hannah's memory was sound and even after that she often talked to us lucidly of her past. She had served as a nurse in Liverpool for forty years before her retirement, most of it spent at Fazakerley, now Aintree Hospital. She had many memories of her

nursing career and was very proud of it.

In 1940 when many were making their way out of London anticipating the blitz, Hannah, aged 17, boarded a train in Liverpool to make her way south to London to do her nursery nurse training at Mill Hill orphanage run by the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. She told of being sent up to the roof with buckets of sand to gather incendiary devices and dispose of them before they could set light to the convent. Hannah told how the orphanage had suffered a direct hit in the blitz but that no one was killed. She used to joke that it was the first bomb of the blitz but this cannot be established. She had to go to collect buckets of water for the children when the water supply was interrupted.

She returned to Liverpool with her nursery nurse certificate at the end of 1941 and decided to enter nursing. She trained at Smithdown Road Hospital following in her sister Mary Jane's footsteps.

UK & Ireland, Nursing Registers, 1898-1968 for Hannah Heery

Register of Nurses - 1946

137084	**Heery,** Hannah	43, Adshead Road, West Derby, Liverpool	Nov. 23, 1943, London	Smithdown Road Hosp., Liverpool, 1942–1945. By Examination.
127205	**Heery,** Mary Jane	43, Adshead Road, West Derby, Liverpool	June 23, 1944, London	Smithdown Road Hosp., Liverpool, 1941–1944. By Examination.

Fig 1: Extract from UK & Ireland Nursing Register 1946 – Ancestry.com

On completing general nurse training Hannah decided to specialise in infectious diseases and in March 1947 she was awarded her 'Fevers Certificate'.

Whilst training she was called to go to, what she always called, the Port Health Hospital in New Ferry. She went with her good friend Naomi Davies, one of the many Welsh nurses she trained with, to help to nurse through a smallpox outbreak.

I interviewed Hannah some years before she died about this episode. It is wonderful to get first-hand accounts and it was only recently I thought to tie that in with contemporary records of the event. I tracked down the Medical Officer of Health reports for 1946-48. These are available from the


Reg. No. 16732.

It is hereby Certified that

Hannah Heery

was admitted by Examination to the Supplementary part of the Register maintained by the General Nursing Council for England and Wales containing the names of Fever Nurses, on

28th March 1947

and that she is entitled in pursuance of the Nurses' Registration Act, 1919, to take and use the title of "Registered Fever Nurse" up to December 31st, 1948.

Dorothy M. Smith SRN.
Chairman of Council.

The Seal of the Council was hereunto affixed this 28th day of March 1947.

M. Henry SRN.
Registrar.

Fig 2: Hannah Heery – Registered Fever Nurse -Photograph by Author

Wellcome Institute's website and make a fascinating source of local history.[3] I also had a look at the press reports. Hannah's memories were accurate, and I was to find from the contemporary sources what a scare this episode had been to Liverpool and surrounding boroughs.

Port Health Hospital

On the eve of the creation of the NHS and the resulting massive reorganisation, the 1948 report of the Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool Port Health, William Mowll Frazer, reviewed the performance of the Port Health Hospital. The hospital has been variously known as the Bebington Infectious Diseases Hospital, the New Ferry Smallpox Hospital, and the Port Sanitary Hospital. The report praises the value of the hospital to the citizens of Liverpool from its foundation in 1877. The report was written on the eve of its transfer in July 1948 from the Port Health Committee to be administered by the Regional Hospital Board.

The hospital was first proposed in 1873 by Dr William Stewart Trench then Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool. He recommended the building of a hospital near the quarantine anchoring ground, for the reception of cases of cholera. The last epidemic had occurred in 1866 and Trench was very opposed to the idea of a hospital ship.

> *'By the 1860s there were no fewer than 10 of them moored in the River Mersey. Unfortunately, sanitary conditions were appalling and something better was needed for patients and the staff looking after them'.*[4]

The hospital was built and opened in 1877 costing some £15000. The proposed building was to be *'of corrugated iron, and would afford accommodation for 24 inmates, besides attendants. The ground, eight acres in extent, would be surrounded by a stone wall nine feet high, and a road 36 yards wide'.*[5]
Patients could be delivered by rowing boat from their ship directly to the shore, and taken up a wooden flight of steps to the hospital facility.

The Medical Officer report of 1948 claims that it treated three people who had contracted cholera in its first year showing Trench was justified in his concerns that cholera was still a threat. Two years later an outbreak of scarlet fever on the training ship *Indefatigable* put the hospital to the test of saving the lives of 230 boys on board at that time.

