

Troopers Hill Smallpox Hospital

A major controversy raged in St George in 1888 over the construction of a [Smallpox](#) Hospital on Troopers Hill. It appears a hospital was necessary in St George due to the decision to close the infectious hospital at Eastville workhouse to non-pauper smallpox patients.



The original site on Nags Head Hill having been rejected due to the level of opposition, an alternative on Troopers Hill was selected at a meeting of the St George Local Board in March 1888. An order was then given to a contractor build the hospital within 14 days.

The 12 bed wooden structure was located 132 yards from St Aidan's church (then on Cassey Bottom Lane) the same distance from Mrytle House on Troopers Hill Road and 243 yards from Air Balloon Road, this locates it on the relatively flat area of the Hill next to what is now Greendown and confirms [Tom Fry's](#) report of his father telling him it was in the north-east corner of the Hill.

There was a strong local campaign to get the hospital removed with many letters to the local papers, meetings of local ratepayers on the Hill and a petition.

The reasons for objecting were mostly given as a wish to protect the open space 'Trooper's Hill was the only place of recreation open to the children and adults the parish'. Concerns about drainage were also raised but the main reason was highlighted in a letter that said 'Lady Somers would not have given her consent for the site of this small-pox hospital on Trooper's Hill had she known that it was bring small-pox into a neighbourhood where no small-pox was'.

More direct action was taken at the end of April 1888, when there was an explosion apparently caused by gunpowder placed next to the hospital and ignited. There were also threatening letters written to William Butler as chair of the Local Board and even an attempt to set fire to the Tar Works. There were claims that this was an attempt to discredit the campaign.

The land was leased from Mrs Somers who owned the Hill at the time, apparently with the condition that she could give three months' notice at any time to have the structure removed.

The hospital was only on the site for a short time as it was reported in July 1889 that 'in deference to the agitation against it' the owner of the land had called upon the Local Board to take it down. It was to be moved to a quarry at the top of Holmes Hill. The report noted that 'An isolated fever hospital is now a necessity in every populous district. Even in the small-pox epidemic when it did such good service, none of the serious consequences to the neighbourhood which many predicted, resulted so far as we can learn'.

A celebration to mark its removal took place in September 1889.

Due to the short time it existed the hospital does not appear on any local maps at Troopers Hill. At Holmes Hill a report from 1894 refers to the Local Board giving 'notice to leave' to the owners of dwellings next to the site so that they could extend the hospital to provide for 40 patients, this 'Hospital (Infectious Diseases)' is shown on Holmes Hill Road on the 1990 OS map, just north of an old quarry.

Extracts from reports in the Western Daily Press and the Bristol Mercury are shown over the page.

Troopers Hill Smallpox Hospital - Extracts from Newspaper Reports

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8th March 1888 Report, Western Daily Press, Meeting of St George Local Board

The report of the medical officer (Dr. Barton) for the month of February stated:—"My attention has been called to the last report of the Medical Officer Health for Bristol, wherein states that some cases of small-pox the Barton Hill part his district were imported from St. George. Inquiries show me that that was the very district from which the disease was imported into St. George, and into Whitehall School".

"I may mention, as an interesting case, that all the children removed the hospital, except one, were vaccinated and had the disease very mildly; the un-vaccinated one had it very seriously and died."

THE HOSPITAL SITE.

The site selected for the infectious diseases hospital on White's Hill was being strongly objected to by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Under those circumstances the question had again been considered, and a spot on Trooper's Hill decided on, provided the sanction the owner could be obtained. This second site, he was of opinion, was much more suitable than the one on White's Hill. A deputation, consisting Messrs Stone and Cox, appeared before the board to object against the hospital being erected on White's Hill, and they recommended Trooper's Hill as a more suitable site. The Rev. E. J. (St. Aidan's Mission Church) also addressed the board, and said as the site selected on Trooper's Hill was within 132 yards of his church, hoped the board would not put the hospital up there. There was additional objection in the fact that Trooper's hill was the only place of recreation open to the children and adults the parish. A long discussion followed, and was pointed out that no matter what site was selected there would still be some opposition it.

12th March 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

The St George Local Board, after experiencing the greatest difficulty in finding a site for an isolating Sanitary Hospital, at first decided to accept their chairman's offer of a seven acre field at Nag's Head Hill...

