

**Early Modern Medicine
Research Group**
at
**Manuscripts and Special
Collections, University of
Nottingham**



**Anthology of project work
2023**

From April to September 2023, a group of community volunteers undertook a research project with Dr Rebecca Moore, Exhibitions Officer, to catalogue medicinal herbs and their uses in remedies in manuscript and printed material held at Manuscripts and Special Collections. Over 3400 records have been created which cover approximately 200 years from the early 1600s to the late 1700s. The research can be searched on the Reading Room PC, please ask a member of staff for assistance.

Volunteers took part in various workshops throughout the project, including book making, cyanotypes, creative writing, embroidery and foraging. These workshops, and the research work of the project inspired the group to respond in different ways, and this anthology contains a selection of that work.

Thanks to the Institute for Policy and Engagement for funding the project.

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Alisander's Journey | Gail Webb

A species named as Alexanders,
known to the ancient Romans,
grows green on clifftops,
thrusts its way along roads,
motorways. It spreads, multiplies.

Lime flowerheads sprout,
Yeah, they say, we are a feast for you,
an edible hedge, a life-force.

It drifts, billows, wafts in winds,
hardly bends in a gale, waves
at history passing by,
gleeful at its own survival.
What can it say?

It may tell of battles, wars,
ravaged countries and their peoples;
of scarred surfaces, hollow mountains.

Alisander fills spaces we cannot.
We smell baked earth,
hear the jostle of market traders,
imagine strolls on Mediterranean shores.
Seeds fall. They know what it takes to survive.

Germination in warm soils sows the hope
of renewal, leaves studded with scarlet jewels.
It finds a refuge here, in the British Isles.

With a heritage of myrrh,
from Macedonia, imagine its journey
through space and time.
It is welcome, brings flavour, medicines,
now naturalised, perfectly at home.

The Ballad of the Cherry Tree | Trish Kerrison

In Mrs Willoughby's Housekeeping Book (Vol 4) of 1737, to which Mother Bird is a frequent contributor, there is a receipt for Plague Water – it lists fifty-two ingredients, the last of which, cherries, are noted as being optional.

We heard it first at Evensong,
the dreaded plague was back among
city-dwelling folk, we must seek
out ancient remedies to keep
in readiness, must say a prayer
to God to guide our footsteps where
grow the blossoms, fruits and leaves,
the roots and grasses, herbs and seeds.

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

A woodcutter's daughter, I must
gather in the woodland harvest;
Sweet Angelica from the shade
of woodland fringes, much favoured
by Old Mother Bird in physicks
for settling of stomach sickness.
Wood Sorrel, in abundance, green
with leaves to wash a liver clean
and the flowers of the Elder tree
most necessary for the ease
of lungs clogged by foul congestion
in the long cold winter seasons

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

Further along the woodland path,
where earth is damp and richly dark,
the finest Pennyroyal grows,
that makes the blood so well to flow,
and Celandine, bright yellow blooms
watery pains and ills to soothe
And deeper in the wood's dark heart,
where only fairies dare to pass,
Polypody of th' oaks display
many-fingered leaves as if they
were fabric on a draper's stall
not cures for sickness, bile and gall

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

In softer shade, Archangel grows
 fair comfort for old joints and bones
 and Lily of the Valley's frail
 white blooms to mend a heart that ails
 in the night when sickness spreads
 and man hovers 'twixt life and death.
 Enough! My basket overflows
 with remedies that nature grows,
 women now are a gathering,
 carrying their spoils like off'rings
 to long forgotten gods of earth,
 the village green, their holy church.

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

In twos and threes, the women wait
 to hear what next m'Lady says
 Old Mother Bird inspects each piece,
 m'Lady checks 'gainst her receipt
 til satisfied with ev'ry grain
 fifty-one gifts from God, Amen.
 Old Mother Bird mithers and frets,
 has no-one stored some cherries, red,
 since the harvest, seven-month gone?
 Then pray you the plague will not come
 'ere cherries hang down full and ripe
 for this herbage will save no lives.