The hospital saved Liverpool from the consequences of other potential outbreaks over the years: cholera brought from Marseille on board the St Dunstan in 1884; scarlet fever again on board the *Indefatigable* and the reformatory ship *Clarence* in 1890 and 1894; in 1899 bubonic plague emerged as a threat as it did several times over the years and was managed by the hospital.

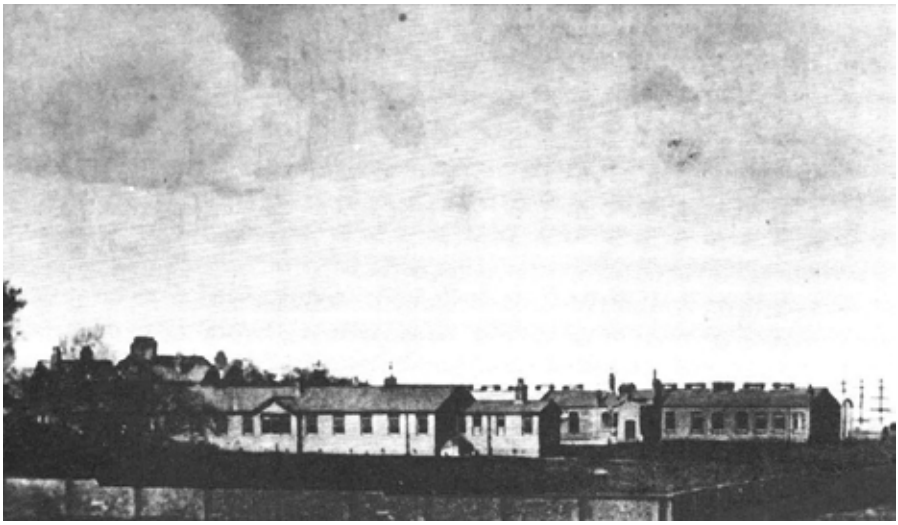


Fig 3: Port Sanitary Hospital New Ferry – from Rock Ferry, New Ferry and Bebington – Postcards from the Past by David Mitchelson, 1998, Sigma Leisure, Ammanford

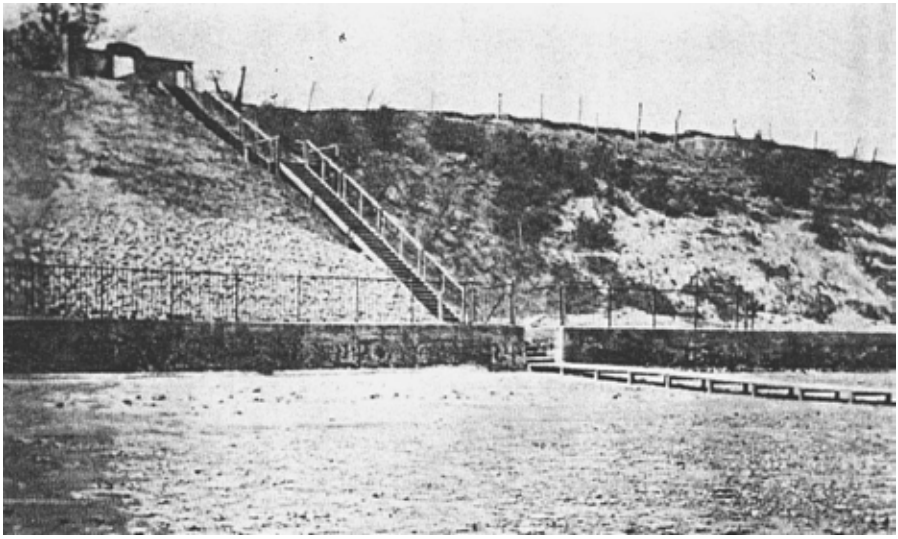


Fig 4: The steps by which patients were brought from the river to Port Sanitary Hospital New Ferry – from Rock Ferry, New Ferry and Bebington – Postcards from the Past by David Mitchelson, 1998, Sigma Leisure, Ammanford

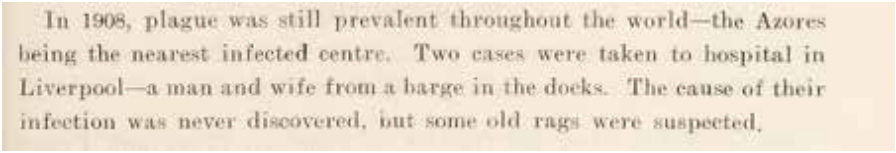

In 1908, plague was still prevalent throughout the world—the Azores being the nearest infected centre. Two cases were taken to hospital in Liverpool—a man and wife from a barge in the docks. The cause of their infection was never discovered, but some old rags were suspected.

