



R.T. Gould del.

Ioannes à Doetecum inv. circa 1593

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THE CUSTOMS QUARANTINE SERVICE

by *E. A. Carson*

EVER since the Great Plague the danger of epidemics being introduced into the Kingdom by the crews, passengers and the cargoes of vessels from infected areas had been very much in the minds of successive governments. Even before the Plague reached this country the Privy Council had received a report that the plague had broken out at Hamburg and Amsterdam, and the Corporation of London had requested that a King's ship should patrol the lower Thames below Tilbury and not allow any ships from infected ports to enter the Kingdom. It was suggested that a 'Lazarette' should be established for all other vessels from dangerous areas at 'Hole Haven', in a creek which would receive a hundred vessels. The vessels were to remain in quarantine for forty days and all apparel, goods, household stuff, bedding etc. were to be aired. If any person were to die within the forty days, the body was to be searched before being cast overboard. Only ships bringing a certificate from the port authorities from which the vessel had sailed were to be admitted.¹

When one considers the advance in medical knowledge since that time, it is remarkable how similar the procedure is in some respects to that of today. We still retain the categories of 'infected' and 'suspected' ports and the certificate from the port authority is not so far removed from the present-day Bill of Health.

It has been stated by Professor Fraser Brockington that the system of quarantine was first practised at Venice, when a 'Sanitary Council' was set up in 1348, and that the first 'lazaretto' was established in 1423. Britain first attempted quarantine in 1585 and Professor Brockington is very doubtful about its value at a time when modes of transmission of the disease were unknown. He did consider it possible, however, that the failure of the plague to reach this country in 1720, when it had already spread from Africa to Marseilles, could have been due to the quarantining of all ships. This course had been recommended by Richard Mead, physician to St. Thomas's Hospital, London and he had again recommended it in his *Treatise on the Plague* (1720).²

In the reign of Queen Anne word was received that plague had broken out in the Baltic and an Act³ was passed to enforce the performance of quarantine by vessels arriving from that area. The Act provided that

All Ships coming from Places infected, to make their Quarantine in such Place. &c as shall be directed by her Majesty, &c. No person shall go on board such Ships without Licence; and such Ships, Persons &c. shall be subject to the Orders of the Queen, &c. After the 25th of Dec. 1710, if any Master, &c. shall go on Shoar, &c. or permit any Person so to do, without Licence, the Ship, &c. shall be forfeited to the Queen. Persons coming on Shore, to be compelled to return on Board, there to remain during the Quarantine.

It was enacted that persons going on board a 'quarantined' ship had to remain on board during the period of the quarantine and punishments were prescribed for persons leaving such a ship. After quarantine had been performed, the goods were to be opened and aired. A further Act was passed in 1720⁴ regulating the procedure to be carried out on the arrival of vessels from infected ports. Masters of vessels were required to make a health declaration and those concealing information were liable to the death penalty or, if they gave untrue particulars, to a fine of £200. Persons leaving a vessel which was in quarantine were subject to six months' imprisonment and a fine of £200 and persons refusing to go to the quarantine station could be forced to do so by 'any kind of violence' and were also liable to the death penalty. Citizens could be ordered to keep watch on vessels in quarantine and goods could be ordered to be burnt, the aid of the Church being invoked in the reading of proclamations concerning quarantine.

On arrival within the territorial limits vessels were obliged to 'bring to' at Boarding Stations and the masters were required to report their ships within twenty-four hours and answer health questions. Customs Officers would hand what was known as a 'quarantine testament' or 'plague bible' to the master of a ship on the end of a pole or fastened to a rope, and the master had to make his report 'on oath'. In the vicinity of quarantine stations Customs Officers were stationed in order to keep watch and ensure that quarantine was not broken. Frequently the help of the 'dragoons' was sought when it was thought that passengers or seamen might attempt to get away by force.

In the Yarmouth Customs Letter Book of 1662-1722⁵ an order of the 22nd August 1721 gives some details of the methods used. The Board of Customs wrote to the Yarmouth officials as follows:

Gentlemen, Being informed that several bales of Cotton and other goods are come on shore on the Isles of Thanet and it being reasonable to believe that the same are part of the cargoes of the two Turkey ships lately burnt by Order of the King's Council on the Red Sand as coming from places infected with the plague, we direct you in case any Cotton Grogam yarn and other goods come on shore that may be supposed to be part of the cargoes of the above ships to consult with the Magistrates in what manner they may be most effectively destroyed and if they approve thereof you are to cause the sd. goods to be buried six foot underground on the shore as near low water mark as you can, taking care that the persons that bury do not touch the said goods but keep at as great distance as they can and gather

them together with Long Poles or Forks and with them putt the goods in to the Pitts dug for that Purpose but if the Magistrates shall be of opinion that it will be securer to have the said goods burnt you are to take care that when they are burnt, the Wind blows off the Shore and that the person concerned in the burning them keep at as far a distance as Possible to the Windward. And you are in either Case to apply to the Magistrates for a Guard to prevent the Goods to be Embazled by any of the Country people And also direct the Officers on the Coast to have a Watchfull Eye in order to prevent any of the Goods being carried off.