The opposition at White's Hill, however, was so keen that at the adjourned meeting on Saturday the resolution was as to the White's Hill site was rescinded, and it was resolved to erect the temporary hospital on the top of the breezy Trooper's Hill for which site permission had been obtained. A member immediately gave notice of a motion to rescind their resolution at the next meeting. But we are told that Mr Brook, the contractor, on Saturday received the order to build the hospital on Trooper's Hill within fourteen days, since the motion to rescind will come about thirteen days after the building is erected, the mover will have to raze a hospital as well as rescind a resolution.

14th March 1888 Correspondence, Bristol Mercury

Sir – I quite disagree with "Nonentity" in all his views respecting the site for the smallpox hospital...

the site [at White's Hill] was most unsuitable, being entirely surrounded by houses, the inhabitants of which were unanimous in their objection to it, whereas the spot now selected is isolated and let at nominal rent. As to Troopers' hill being a recreation ground, I think it is mostly used for pigeon-flying on a Sunday...

22nd March 1888 Correspondence, Bristol Mercury

The opposition manifested by certain members of the boards is also shown by residents of the locality, who are more intense in their hostility to this proposal than they were to the other. In fact so aggrieved are they that a memorial protesting against it, beseeching the owner to prevent its completion has been signed by a large number, including the curate in charge of St Aidan's church.

With respect to Trooper's Hill being 'common land' I am aware that it is private property, but from time immemorial it has been the common place for all kinds of meetings, political and religious, and it has been the recreation ground of the children of the district also. As there is no fence, I ask how are the children to be prevented from approaching the hospital?

22nd March 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

As the hospital will be completed this week, it seems now too late to change the present site. The necessity for isolation was made apparent during the past fortnight when, according to one statement there were three deaths of heads of families, numbering respectively eight, seven and five.

The sanitary building on Troopers' hill will accommodate twelve patients, and there will be apartments for nurses, cooking &c.

26th March 1888 Report, Western Daily Press

On Saturday afternoon a meeting of ratepayers living in the neighbourhood of Trooper's hill, St George, was held on the summit of the hill, to protest against the choice of the site for the Small-pox Hospital... The building is approaching completion, and before the proceedings commenced it was inspected by several of those present.

Mr James moved and Mr Pomeroy seconded, a resolution protesting against the placing of the hospital on Troopers Hill, and pledging the meeting to use every legitimate means to secure its removal. It was carried unanimously, and cheers were given.

5th April 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

The Hospital Committee (Messrs Betty, Harvey and Verrier) reported that the building was completed and provided with two beds in each ward. The fees for admission and maintenance had not been fixed, but it was intended to make them as low as possible, so as to be within the reach of the labouring classes...

6th April 1888 Correspondence, Western Daily Press

The votes in the elections of five members of the St George's Local Board were counted yesterday...

As far as could be ascertained, the votes of several of the ratepayers in the neighbourhood of Trooper's Hill were influenced by the strong feeling against those retiring members who had advocated the erection of the smallpox hospital on the hill...

[Four members of the Board Mr Butler, Mr Jones, Mr Stone & Mr Harvey were re-elected]

7th April 1888 Correspondence, Western Daily Press

Sir - Will you kindly give publicity to a few facts which the inhabitants of Crew's Hole and neighbourhood urged upon St George's Local Board against the erection of the Small-pox Hospital on Trooper's Hill. It will bring the disease into a place as yet untainted with its infection, and which is the last place in the parish in respect to sanitary matters, there being neither drainage, water, nor lights. It destroys the only park and pleasure ground in the parish, where thousands of people resort in summer, and which is used by the children in its vicinity at all times. It encloses land which has been from time immemorial the common right of the people, and stops a public path which is in direct communication with the city.

We ask is there a local board which is so unreasonable and unjust as to deprive the poorest of its population of their healthy recreation ground?

I remain, Sir yours truly.