Fig 5: Report 1948 Medical Officer of Health, Liverpool Port Health Authority. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

It was only in 1926 that the hospital saw its last case of bubonic plague from a watchman on the docks.

In this 1948 review of the hospital's work the very recent outbreak of smallpox was mentioned:

> *The last epidemic of smallpox in Liverpool in 1946, arose from cases arriving by sea, and was of a very severe type. Among the thirty cases there were nine deaths. The facilities of the hospital were invaluable in preventing the spread of this dangerous disease.*[6]

This was the epidemic Hannah was called on to nurse through. While she was doing her 'fevers certificate' a call came to Fazakerley Hospital, then an infectious diseases hospital, for nurses to help at Port Health Hospital. The matron begged for volunteers. Hannah said she would only go if her friend Naomi Davies would go too. At 23 or 24 years old they were about to go to nurse a very dangerous, life-threatening, and potentially disfiguring illness. Naomi was due to be married in the summer.

Hannah explained to me that the hospital was *'on the river. The Navy came to take bodies away for deaths from anything out of the ordinary.'* She said they had no protective equipment and *'no gloves'*. They had to start each day by lighting the fires and doing the cleaning. The smallpox had been brought back by some servicemen from overseas. She said there was also one sailor who had been misdiagnosed at first. Only about 20 years old, he was delirious. Hannah's memories were that his parents came to the hospital but could not be allowed in to see him. He did not want Hannah and Naomi to touch him, knowing he could infect them and kept shouting, *'Don't come near me'*. They looked after him all one night and he died in the early hours of the morning. Hannah told me that the only thing they could do for patients was to wash and clean their eyes and mouth for them. This tallies with the treatment spoken of in the 1947 review of the outbreak by Peirce in which he says the treatments include:

> *a) Constant attention to the eyes with (i) use of eye shades;(ii) use of penicillin eye-drops; (iii) bathing with warm boracic lotion*
> *b) Constant swabbing out of the mouth with (i) glycerine and boracic; (ii)*

glycethylamine for gargle.
c) A soothing application of calamine lotion.[7]

When I asked Hannah if she was frightened, she shrugged and said, *'you just had to get on with it'*.

The smallpox patients were *'covered head to foot with sores'*. Hannah was not complimentary about the hospital organisation. Never one to hold back, she complained to the authorities and there were improvements. When Port Health was eventually closed, and another hospital opened, Hannah was among the people consulted about the organisation of the new hospital. For her trouble in putting her life at risk during the outbreak, she was paid an extra shilling a week.

The smallpox was not contained and got into the community around the hospital. She told us that one doctor took it home with him and infected the family of someone who was working for him. Of the husband, wife and three children only the husband survived. This was later borne out by the reports I found.

When they thought the outbreak was almost over and she was about to go home a lady was admitted with smallpox who was pregnant with twins. Hannah had not done any midwifery but had to help her deliver the stillborn babies.

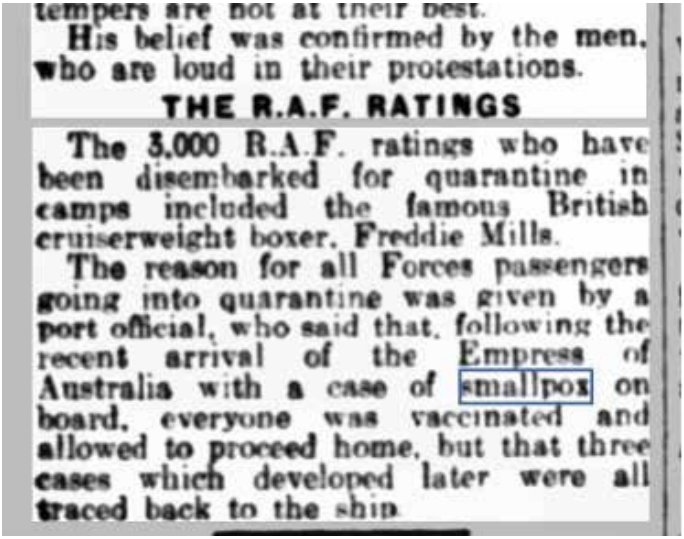
From what Hannah remembered when the outbreak 'petered out' those vaccinated had not died while the unvaccinated had. The same statement is made in the Medical Officers' reports. The infection left the living with terrible scars. She said it was a big shock to people.

