

Reading and practising medicine in 16th-century Stebbing:
Thomas Hull's book of remedies

How did the residents of Stebbing deal with illness and disease in the 16th century? From whom could they seek advice or treatment? And where did a medical practitioner's knowledge come from, in such a place?

Answers to these questions of life and death may be found in the pages of a medieval manuscript preserved at Cambridge University Library (MS Add. 9308). Made in the late 14th or early 15th century, this compilation of medical recipes and charms offers cures for everything from headache to sore feet, written in the vernacular language of the day, Middle English. More than a century later, this book came into the hands of one of Stebbing's residents, who wrote on its first leaf: 'This is Thomas Hull's book, of Stebbing' (f. i recto). Who was this Thomas Hull?

Fig. 1: Thomas Hull's ownership inscription (MS Add. 9308, f. i recto)

Such ownership inscriptions are not uncommon in medieval or early modern books, but discovering more about the people named is often not possible. Records may not survive, and if they do they have not been edited or transcribed and cannot be searched quickly or easily. Fortunately, neither is the case here. A remarkably rich trove of records survives for the main two Stebbing manors of Stebbing Hall and Porters Hall – most of which are held at the British Library – and these are the subject of an ongoing project to transcribe, translate and interpret them, conducted by Prof. Larry Poos of the Catholic University of America, in collaboration with Graham Jolliffe of the Stebbing Local History Society.

Thanks to their work, we know that members of the Hull family lived in the village from at least 1426, only disappearing from the records at the end of the 17th century. The style of handwriting used for the ownership inscription in MS Add. 9308 points to it having been written at some point during the 16th century. In response, the Stebbing project team were able to point to several Thomas Hulls that are attested in manorial documents and wills for this period, but further research will be needed before these names can be teased apart into discrete lives. Any one of them could have been the owner of the manuscript at Cambridge University Library, however one in particular stood out as a plausible candidate. This is the Thomas Hull who, together with his wife Alice, is named in an indenture of a lease agreed on 12th October 1553.¹ In the text, he is styled as 'Thomas Hull the elder, barber'. Furthermore, the signature that he added to the foot of the document is closely similar to that found in the Cambridge University Library manuscript.

Fig. 2: 'Thomas Hull the elder, barber' and his signature (Essex Record Office, D/DVx/6)

Barbers were one of a variety of medical practitioners in medieval and early modern England. They had begun to form trade guilds and companies during the late medieval period and by the 17th

¹ Essex Record Office, D/DVx/6.

century at least 26 such organisations were recorded in towns across England (though none is known in Essex).² They were professionally rather than academically trained, probably serving first in an apprenticeship, and were responsible for a range of minor surgical procedures, including bloodletting, as well as other simple medical treatments. Whether or not Thomas Hull had undergone such training, and whether or not he was or had been a member of such a guild, remains to be discovered. That he was given the status of barber in the context of a legal document suggests, though, that he was known to possess some medical knowledge and presumably was active in its practice. MS Add. 9308 described cures for a wide variety of everyday ailments, of a sort that a barber would have likely dealt with, and provided its reader with an accessible and practical guide, in place of the more formal knowledge and theoretical grounding that a physician would have gained through study at university.

Such compilations of recipes – often referred to as ‘receptaria’ – survive in great numbers from the late medieval period. MS Add. 9308 is one of several examples among the medieval manuscript collections of Cambridge University Library. It contains over two hundred separate medical recipes, as well as several performative rituals or charms that were likewise intended to heal the sick or aid someone at a time of distress. Each recipe and charm begins with a rubric or title, which briefly describes the illness that it will treat. With only a few exceptions, they are written entirely in Middle English, and thus bear witness to the increasing circulation of medical knowledge in the vernacular language of the day. Some of the charms, and the occasional rubric, are written in Latin, suggesting that some degree of literacy in that language was expected as well.