Thomas Pebworth, Whites Hill

12th April 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

The action of the Barton Regis Board of Guardians in deciding only to admit pauper patients into their smallpox hospital threw a great responsibility upon the Local Boards of St George and Stapleton. The members of these bodies had immediately to face the problem of providing the necessary accommodation with the limits of their jurisdiction. The St George's Authority boldly grappled with the difficulty, and resolved upon erecting a building for the reception of cases of infectious diseases upon Trooper's hill. Their determination has roused the ire of some of their constituents living within a measureable distance of the ground selected, and the wrath of the ratepayers will not be assuaged when they learn, as we are informed they will, that the cost of the hospital premises will be equal to a rate of a penny in the £1. The representatives of St George intend making an effort to induce the guardians to reverse their decision, and on Friday Mr William Butler will move a resolution affirming the desirability of admitting other than pauper cases to the workhouse hospital.

26th April 1888 Report, Western Daily Press

A mass meeting of the working men of Crew's Hole and neighbourhood was held on Trooper's Hill, when the following resolutions were passed unanimously:-

(1) That this meeting of working men begs that Lady Summers will use her influence in obtaining the removal of the Small-pox Hospital from this hill. (2) that the working men of ths neighbourhood condemn the action of the Local Board in refusing to remove the Small-pox Hospital, and wish to express their determination not to relax their efforts until they have compelled them to do so. (3) It is necessary, in the interests of the working men of the district, that a Ratepayers' Union should be formed.

The speakers in support of the various resolutions included Messrs J D Marshall, Pebworth, James, Pomeroy, Kent, Moss and Drake.

1st May 1888 Report, Western Daily Press

ATTEMPT TO BLOW UP THE FEVER HOSPITAL AT ST GEORGE

An attempt has been made to blow up the wooden structure at Trooper's Hill St George, intended to be used as a fever hospital. A string feeling exists in the neighbourhood against placing the hospital on the site which has been selected by the St George Local Board. On Sunday night the caretaker heard an explosion, and found that a quantity of gunpowder had been placed at one end of the building and fired with a fuse. There were no patients in the building, and the damage done was very slight.

1st May 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

SMALLPOX AT ST GEORGE ATTEMPT TO BLOW UP HOSPITAL

On Sunday evening, about 8.30pm, the watchman in charge of the smallpox hospital at Trooper's hill, St George, was alarmed by hearing a loud report at the north-east corner of the building. An examination showed that a quantity of gunpowder had been placed at the side of the building, and been fired by means of a fuse. A gentleman standing half a mile away says that flames shot up to a height of six feet when the explosion was heard, but fortunately the miscreants' want of knowledge of blasting prevented much damage being done to the building. Our correspondent states that this is not the only attempt which has been made to destroy the hospital since the agitation which has been carried on against it.

3rd May 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

Smallpox at St George – Threatening Mr Butler

Yesterday, at a meeting of the St George Local Board, Mr W Butler presiding, the subject of the recent explosion at Trooper's hill was mentioned.

The Chairman asked what the board were going to do about the hospital. They all knew what had taken place there. In addition to that, he himself had been threatened. He had been plainly told that unless the hospital was removed his doom was sealed...

There had also been an attempt to blow up the hospital. That was a great pity...

He had done all that it was possible to do in the matter, When the resolution was proposed at a meeting of the Barton Regis Board of Guardians to close the infectious hospital at Eastville against non-pauper smallpox patients, he opposed it to the utmost of his power...

Mr S Betty proposed that a reward should be offered in regard of the outrage at the hospital.

Mr J Lambert seconded, and the resolution was carried unanimously.

5th May 1888 Correspondence, Western Daily Press

Sir – I see in your Wednesday's Daily Press statements respecting the St George's Small-pox Hospital. Which I feel it is my duty to correct...

There is no drainage, the water from the small-pox hospital is running ____ down the hill towards my house, which is only 132 yards from the small-pox hospital. It is only 243 yards distant from Air Balloon Road...

Lady Somers would not have given her consent for the site of this small-pox hospital on Trooper's Hill had she known that it was bring small-pox into a neighbourhood where no small-pox was.

Thomas Pebworth,

Mrytle House, White's Hill, St George.

7th May 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

A number of ratepayers f St George having resolved to form a reatepayers protection association, a public meeting was convened for Saturday afternoon on Trooper's hill, "to elect a committee and consider what further steps shall be taken to obtain the removal of the smallpox hospital" Less that 100 people attended...