Reports of the Outbreak in the Press

The first indication of the outbreak to reach the press was reported on the 19th of February 1946. A case was found on the Canadian Pacific liner *Empress of Australia* which came into Liverpool flying the *'Yellow Jack'* a signal flag that used to signify the vessel was harbouring a dangerous disease and needed to be quarantined. Dr W M Fraser Liverpool's Medical Officer described the case as *'mild'* to the *Liverpool Echo* and said it was of no possible danger to the community. By midday the ship was cleared of around 4000 passengers, leaving their names and addresses. Twenty-three year-old Patrick McMahon, who had the mild case of smallpox, and a child with chicken pox were taken to the Port Hospital at New Ferry. Three people with smallpox had been landed at Suez from the ship on its voyage from Bombay. In Suez service and port medical authorities had gone on board to vaccinate everyone and arrange precautions.

On the 2nd of March a further press item stated the Canadian Pacific liner *Duchess of Richmond* was placed into quarantine after landing the day before. It carried four suspected cases of smallpox. These were later confirmed, three RAF personnel and one Major of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). They were duly sent to Port Health Hospital. Port and military doctors worked to vaccinate the 3777 passengers throughout the day. We get the impression that things were becoming a bit more serious as the ship was not allowed to berth at the landing stage and was kept lying off Canada Dock. The ship had come from Bombay with 3492 RAF personnel and the rest from the Army, a few civilians and nursing sisters.

On the 4th of March it was reported that the RAF personnel had been disembarked for quarantine in camps. They included famous British cruiserweight boxer Freddie Mills. It was stated that the quarantine was necessary because after the passengers from the *Empress of Australia* had been allowed to proceed home further cases had developed out in the community.



tempers are not at their best.

His belief was confirmed by the men, who are loud in their protestations.

THE R.A.F. RATINGS

The 3,000 R.A.F. ratings who have been disembarked for quarantine in camps included the famous British cruiserweight boxer, Freddie Mills.

The reason for all Forces passengers going into quarantine was given by a port official, who said that, following the recent arrival of the Empress of Australia with a case of smallpox on board, everyone was vaccinated and allowed to proceed home, but that three cases which developed later were all traced back to the ship.

Fig 6: Liverpool Echo 4th March 1946

On the 6th of March leading aircraftman Percy Robinson, one of the four admitted to Port Health hospital from the Duchess of Richmond, died aged 37.

Concern for the community began following the news of cases which had occurred after passengers from the Empress were allowed to disembark and go home without restrictions. In the press during March Mr MacDonald the Medical Officer for Health for the Wirral asked the public in the borough of Bebington to *'consider'*

vaccination and revaccination against smallpox, in the first instance going to their medical practitioner. Dr Birchall advised the residents of Ellesmere Port to seek vaccination as well.
On 6th April it was reported that an additional five suspect cases had been admitted to hospital as a precautionary measure and that the Bebington outbreak was now *'under control'*. The outbreak had been *'successfully confined'* to one woman, a patient at Clatterbridge Hospital. Clatterbridge had its origins in accommodation provided for the treatment of infectious diseases for the Wirral Poor Law Union Workhouse in 1888, a purpose-built infirmary block being erected in 1899.

The outbreak was also complicated by the incidence of chickenpox in the area. In addition, a young woman, *'Audrey Tinnis',* whom the authorities wanted to contact was reported missing from home and was thought to have been in direct contact with the Clatterbridge case. 16-year-old Audrey was missing for over twelve days and no report in the press can be found giving news of her safe recovery. Her name, however, which was actually Timmis, was very much mangled by several newspapers. Happily, she did return home, unaffected by the smallpox outbreak, and in 1952 she married.



POLICE HUNT GIRL

MISSING "CONTACT" OF SMALLPOX CASE

New Ferry police are anxious to trace a 16-years-old girl contact of the Clatterbridge smallpox case.

The girl, Audrey Tinnis, of Beverley Road, New Ferry, has been missing since Friday, and is a direct contact of the woman patient involved. Her description, circulated over the police radio net throughout Merseyside and the North-West, is as follows:

16 years of age, but looks older; 5ft. 4-5ins., well built, fair hair, fresh complexion; is wearing blue dress and coat to match, brown shoes, and no stockings.

She may be unaware that she is a contact.

Fig 7: Liverpool Echo 2nd April 1946

Only two days later, on the 8th of April the Medical Officer for Wirral's words of reassurance were put in some doubt. A further suspected case was admitted to hospital,

an 11-month-old baby. The baby's parents were among three already under observation and the news item reported that there were in addition three *'actual known cases'*. The outbreak was understood to be confined to one family circle though the medical officer was trying to trace a patient, a Mrs Grace who had been at Clatterbridge Hospital with a minor injury and might have come into contact with one of the cases.