Fig. 3: Remedies for cleansing of the head, dizziness, and deafness (MS Add. 9308, f. 2r)

Recipes in these manuscripts are commonly organised in approximate head-to-toe order. The first in this manuscript deals with headache, cleansing of the head, vanity of the head (i.e. dizziness), ‘evil hearing’ (i.e. deafness), clearing the sight, red eyes, watering eyes and so forth. They continue down through the body, addressing aching or swelling in the legs, thighs or feet, shingles and ‘wild fire’ (i.e. erysipelas, an irritating infection on the surface of the skin). There then follows a series of miscellaneous recipes, covering everything from fevers and snake-bites to gout and sores, before the sequence returns once more to the top: ‘web in the eye’ (i.e. a film or cataract), headache, swelling or scalding of the head, and so on. Cosmetic recipes also feature, attesting to the desire to improve one’s appearance: how to get rid of freckles or skin blemishes (which could have been misinterpreted a sign of disease), how to whiten one’s teeth or face, or solve bad breath. More serious illnesses or injuries are also described, with treatments for ‘rankled wounds’, ‘canker on a woman’s breast’, bleeding, dysentery and broken bones. These are a vivid, sometimes visceral reminder of the pain and precarity of medieval life.

There are also a few guides to diagnosis and prognosis, such as to determine whether a skull has been fractured or not, to find out where canker breeds, or to know whether a sick man shall live or die. The latter instructed that he should be given to drink a juice made of chervil and pimperl: ‘if he cast it up’, it reads, ‘he is not curable’. For the patient who managed to keep this herb smoothie in his or her stomach, more was on the way: ‘[T]hen give him to drink, [over] three days, pimperl, bugle and sanicle and they shall come out through the wound and purge the wound of blood...’. If

² Margaret Pelling, ‘Barber-Surgeons’ Guilds and Ordinances in Early Modern British Towns - the Story so Far’, *Early Modern Practitioners: Working Papers*, 1 (2014) <<https://practitioners.exeter.ac.uk/working-papers/>>.

the patient has not been wounded, the medic should collect the patient's urine and cast it on a red nettle bush in the evening: '[I]f it be green at morning, he shall live; else not.'

Fig. 4: 'For woman that travaileth of child' (MS Add. 9308, f. 49r)

Treatments for specifically female ailments are common throughout and are not placed separately. They include cures for 'aching in the womb' and the 'menisoun' (period pain and bleeding), soreness in the breast and swelling in the womb. There is also a charm 'for woman that travaileth of child': that is, having a difficult labour. It invokes the names of important female saints and their saintly children – St Mary, who bore Jesus Christ; St Anna, who bore St Mary; St Elizabeth, who bore St John the Baptist; and so on – and sought their intercession by writing their names on a piece of parchment or paper and tying it to the woman's right thigh. 'O infant, come out, whether alive or dead, because Christ calls you to the light', it reads. Just such a 'birthing girdle' survives at the Wellcome Collection and proteomic analysis of surface stains proves that it was indeed used.³

The context in which these recipes were read, prepared and put to use was almost certainly domestic. The components used are predominantly simple, everyday things: household ingredients, such as milk, honey, wine or vinegar; animal fats such as pig fat or eel's grease; herbs such as rue, tansy, fennel, sage or rosemary; and common perennial plants such as speedwell, hollyhock or betony. The preparatory techniques again are straightforward, often involving stamping, beating, mixing, tempering and boiling the ingredients together, which processes would employ the same basic equipment required for cooking. One recipe instructed the reader to place the ingredients in the oven at the same time as dough; once the bread had baked, the ingredients would be ready for the next stage of preparation. It thus gave a guide both to appropriate temperature and timing in the absence of instruments of measurement.

The recipes often conclude with formulaic statements of their efficacy: 'Thou shalt be whole', 'On warranties' (i.e. guaranteed), or 'Probatum est' (i.e. proven). Occasionally medical authorities are cited: a drink for all manner of fevers or abscesses is attributed to 'ypocras philosophus' (i.e. Hippocrates). Towards the end, there are clustered together three recipes for 'gracia Dei' – a salve or plaster for cleaning and healing wounds – with endorsements by more recent figures: 'Lady Beauchamp, the earl's wife of Warwick', 'the good earl of Hereford...that was held [to be] a noble surgeon' and someone by the name of 'Obkyn Fermory of Kneesworth'. Kneesworth is a village north of Royston in Hertfordshire.