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

M'Lady, she is unconcerned,
 listens not to Old Mother Bird
 thinks cherries only add some sweet
 'gainst the bitter of this physick,
 but Old Mother Bird lost her sons
 to plague, when cherries there were none.
 By their grave a cherry tree stands
 late planted by her grieving hand
 it blossoms pretty in the spring,
 but 'tis too short, the joy it brings
 for its cherries grow shrivelled, hard
 and bitter like her broken heart

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

The receipt is known, proved to cure,
 says m'Lady, talk you no more
 of this, we have no time to waste
 make haste to the kitchen, make haste.
 We crush our leaves and mix and grind
 the nuts and bark, and roots and rinds
 Boil and simmer many a day,
 sieve and strain, sieve and strain
 'til liquid runs as clear as glass.
 Carefully bottled, stoppered fast
 'tis stored ready for what may come,
 God bless us, and the work we've done.

Lord bless m'Lady's remedy

What if 'tis so that cherries, red,
 are the diff'rence 'twixt life and death?
 In the graveyard, Old Mother Bird
 casts down the tree with angry words,
 bows branches low, down to the graves
 of all the lives that were not saved
 cursed its saplings to bloom in spring
 but only bitter cherries bring.

The plague did not return this way,
 Thanks be to God, whose name we praise,
 Old Mother Bird now Rests in Peace
 but still, the Cherry Tree doth Weep.

Knotted Breasts | Gail Webb

Hold

each one

precious, soft,

like two fledglings

newly birthed, ready

to take flight in the world.

Sssh to stress, to all that hurts,

unknot yourselves, unravel ropes.

Comfrey will soothe, flatten out the bumps;

hands intuit knots, skeined flesh, entwined lumps.

What a Wise Woman Told Me | Denise Morton

That food is all around me if I
look up as well as down.
That there are mushrooms that can kill.
That I should not rely on Google
and ask an expert instead.
That sometimes even experts get it wrong.
That the best nettle seeds are female.
That you'll know them when you see
the droop of their threads like the heads
and arms of worn-out washerwomen.
That male nettle seeds stand proud and erect
and don't do a damn thing for you.
That one of her relatives burned at the stake
for healing the sick too well.
That Hibiscus (her cat) recently died.
That every night she still cries and cries.
That borage doesn't heal all grief.
That her daughter thinks she's lost the plot
and should join the W.I.
That her elderflower cheesecake is fit for a queen.
That she brews a fine fennel tea.
That it's scone as in stone, Not scone as in gone
and that jam goes first, not cream.
That hogweed and hemlock look much the same,
And should be avoided like the plague.

That the NHS is in a terrible mess.

That nature can relieve our distress.

That mugwort thins the blood,

that plantain weeds heal wounds,

that dandelions cleanse our insides out,

that violets soothe the throat and rosehips have vitamin C.

That her granddaughter's on TikTok though

she's not sure what that means.

That climate change is underway and Earth will burn one day.

That people seem to miss so much,

as they focus on their phones.

That she has no faith in politicians, policemen or priests.

That they've lost touch with the likes of her and me

as they're driven to their mansion-like homes.

That she's not afraid of dying but is not yet sick of life.

That she's prepared to make her peace when the time is right.

Wild Tansy | Gail Webb

"... stops the immediate flux of the terms in women" (if it is worn in their shoes!)

Nicholas Culpeper

Wear it in yer shoes, Tansy, tread upon it light,
it will crush yellow on yer soles, a sudden sight -

button flower heads pressed , disc florets,
gathered among meadows and in forests

bitter taste, fern-like leaves, aromatic smells,
mustard clusters conjure up sweet women's spells

flattened, subdued, the plant will do our bidding
to stop flows, rhythms, any other shedding

though it grows on the wayside, next to brooks,
it can be used by witches and by cooks

freckles, spots, pimples, sunburn disappear
every time this herb in vinegar comes near

fine, shining, silver leaves, this silver weed
frees women from terms they had not agreed

Wear it in yer shoes, Tansy, a secret we shall hold.
You dance upon danger, sunshine seeds, burnished gold.