On the 12th of April a third ship, the *Britannic*, berthed at Prince's landing stage and a patient landed from the vessel proved to have smallpox. Customs baggage examinations were suspended and all further disembarkations from the ship were forbidden. The medical officer's report later clarified that a further patient was landed from the *Britannic* suspected of scarlet fever with haematuria. This was later found to be another case of smallpox.

The Daily Mirror of the 13th of April carried a tragic tale. One of the passengers who had been admitted to the hospital from the *Britannic* was five-month-old twin David Kinross. His brother Andrew had died on board on the ship's journey from Bombay. They were the sons of one of the naval officers. David was rushed to hospital when the *Britannic* docked. Five nurses working in relays through the night watched his cot. One of those nurses will have been Hannah. The senior medical officer on board the liner said that the babies had been ill when brought on board the ship.

The naval petty officer also removed from the troop ship *Britannic* died on the 14th of April. I believe this to be the young man Hannah spoke of whose parents were not allowed to see him. She mentioned an initial misdiagnosis. This young man was Petty Officer Peter George Brown, born in 1924. A photo of him in his naval uniform has been given by his sister. She remembers her parents coming to Liverpool to retrieve his body. Hannah remembers them being at the hospital before his death but not being admitted.



Fig 8: Petty Officer Peter George Brown (1924-1946) photograph from Peter's sister.

In Birkenhead on the 20th of May four further cases were found in the community. A 12-year-old boy, whose father and elder brother and sister were isolated the previous week, was admitted to

Port Health Hospital. The article stated that *'one of the two women who died from smallpox in Birkenhead last week was a known contact'* with the family. In fact, one was his mother. This will have been the family Hannah told me about, who she believed had contracted it because she thought the mother was a cleaner for one of the doctors in the hospital. In this respect her memory differs from the account in the Medical Officer's report which states that the father had consulted the doctor earlier on in the outbreak.

On the 22nd of May came the tragic report that *'three people had died within 24 hours'* in Birkenhead, *'all members of one family'*. They were the Tomney family. Their mother had died earlier. The children were Dorothea (15), Joseph (17) and Terence (12). Hannah had told me how only the father had survived. She talked about the way the father must have felt as he left the hospital. More than fifty years after the event it seemed like she could still see the poor man walking out of the hospital gate. The press reported that visits to hospitals and old people's homes were suspended.

On the 25th of May four new cases had been diagnosed in the Liverpool area, three adults and a four-year-old boy who was a patient at Fazakerley Hospital. Infections within the hospital must have caused quite some alarm. All four were transferred to Port Health Hospital, often referred to as the Port Isolation Hospital. Worryingly, the Liverpool cases were independent and not traceable to cases or contacts previously reported. This sort of event would be the tipping case for more widespread alarm. A new case was reported in Birkenhead. There were now ten patients with smallpox being treated in the New Ferry hospital.

The concern carried on for a couple of weeks. By the 5th June there were hopes that the problem was easing with no new admissions for a whole week. But on that day the wife of someone admitted to the hospital over three weeks previously came down with the disease.

More occurrences were reported. On the 10th June a woman from a family of six in Wirral was admitted to the Port Health Hospital. Again, officials could not trace any contact with previous cases. Another Birkenhead woman, the daughter of two people already in the hospital, was admitted with a *'mild case'*. The news was that there were five people in the hospital with a further five people having already died. The figures are always rather patchy in the press. They don't tell a clear story and perhaps that is inevitable as they are from a press scurrying about to keep up and the number of different medical authorities involved. The Medical Officer of Health reports are more substantial when it comes to actual numbers.

The concern led to regular reports in the press and the level of anxiety can be gauged

by the fact that on the 11th of June the papers were happy to record that a day of respite had gone by with no new cases recorded. Everyone must have been on tenterhooks by that time.

On the 12th though the news was sad again when it was reported that a mother with smallpox in hospital had given birth to stillborn twins. She had been admitted with a mild case on 10th June and her parents were already in the hospital. This was the woman whose stillborn twins Hannah had delivered with no maternity training. Like the young sailor and the father whose family all died this woman's tragedy was seared into Hannah's memory.

Medical Officer of Health Annual Reports of the Period

Ellesmere Port
There were several authorities involved and it is a surprise to hear what feels like a slightly different account from each authority.