Mr John James said that one or two things had happened during the week which were startling and annoying to those who were doing what they could in the interest of ratepayers... He regretted very much that any attempt was made to blow up the building. But there was a worse job that that – the attempt to do injury to great employer of labour in the neighbourhood (Mr W Butler)...

He found in talking with other ratepayers, that considerable doubt existed in reference to the alleged outrage, and there was an idea that it had been arranged with the view of killing the opposition to the hospital by turning public opinion against it...

He considered it a scandalous thing that the Local Board should put the hospital in that place, because it was not intended for the working classes, and those who said it was were not speaking the truth. Mr Butler did not put the matter fairly to the people. He said they were dead against the hospital – they were not, but they were dead against it being placed on the only free open space in the parish (hear, hear). That ground had been open space "through all generations" (hear, hear), and the recreation ground for their children, but the Local Board, instead of improving the place, were taking it from them...

7th May 1888 Correspondence, Western Daily Press

Sir – I am surprised that such a mountain has been made out of a mole-hill with regard to the so-called attempt to blow up the Small-px Hospital at St George.

It is supposed that the powder was put in a paper bag, then placed against the building and lighted by means of a fuse. If such was the case, I venture to ask: Could the attempt have been a determined one, or merely a hoax? The latter is in all probability the case, for in a district where quarries abound, the inhabitants could hardly help being acquainted with the process of blasting; at least, enough to know that it would be useless to try to destroy a building by simply placing a small paper bag full of powder against it...

8th May 1888 Correspondence, Bristol Mercury

Sir – In the report published in your paper of this morning a meeting held on Trooper's hill at St George on Saturday afternoon, a Mr John James is said to have made many statements about me, not one of which has a single word of truth in it.

The matters connected with the present outbreak of smallpox are under the control of members of a committee of the board resident in St George, and both political parties are represented on it, and

they have large discretionary powers given to them, so they can act with promptitude in any urgent emergency, without waiting for a meeting of the board.

I am not a member of this committee, and have not attended one of its sittings; and when a meeting of the board finally decided which of the two sites they would fix upon – the one offered by me, or that by Mrs Somers (the only two available) – I abstained from going to the meeting, as I would not influence their choice in any way.

All negotiations for the sites have been carried on through the clerk, and he has reported his failures to the board; but I have never learnt that any other offer has been made of land for this purpose except the one made by myself.

We regard to the threatening letters written to me, they are at the service of Mr James at the police station, St George, and if he will inform me who wrote them, I will pay five guineas to the Bristol Infirmary in the name of Mr James, and send him the receipt.

Yours truly, William Butler, Clifton Grove, Clifton, May 7th, 1888

11th May 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

While Stapleton, Horfield and the Barton Regis Sanitary are still appointing committees to jointly consult over the provision of a sanitary hospital which they never provide, the St George's Local Board have not only erected their building in spite of an almost unprecedented agitation against it, but the building is actually occupied by patients. The outbreak of 20 cases in one school seemed to have aroused the board to a stern sense of duty, and (as they put their case), driven by the dire necessity of saving children's lives, they have persisted in their course, even against the outcry that they were depriving children of a playground. Many a board would have hesitated and flinched before such an agitation as that which has been raised against the temporary hospital at Trooper's hill, but the St George's authorities, in the face of threats and denunciations, have opened their hospital for the purpose of isolating smallpox patients.

11th May 1888 Correspondence , Bristol Mercury

The Sanitary Hospital on Troopers' hill, St. George, has now been opened for reception of patients, the committee having taken special advice on the question as to site and other matters which have caused so much excitement in the Local Board district.

In spite of the opposition to the site of the hospital at Trooper's hill, the committee appointed by the board made every preparation for the reception of patients, and on Saturday last the first case was received-a young fellow aged 20. This was speedily followed by two on the Monday, so that no time has been lost in turning the accommodation to account, and it is satisfactory to find that the patients, under the care of Dr Tighe, are progressing favourably.