Bloody Flux and the King's Evil | Jayne Muir

The byways, meadows and cottage gardens of Britain were once a vast larder of ingredients from which oils, ointments, tinctures, pills, poultices and reviving drinks were concocted to treat all sorts of illnesses and ailments. Although modern drugs rely more on the laboratory than the hedgerow, the healing properties of many plant and herb extracts have been scientifically proven: digitalis from foxgloves to treat some heart conditions; extracts from yew trees in the manufacture of chemotherapy drugs and aspirin from the bark of certain willow and birch trees.

Traditional remedies were passed from one person to another and some were written down in books, often alongside culinary recipes or religious texts. The University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections holds examples of such books, and in conjunction with the recent Plants and Prayers exhibition at the Weston Gallery, volunteers have been researching the cures and recording their ingredients to help with future research. Some of the remedies are simple, others are more complex and many are surprising.

According to the Archdeaconry of Nottingham Precedent Book (AN/P 283) someone with toothache in the 17th century might have been advised to apply a combination of hyssop and vinegar, whilst for 'teeth that are black or stink' the mixture was frankincense, sage and salt. Grease of a fox plus mustard and vinegar might help the cramps and wild tansy could staunch the blood. According to Margaret Willoughby's 18th century household book (MS 97/3), weak eyes could be treated with a mix that included rosemary, eyebright, betony flowers and clove bark, ground to a powder, mixed with tobacco and smoked. To ease toothache the juice of a roasted onion should be dropped 'into the ear'. For leg sores, 'let the patient stand in spring water' before applying a plaster of sorrel and egg white to the affected limbs.

Remedies for more serious complaints such as the king's evil (scrofula, a type of tuberculosis) also feature. One 18th century cure required ragwort and hogs' grease. Another consisted of wax, turpentine, sheep's tallow, barley meal and the 'urine of a man child not above 3 years'. The ingredients for a purgative to treat the bloody flux (dysentery) included rhubarb, cinnamon, opium and clarified honey. Treatments or preventions for the pestilence (probably bubonic plague) appear quite frequently and

range from a simple mix of lily root and white wine in the 17th century example, to a concoction of 40 different plants mixed with strong ale and best brandy in an 18th century recipe.

Some of the remedies are noted as 'proved' or 'approved' or include further apparent evidence of their usefulness, such as a gout prevention consisting of oil of honey and balsam, which 'helped an ambassador in Rome and he was never troubled with the pain any more'.

Some of these cures may well have helped, others we know were ineffective, but books like these give an insight into the illnesses and conditions that concerned earlier societies, as well the native plants at their disposal and the more exotic ingredients imported to Britain. A mix of strong ale, garlic, rue and scraped tin might have been used to treat the bite of a mad dog in the 17th century, but a shot of tetanus is probably more advisable today.

Annotated entry of Valerian from Miller's *Botanicum Officinale* | Sue Roe

Botanicum Officinale (1)

(2) Valeriana Major (Phu) Garden Valerian, Off. Valeriana hortensis, Garden Valerian, or Setwall, Ger. — hortensis, Phu olufatri folio Diofcorides, Garden Valerian, the Phu of Diofcoridis, C. B. Phu majus five Valeriana major, the great Valerian, Park.

The Root of the Garden Valerian is about a Finger thick, of a brown Colour, growing not deep in the Earth, but spreading itself a-cross with many large white Strings on each Side, which makes the Root appear like a large Scolofendra, or Caterpillar with many long Feet, of a very strong Smell, especially when dry; it shoots out several hollow chanel'd Stalks two or three Foot high, having the lower Leaves long and round-pointed, some whole, and others cut in, resembling those of Scabious, but that they are smooth; the Leaves which grow on the Stalks are also much more cut in. The Stalks are divided towards the Top into several Branches, having at each Divarication a long narrow Leaf, and at the Ends grow the Flowers in a Kind of Umbels, each Flower being a small, long, narrow Tube, divided at the Top into five Segments, with as many Apices,(3) of a white Colour; they stand on the Rudiments of the Seed, which, when they are fallen, grow larger, being longish, striated with a downy Top. It is usually planted in Gardens, though it grows wild in the Alpine Countries. The Roots are chiefly used.