The Ellesmere Port Medical Officer of Health report of 1946 brushes lightly over the outbreak with the statement that:

> *'During the early months of the year there was some anxiety concerning smallpox. Large numbers of servicemen and women were returning from the Far East and sporadic cases of smallpox occurred throughout the country. There were in addition small outbreaks in neighbouring districts, and numerous contacts were kept under careful observation in the Urban district.'* [8]

Bebington
The following extracts from the report of the Bebington Medical Officer of Health show the extent of the fear the smallpox outbreak caused. There remained uncertainty about how it had spread. There was evidently some anxiety in the Bebington community that the Port Health Hospital was in its midst as the report takes pains to explain how near cases might have been to the hospital. He states that while *'aerial infection of smallpox is now discountenanced…the occurrence of the disease in our area…compels attention.'* The death rate from the outbreak is given at 29%. Smallpox demanded serious precautions:

> *It is significant that the outbreak we encountered formed part of a Merseyside outbreak, and that from 9th February to 2nd July, 1946, there were 31 cases admitted to the Port Sanitary Hospital, New Ferry. Of these, seven were landed from troopships (two deaths); eleven occurred in the City of Liverpool (two deaths); ten in Birkenhead (five deaths) and three in*

Bebington.

The first case was admitted from a troopship on the 18th February. The first Bebington case was taken ill on 19th March, and is presumed to have been infected on 6th March. Detailed inquiries by myself and the Chief Sanitary Inspector failed to elicit any information relative to contact with any suspicious source. The woman lived 5/12ths of a mile from the Port Health Hospital and she daily visited a house 1/3rd of a mile from the hospital. These visits necessitated passing within 1/12th of a mile from the hospital. It may be that the aerial infection of smallpox is now discountenanced, but the occurrence of this disease in our area following the admission of cases to the hospital compels attention.

Dr C.O.Stallybrass, the Deputy Medical Officer of Health, City of Liverpool, in the paper read to the North Western Branch, Society of Medical Officers of Health in September 1946, points out that the death rate in this outbreak was 29 per cent. He states, "In its severest form smallpox is a frightful disease and the management of an outbreak put a heavy burden of responsibility upon all concerned."[9]

The report tells of the dedication of all the staff involved in managing the outbreak.

A second outbreak occurred on 9th June when a woman, 24 years of age, was removed to hospital suffering from a moderate attack of smallpox. She lived 5/6ths of a mile from the Port Health Hospital. There was no known contact with either our first two cases or with any cases in any other area.

The fact that a ring was drawn round both these outbreaks indicates the efficiency and painstaking work of my department. They did not spare themselves; the office was kept open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day.

Port Health

The Port of Liverpool Medical Officer of Health report for 1946 found it a very significant event. It showed the value of the Port Health Hospital. It stated that:

In addition to seven seaborne cases, eleven cases of smallpox were admitted from Liverpool, ten from Birkenhead and three from Bebbington. Of the Liverpool cases nine recovered and two died. Of the Birkenhead cases five recovered and five died, the three Bebington cases recovered. Two of the seven which were landed from troopships also died. Seven had died at sea on board the ships.

	Died en route	Landed from ships	Liverpool	Birkenhead	Bebington
Cases admitted to Port Health Hospital		7	11	10	3
Recovered		5	9	5	3
Died	7	2	2	5	0

The table below, published in 1947, gives an indication of the spread of the disease

TABLE

DATES OF INFECTION (DATES OF ADMISSION TO THE PORT HEALTH HOSPITAL IN THE CASE OF SHIPBORNE CASES) OF ALL SMALLPOX CASES OCCURRING DURING THE OUTBREAK ON MERSEYSIDE DURING THE FIRST HALF OF 1946

Date of admission to hospital	Date of infection	Borough in which case occurred	Group No. within Borough	Case within Group	Name of patient
Feb. 18	—	Seaborne	I	1st	Patrick McM. "Empress of Australia"
Mar. 2	—	"	II	1st	Norman O., "Duchess of Richmond"
" 2	—	"	II	2nd	George M. "
" 2	—	"	II	3rd	Charles B., "
" 2	—	"	II	4th	Percy R., "
—	Mar. 6	Liverpool	I	1st	Doris L.
—	" 7	Bebington	I	1st	Mrs. T.
—	" 19	Liverpool	I	2nd	Florence L.
—	" 21	Bebington	I	2nd	Robert T.
Apr. 7	—	Seaborne	III	1st	John T., "Orion"
—	Apr. 11	Birkenhead	II	1st	Joseph T., Sen.
" 12	—	Seaborne	IV	1st	Peter George B., "Britannic"
—	Apr. 12	Liverpool	II	1st	Ellen J.
—	" 18	"	III	1st	James W.
—	" 28	Birkenhead	I	1st	Mary B.
—	" 28	"	II	2nd	Margaret T.
—	" 28	"	II	3rd	Dorothea May T.
—	" 30	Liverpool	III	2nd	Alice H.
—	May 1	Birkenhead	II	4th	Joseph T., Jun.
—	" 3	Liverpool	III	3rd	Esther S.
—	" 4	Birkenhead	II	5th	Terence T.
—	" 4/7	"	II	6th	Elliott C.
—	" 4	"	III	1st	Robert R.
—	" 6	Liverpool	II	2nd	Graham T.
—	" 8	"	II	3rd	Marie W.
—	" 16	"	II	4th	Margaret L.
—	" 17	"	III	4th	John William S.
—	" 18	"	IV	1st	Joseph D.
—	" 19	Birkenhead	III	2nd	Sarah R.
—	" 20	Bebington	II	1st	Mrs. Anne D.
—	" 26	Birkenhead	III	3rd	Mrs. Sheila L.