During the 1720 plague scare the Customs Collector at Dumfries reported that three large vessels hovering off the Isle of Man might try to land in the Solway as the Manx people would not allow them to land. He said that the smugglers had convinced the country people that the plague rumour was just a trick of the Customs to prevent the landing of goods. Plague did in fact break out in the Isle of Man and the Commissioners of Customs gave orders that 'none from the Island – whether infected or not – should be allowed to land from the mainland'. A party of the 'gentry of the Island' sailed to Whitehaven where they were 'beaten back to sea'. In despair they sailed down the coast to Lancaster. The Collector of Customs there reported his action as follows:⁶

We are here, Sir, in the utmost confusion by the plague being in the Isle of Man, and the people of that Island flocking to all parts of this coast in flat boats. We are ordered by the Commrs. above to keep watch strictly by the last post that none should land that came from thence, but notwithstanding about 12 o'clock last night ten men got ashore at Bolton, three miles from hence four sick and six in health. They fairly tell us that we must expect boats every hour, and more particularly one this night about 8 o'clock, with forty men – the gentry of that Island – who have been beat off from Whitehaven and are resolved to fight their way through here. The country has continued to flock in upon us all this day for assistance to keep them off our town. Arms are sent in carts, and our Collector has prevailed with the Officers to send two Troops of Dragoons, and we are expecting this morning to have an account of that dreadful affair.

Under the Quarantine Act of 1753⁷ all vessels arriving, persons coming, and goods imported into Great Britain or Ireland etc. from places where it was judged probable that the infection of the plague might be brought, were obliged to make quarantine in such a place and manner, and for such time as directed by the Order of Council, notified by proclamation, or published in the *London Gazette*. All persons etc. going on board such vessels and all vessels receiving any goods or persons from such vessels were also made subject to the same orders. If the plague actually appeared on any vessel north of Cape Finisterre, the master was obliged to proceed to the harbour of St. Helen's Pool, Scilly and report to a Customs Officer there, who would pass the message on. The ship could not in any case enter any port, and no one was allowed to leave or have intercourse with other ships or persons without permission from His Majesty or the Privy Council. Anybody disobeying this order would be adjudged guilty of

felony, without benefit of clergy. In the case where a vessel from an infected place attempted to enter a port, the principal Officer of Customs, or person appointed to see quarantine performed, had to go off and, at a convenient distance, demand the name of the ship, master, where cargo was loaded, at which places the ship called and if any of the places were infected, how long the voyage, how many persons on board on sailing, whether any were infected or had died on the voyage and of what sickness; what vessels or people they had been in contact with and where they belonged. Where any person on board was infected or the ship was obliged to perform quarantine, the officers of His Majesty's ships were obliged to force the vessel to go to the appointed place upon notice being given. A master, or person in charge of a vessel, concealing that he had come from an infected place or had anybody infected on board, was considered guilty of felony, without benefit of clergy.

A letter which reveals the difficulties of applying quarantine procedure was written by the Customs Collector at Dover to the Board of Customs in 1785.⁸ The Board had been informed that the hufflers and boatmen at Dover were 'so daring and inconsiderate of the dangerous consequences attending their having communication with ships liable to Quarantine that they actually brought such ships into the harbour and smuggled goods into the town'. The Collector confirmed that the hufflers and other seafaring people did in fact bring such vessels into the harbour – always without Customs permission – and pointed out that 'the Officers do not know where ships come from until they enter the harbour where they are hailed by the Tidewaiters at the Watchhouse and, even if they are liable to quarantine, they cannot be forced out to sea but are placed under restriction in the harbour as far distant from other ships as possible and guarded night and day by sundry officers'. The Collector also affirmed that he had caused extracts from the quarantine laws to be displayed in the conspicuous parts of the town most frequented by masters of ships, pilots, hufflers etc., in order to deter them from bringing quarantine ships in, but without effect. It is possible that there had also been a certain dereliction of duty on the part of the Customs service for section 22 of the Quarantine Act of 1801⁹ enacted that

if any Officer of His Majesty's Customs. . . shall desert from his duty. . . or shall knowingly and willingly permit any person, ship, vessel, goods or merchandise, to depart or be conveyed out of the said lazarette, ship or other place unless by permission under an order of His Majesty. . . he shall be guilty of felony and suffer death as in cases of felony without benefit of clergy.