“They are Alexipharmic, Sudorific, and Cephalic, (4) and are accounted useful in malignant Fevers, and pestilential Distempers (5); they help the Head and Nerves, provoke Urine, and bring down the Menses (6) They are one of the Ingredients of the Theriaca and Mithridate (7)

1. The *Botanicum Officinale* was a compendium of plants used by apothecaries for the treatment of disease and illness. It was published in 1722 by Joseph Miller (1668/9-1748). He was appointed Master of the Worshipful Society Of Apothecaries in 1738 and Praefectus Horti at Chelsea Physic Garden (1743-47).

2. The names of the plants are given, first in Latin, the Officinal name, then German; Discorides (40-90) was a Greek physician, botanist and pharmacologist.

C.B. was Caspar Bauhin (1560-1624) a Swiss physician, anatomist and botanist; Park was John Parkinson (1566/7 -1650), a leading herbalist, botanist and apothecary.

3. Apices were at the centre of the flowers?

4. These are the general properties of the plant: alexipharmic: being an antidote to poisons; sudorific: inducing sweating; cephalic: curing or relieving disorders of the head.

5. Pestilential distempers: infectious diseases.

6. Menses: this plant is one of many remedies in this book for bringing on menstruation; they could have been used as abortifacients.

7. Theriaca is one of the several cure-all compounds which apothecaries prepared. Initially used as an antidote to poison and venomous bites. It contained viper's flesh, opium, honey, wine, cinnamon, and more than 70 other ingredients. It could be taken orally or used in a plaster. Also known as Venice treacle.

Mithradite: also originated as an antidote to poison. It is supposed to have been devised by Mithradites VI King of Pontus as a protection against assassination by poison. It contained over sixty ingredients. Also known as English treacle.

Rembert Dodoens, *A new herbal or historie of Plants* | Tabitha Gresty

Since working on the Early Modern Recipes Research project, I have been constantly amazed by the breadth of medicine explored within this period. The text I studied was Rembert Dodoens's *A new herbal or historie of Plants*, which provides an almost encyclopaedic view of how to use herbs and plants to cure specific illnesses and ailments. However, what is perhaps also fascinating about the text, specific to the volume held by Manuscripts and Special Collections is the marginalia within its pages.

It is clear to see which herbs were viewed almost as cure-alls given the diversity of their applications mentioned within the text. The text describes these uses as virtues of the plant. For example, by my own count, the different parts of a plantain has 39 recorded uses from jaundice to 'fires of the belly'. Mugwort was considered to assist with keeping away venomous creatures and travel weariness. Now, obviously, the actual medicinal benefits provided by these plants is highly contentious and, given that poisonous plants such as foxglove are also included within some cures, some of these cures could actually endanger the user further. However, it does demonstrate which of these plants were more readily available, indicated by the frequency of their use. What is also interesting is that certain plants do seem to have affiliations with certain ailments: betony is connected several times with stomach and uterine issues, while water cress is connected with skin troubles such as blemishes and spots. This could possibly indicate a communal medical knowledge whereby certain herbs were widely believed to be linked to certain anatomical features or ailments.

In addition to the patterns of herbs and remedies, this particular copy of the text is interesting because of the marginalia within its pages. This text is widely annotated by a variety of hands. For example, the very first page of the text is inscribed with a cure for a mad dog bite, possibly a bite from a dog infected with rabies. Some of the annotations directly contradict the recipes. Within the entry for mercury (another example of a potentially dangerous remedy), the recipe itself states that 'The Barons mercury, or male Phyllon drunken, causeth to engender male children; and the maiden Mercury or girles Phyllon drunken, causeth to ingender girles, or daughters'. However the annotation beside this reads 'to get boys or girls'. This possibly indicates that the individual who annotated it saw that the remedy had little impact on the gender of the child. Despite the misguided and potentially dangerous nature of this remedy, it is particularly

interesting that someone else viewed this cure as mistaken with knowledge specific to their own time period.

This text is incredibly fascinating as it provides a sense of chronology with early modern medicine. It supplies us with the author's knowledge, perhaps gathered from the community around them. However, the marginalia provides us with different lenses. The various readers of this text have added their own input and knowledge, perhaps for their own notes or for future readers.