Fig 9: From The Smallpox Outbreak on Merseyside 1946 E.R. Pierce, Public Health January 1947

over this period.

It is from the Port of Liverpool Medical Officer's report that we get an indication of the many near misses there were in terms of ships involved in smallpox which landed in Liverpool at this time. As well as the ships detailed from press reports there were several others of concern. The *SS City of Hong Kong* arrived on the 11th of March, reporting having landed a member of crew suffering from smallpox at Beri Bunder on the 6th of February. The *SS Orion* landed on the 7th of April. One smallpox case had been landed at Suez and a further one was on board. He was taken to Port Health and ultimately recovered. On the 4th of May the *MV Georgic* reported landing two cases of smallpox in Suez and one in Gibraltar. The *MV Georgic* had also caused a scare earlier in the year when on the 2nd of March a case was removed which turned out not to be smallpox. The same occurred on the *MV Ernebank* on the 26th of March. [10]

It is quite evident that this was a dangerous period for the city and the vigilance and precautions taken by the Port Medical authority and the contribution of the hospital at this time were vital.

Liverpool

The Medical Officer of Liverpool report showed yet another perspective. As we heard before eleven cases were admitted to the Port Health Hospital with two deaths occurring. The disease was *'variola major of a severe type'*. The first two cases were thought to be traceable to a soldier returning from India on a transport on which there was known to be smallpox. The second group of cases also occurred from contact with a returning soldier who had been initially misdiagnosed as having scarlet fever. Two out of four people in this group died. Children were especially vulnerable. The deaths were a girl and boy of five and six years old. The third group was very *'disquieting'* as the source of the fever could not be identified. It led to a *'house-to-house search'* in Everton for cases of illness. The report tells us that in that year *'the sanitary inspectors made 8426 investigations relating to cases of infectious disease, involving 10528 visits to infected houses, and 1047 visits to phthisis (tuberculosis) cases, also 7438 inquiries made to suspected smallpox contacts'*. The public health department was certainly kept busy that year. The report states that widespread epidemic was only avoided by rapid vaccination and daily observation of all known contacts. Liverpool's *'vaccinal state'* was also stated to be high which led the city to be better able to weather the outbreak. *'Revaccination for medical officers, nurses, sanitary inspectors, health visitors, ambulance drivers and attendants … was carried out thoroughly and expeditiously'*. An interesting statement was made regarding mass vaccination:

> *It is noteworthy that mass vaccination of the public was not undertaken.*

Mass vaccination is not to be undertaken lightly. It is not only difficult to organise if it is to be effective, requiring a large amount of medical help additional to that normally at the disposal of the department, but the resultant absenteeism due to real or fancied incapacity is disturbing to commerce. It was decided, therefore, to refrain from mass vaccination until there was clear evidence that the outbreak was out of control. This decision was justified by events. [11]

Birkenhead

The Medical Officer of Health for Birkenhead had the sad duty of reporting 50% mortality from the cases Birkenhead had experienced. The first group of six comprised a medical practitioner and the family mentioned above of whom four died. The father of the family and the medical practitioner survived. The second 'group' comprised just one woman of 29 years of age who was unvaccinated and died within 24 hours of admission to hospital.

The efficacy of vaccination is highlighted. '*Of the ten cases reported in Birkenhead five had never been vaccinated and died. The remaining five had been vaccinated on one or more occasions and all recovered*.'[12] This is just as Hannah said.

The report pays tribute to the dedicated staff who worked tirelessly throughout the outbreak.

