Veganism interactive
A closer look at veganism

Narrator:

Whether or not you are vegan, or know any vegans personally, you've probably noticed veganism becoming more prominent recently, whether on food labels, in the news, or being a topic of discussion among family, friends or colleagues.

You may also have noticed that the topic of veganism often raises strong opinions, stimulating heated debates on social media, or in comments pages under online newspaper stories about veganism.

Sometimes in these debates, things can get personal, with the historical roots of veganism and the motivating ideas behind it getting buried… [pause] so let's do a bit of digging!

Many people across the world have sought ways to live without harming or exploiting other animals for centuries, long before the word vegan was thought up. But these basic ideas underpinning veganism lacked a word that summed up and concisely communicated these ideas.

The first people to call themselves 'vegetarians', in Britain in the early 1800s, were what we would now understand as vegans - not only did they eat a plant-based diet, but they also sought to avoid other ways of using other animals that were commonplace at the time, such as for transport or agricultural work.

But after over 100 years of vegetarianism, the term had a more limited association with avoiding eating meat, including within the British Vegetarian Society. Some of the Society's members were unhappy with this limited scope of vegetarianism. The new group needed a new word to differentiate themselves from vegetarianism. It was in this context that a young couple closely involved with this new group: Donald Watson and Dorothy Morgan, on a night out dancing at the Palais de Danse in Leicester, came up with the word 'vegan'. Equipped with the new term, the new group formed The Vegan Society, in 1944.

While the ideas behind veganism have a long history, 'veganism' was first officially defined by an early member of The Vegan Society, Leslie Cross, and was adopted as the Society's official definition in 1951: "The word veganism shall mean the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals".

One of the key tasks that this new Society set out to achieve was to uncover all the hidden ways that other animals were being exploited, such as investigating animal ingredients in toiletries and cosmetics, as well as in food and drink – to put this in sociological terms, the early pioneers of veganism focused on exposing the extent to which social structures depended on exploiting nonhuman animals.

Veganism is still primarily concerned with ending the exploitation of animals.

Paying attention to the harmful consequences of exploitation that veganism highlights can itself be a painful process and experience, but by working towards ending exploitation, there's no longer any need to distract ourselves from the harmful effects of exploitation, and we can start to recognise all other animals as subjects, different from humans, but no less interested than us in living their own lives.