The Privy Council was stimulated into action in 1804 when Yellow Fever spread from Africa into Southern Spain killing 100,000 persons in

Cadiz alone and more than a third of the population of Gibraltar. The College of Physicians was asked for an opinion as to how the infectious distemper might be prevented from spreading and suggested the imposition of quarantine in its strictest form and also the setting up of a Central Board of Health. The Privy Council accepted this suggestion and the establishment of the Board of Health was announced in the *Gazette* of May 1805. The life of this board was very short, for in August 1806, the Privy Council, while expressing its appreciation of the work the Board had carried out, recommended that, since there was no unusual or infectious disorder prevailing on the Continent, further meetings of the Board should be discontinued.¹⁰

In 1805 Quarantine regulations were issued requiring that all vessels bound for London, Rochester and Faversham should perform quarantine at Standgate Creek, those bound for ports from Leigh to Berwick at Whitebooth Road between Hull and Grimsby, those bound for ports from Carlisle to Beaumaris including the Isle of Man, at Highlake, Liverpool, those bound for ports from Sandwich to Cowes at Motherbank, those bound for ports from Poole to Scilly at St. Ives Pool, Falmouth, those bound for ports from Bridgwater to Swansea at Kingroad and Porschute Bill, from St. Ives to Aberystwyth at Milford Haven, for West Scotland ports at Holy Loch, for ports from Inverness to Stornoway at Cromarty Bay.¹¹

Further measures were taken in 1825, when an Order in Council of 19th July enumerated the goods liable to infection. Pilots were given responsibilities and were obliged to obtain from the masters of vessels an account of the places at which they had loaded and touched and details of the cargo shipped. They were also obliged to hoist the proper signals and bring the vessel to when required to do so by a Quarantine Officer. The Customs Officers were required to ask the master or surgeon certain questions and then, according to the answers, issue a Notice of Detention or a Quarantine Certificate. In 1826 a further Quarantine Act¹² was passed and was the basis of procedure for the remainder of the century.

The quarantine system did, however, come in for a good deal of criticism throughout the century, particularly during the cholera epidemic of 1831-2 when attempts were made to enforce the controls more rigidly in an effort to prevent the spread of the disease. Because of the delays caused to shipping, mercantile interests were particularly affected and those representing them were vehement in their protests. In 1831 a proclamation was issued enjoining the observance of all laws of quarantine and when the threat of cholera became severe the government enforced a fifteen days' quarantine on all ships coming from infected ports in Russia.¹³ This was

later extended to those coming from any part of the Baltic or Germany. In response to petitions from merchants and shipowners asking for some relaxation the Privy Council decided to appoint medical superintendents and empowered Customs Officers to admit vessels to 'pratique', that is to release from quarantine vessels which had received a certificate from a medical superintendent. Medical opinion was divided as to the effectiveness of these preventive methods and during the 1848 cholera epidemic when a new Public Health Act was passed¹⁴ the Board of Health was actually opposed to quarantine so that in November 1848 the restrictions on incoming shipping were lifted.¹⁵ After the last great outbreak of the disease in 1866 the quarantine system was re-examined and, though not discredited, was relaxed. By this time nations had begun to co-operate in the interests of health and to discuss together the ways and means by which epidemics might be controlled.¹¹⁶

It is interesting to note that in 1827 ten vessels were recorded as arriving at the Motherbank Quarantine Station,¹⁷ all of which except two had clean Bills of Health. In 1828 the number of vessels so recorded had risen to fifty-three, most of which were clean, in 1829 there were fifty-six, in 1830 the number had risen to sixty-four but in 1831 there was a tremendous jump to 633. In 1832, however, the number had dropped to 234 and in 1833 to forty-six. The figures then remained fairly steady until 1841 when they rose to eighty-nine. After that they fell steadily and in the last recorded year 1896 only four vessels were shown. Even so, in 1889 Quarantine Regulations were issued in which it was stated that the Quarantine Act of 1826 was the basis on which all order rested and that an abstract thereof had been prepared and was to be issued to all masters clearing out and should be affixed in a conspicuous part of the vessel. It was also stated that the advance of medical science and cleanliness had been so great that 'any danger of introduction of disease into the United Kingdom had been tremendously minimised and the Privy Council Authorities have in consequence reduced the number of fixed quarantine stations to one, which is at the Motherbank, a roadstead of Ryde, in the Isle of Wight. There are here two of Her Majesty's ships, the *Edgar* and the *Menelaus* lent by the Admiralty to be used in case of need'. Detailed instructions as to the method of disinfection were also given in these regulations.

The Public Health Act of 1896¹⁸ repealed the Quarantine Act of 1826 and the administration of quarantine was transferred from the Customs to the Local Government Boards. The 'quarantine hulks', the old men-of-war, at Motherbank and Stangate Creek were relinquished and the old Customs Quarantine Flag of a crown on a yellow ground no longer flew from Quarantine Custom Houses.¹⁹

Modern communications ensure that Port Medical Authorities are warned in advance if a vessel approaches a port with an infectious disease on board but there are still scares from time to time and the Customs service of today still plays an important role in the enforcement of the Public Health Regulations for it is still the first duty of a Customs Officer boarding a ship from abroad to ask the 'health questions' and, if satisfied with the answers, to issue a Certificate of Free Pratique or otherwise to issue a Modified Pratique or to detain the vessel pending medical inspection.

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