There is no doubt, as we recently witnessed with Covid, that there are everyday heroes among us who come to the fore during such periods, putting themselves at great risk to manage the dangers of destructive infectious disease. Hannah was one of these. A young woman barely out of training, she remembered this period all her life as one requiring exceptional energy and a robust character. Hannah's friend Naomi was due to be married, and part way through the nursing of the outbreak they experienced a traumatic death which made Naomi decide to leave in the middle of the night. The threat of lasting disfigurement from smallpox sores was alarming. Hannah was woken the next morning with breakfast on a tray by the sister on



Fig 10: Hannah Heery 21 June 1923 - 16 Feb 2022

duty who begged her not to leave as well. Naomi got married later that year and, as was the requirement then, had to leave nursing.
Another family story tells of her brother Matty Heery taking treats to her, food, magazines and cigarettes, to leave at the gate of the hospital where she was confined to the grounds for six weeks. She went on to work in the Fazakerley Infectious Diseases Hospital for many years where she nursed cases of leprosy, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, measles and whooping cough. She remembered caring for veterinary students and dock workers who had caught diseases from handling hides, including anthrax. She described the distressing intravenous treatment they had to undergo. She saw the wonders of penicillin becoming available for treatment. She retired from Fazakerley Hospital in June 1983. She lived to the ripe old age of 98 which may be partly ascribed firstly to her having nearly died of diphtheria in 1936 when she was a young girl – her sister Sheila did die from it - and then going on to get tremendous immunity from all the diseases through which she nursed people. She lived through Covid too.

The Port Health Hospital in New Ferry closed in 1962. In the end, the buildings were deliberately burned down by the Fire Department in 1963. The flames could be seen in the sky as far as Runcorn.

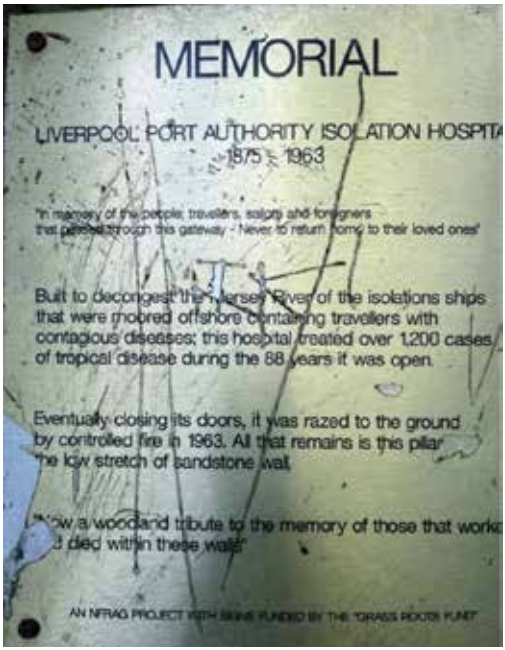


Fig 11: Memorial Plaque on the site of the former Port Sanitary Hospital – Author's Photograph

A memorial plaque states that it has been placed:

In memory of the people; travellers, sailors and foreigners that passed through this gateway – never to return to their loved ones. Built to decongest the Mersey River of the isolation ships that were moved offshore containing travellers with contagious diseases; this hospital treated over 1,200 cases of tropical disease during the 88 years it was open. Eventually closing its doors it was razed to the ground by controlled fire in 1963. All that remains is this pillar and the low sandstone wall. Now a woodland tribute to the memory of those that worked and died within these walls.

Endnotes

1 Mersey Port Health Authority Website - https://www.mersey-pha.gov.uk
2 E R Peirce, The Smallpox Outbreak on Merseyside 1946, Public Health, January 1947
3 See https://wellcomelibrary.org/moh/about-the-reports/
4 New Ferry Online https://newferryonline.org.uk/1875-1899
5 The Liverpool Mercury 4th March 1875
6 W M Frazer, Port of Liverpool Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the year 1948 (Liverpool, C Tinling and Co Limited, 1948)
7 E R Peirce, The Smallpox Outbreak on Merseyside 1946, Public Health, January 1947
8 L Wilson Evans, Ellesmere Urban District Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the year 1946, Typed manuscript. Wellcome Institute Library
9 D O Macdonald, Borough of Bebington Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the year 1946 (Rock Ferry, E A Murray and sons, 1946)
10 W M Frazer, Port of Liverpool Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the year 1946 (Liverpool, C Tinling and Co Limited, 1946)
11 W M Frazer, Report on the Health of the City of Liverpool during the year 1946, (Liverpool, C Tinling and Co Limited, 1946)
12 F G Foster, County Borough of Birkenhead Annual Report of the Medical Officer for 1946, (Birkenhead, County Borough Council, 1946)