Faithfully yours,

Sir- In his letter of Monday, Mr W. Butler charges me with having made many statements about him, at the meeting held on Trooper's hill on Saturday, not one of which had a single word of truth in it. . This is a misstatement, and one which needs refuting, so I will call Mr Butler's attention to what I said, First, I asserted that " if he had said the hospital should not be built on Trooper's hill, it would never have been erected there ;" and in support of this statement Mr Butler himself says that he stayed away from the meeting of the board, so as not to influence their choice in any way, thus

admitting the possibility of the truth of my assertion. Secondly, I said "it would never have been introduced into this neighbourhood, if Mr Butler had not first proposed to let one of his fields on White's hill for the purpose;" but the opposition proving too strong for him he gave in, and the board then obtained the consent of Mrs Somers to have it placed on Trooper's hill. This is known to be the case by those who have closely watched the proceedings of the board with regard to the smallpox hospital,

Yours truly, JOHN JAMES, Marling road, St. George.

14th May 1888 Correspondence, Bristol Mercury

SMALLPOX HOSPITAL AT ST GEORGE

Sir – Your correspondent of Thursday, who for some reason or other best known to himself withholds his name, has not attended the meetings of those in opposition to the site of the smallpox hospital on Troopers' hill, or he would not have made the statement he did with regard to no other site having been pointed out, Mr James has named several spots in St George for superior, with regard to isolation, convenience and sanitary arrangements...

I am of the opinion that if a poll was taken of those in the immediate neighbourhood of Troopers' hill, there would not be half a dozen in favour of it remaining where it is.

Yours &c,

W. Pomerpoy, Air Balloon hill, St George

16th November 1888 Report, Bristol Mercury

Everyone will regret to learn that the dreaded smallpox has again made its unwelcome appearance in the parish of St George. But at present there is only a solitary case, and the members of the Local Board, having passed through a bitter experience during the last visitation, are far better prepared to deal with any outbreak that they were last year. As soon as the case was reported at the parochial offices yesterday afternoon, arrangements were made for removal, and the patient was received at the Troopers' hill hospital in the early part of the evening.

10th July 1889 Report, Bristol Mercury

The St George's Local Board have had to yield to the force of circumstances, and are compelled, under the threat of legal proceedings, to remove the Hospital for Infectious Diseases which they had erected on the breezy upland known as Troopers hill. The institution has done good service, and it is to be regretted that, in deference to the agitation against it it was erected, the owner of the land has considered it necessary to call on the board to take down the structure. This of course they will do; but, as such a building is a sanitary necessity for such a large and densely populated parish, the hospital will be re-erected, and the probable site will be on the board's own property – the quarry at the top of Holmes Hill. This spot is an isolated one, and ought not to be objected to. An isolated fever hospital is now a necessity in every populous district. Even in the small-pox epidemic when it did such good service, none of the serious consequences to the neighbourhood which many predicted, resulted so far as we can learn.

16th Sept 1889 Report, Western Daily Press

The Small-Pox Hospital Troopers' Hill. —At a meeting ratepayers the parish St. George,, held on Saturday afternoon, Troopers' Hill, St. George, a resolution was passed, thanking Mrs Somers for her kindness in having Small-Pox Hospital, which some time ago was erected Troopers' Hill, ; removed. Ever since erection of hospital several ratepayers of the parish have been making strenuous efforts to have removed, on the grounds that Troopers' Hill had always been a place of recreation for children. Saturday's meeting was addressed by working men, after which selections of music were given by a brass band that was in attendance, and various amusements were provided for the large number people present.

31st January 1894 Report, Bristol Mercury

In reference to the acute tension between the various local sanitation authorities over the question of making proper provision for smallpox patients during the prevailing epidemic in and around Bristol, it is only fair to recognise the efforts which have been made by the St George's Local Board...

The St George people made some early provision for an infectious hospital by building one for the reception of smallpox patients at Trooper's hill about eight or ten years ago. That building was for 18 patients. When, owing to a notice received from the owner of the hill that they had to pull down the building, they removed it to "The Holmes" a quarry where the board had some property, about a quarter of a mile from the offices. Owing to representations in the face of the fact that they had four small cottages and two good-sized dwelling houses there with half an acre of land, the board resolved upon making still further provision, and six months ago they gave notice to the owners of all the residences to leave; and they thus will have provision for 40 patients.

Notes by Rob Acton-Campbell, research by Susan Acton-Campbell,

Friends of Troopers Hill, February 2020

www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history.htm