If this manuscript came into the hands of Thomas Hull only in the 16th century, what is known of its origins or earlier ownership? Small and simple though it is, MS Add. 9308 bears all the hallmarks of being the production of a professional, lay craftsman. The layout is uniform throughout, with a writing frame and sixteen lines ruled neatly on every page. The text is written by a practised hand in a semi-formal style of handwriting known as Anglicana formata. Initials painted in blue mark the beginning of each rubric, the rest being underlined neatly in the typical, contrasting red ink. The initials at the beginning of the text are slightly more elaborate, with fine pen flourishing in the margins and within the body of the letters, again in red.

³ Sarah Fiddymont and others, 'Girding the Loins? Direct Evidence of the Use of a Medieval English Parchment Birthing Girdle from Biomolecular Analysis', *Royal Society Open Science*, 8 (2021) <<https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.202055>>.

Textual evidence may be adduced to suggest further that the manuscript was one of multiple copies produced speculatively for sale to potential customers, rather than as a response to a specific commission (the usual mode in a culture of bespoke book manufacture). Closely similar groupings of recipes, presented in more or less the same order, have been found in other manuscripts in Cambridge, albeit copied by different hands and to different designs. Furthermore, the collection here was explicitly advertised as a compendium of all of the useful household medical knowledge that one might need. Before the recipes begin, the scribe copied a short poem, which introduces the contents to the reader and explains their usefulness, much like a modern-day publisher's blurb:

*The man that will of leechcraft lere, [i.e. learn]
Read over this book and he may hear
Many a medicine both good and true,
To heal all sores both old and new.
Herein are medicines without fable
To heal all sores that are curable:
Of sword, knife and of arrow,
Be the wound wide or narrow;
Of spear, of quarrel, of dagger, of dart,
To make him whole, in each part...*

Fig. 5: Introductory verse to the recipe compilation (MS Add. 9308, f. 1r)

Though the book was apparently created and sold as a discrete unit, nevertheless several leaves at the end were ruled but left without text, presumably in expectation that readers would want space to add further remedies that they had gathered or formulated themselves. Changes in scribal hand showed that this did indeed happen: a 15th-century hand added two remedies for gout; a later 15th- or 16th century hand added a recipe for verdigris; and a third, 16th- or early 17th-century hand added a cure for farcy in horses.

Fig. 6: 'This is the calendar of the medicines in this book written': a table of contents added to the manuscript by a later hand (MS Add. 9308, f. i verso).

An early owner also modified the book in order to facilitate its use as a reference book. Perhaps before the manuscript was first bound, a gathering of six leaves was added to the beginning, onto which another, less neat hand began to compile a table of contents. This scribe copied out the rubrics for each recipe, bracketing them together where they occurred on the same leaf, and keying these to the folio numbers he added to the leaves in the main part of the manuscript. Such apparatus initially developed in earlier centuries and primarily in texts for formal, academic study. This addition to MS Add. 9308 illustrates not only that they had spread by the 15th century to manuscripts produced for wider consumption, but also that their function and use was intuitive to late medieval readers who desired ready access to the contents of their books.

The manuscript also points not only to a widening of literacy in lay society, but also to a growing appetite for access to medical knowledge. This demand was mediated by the production of small,

portable, affordable (though not necessarily cheap) books, whose contents were written primarily in the vernacular, and aimed primarily at readers without academic medical training, but who were nevertheless aware of and wished to treat illness. Such books are one of a number of material and documentary witnesses to developments in late medieval people's attitudes to personal health and that of wider society: for example, civic ordinances to keep streets and drains clear of refuse or even pipe fresh water into towns and cities; the recording in wills and household inventories of equipment for washing, bathing and cleaning; and the establishment of guilds that regulated the training and practice of basic medicine by their members. As such, these manuscripts are an invaluable resource for historians of medicine and health seeking to understand how medieval people understood and approached illness and injury, how medical practices were developed, tested and applied, and how that information was transmitted through wider society.

In order to make the contents of this and other manuscripts more accessible, Cambridge University Library has been leading a major collaborative project entitled *Curious Cures in Cambridge Libraries*. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, the project is covering 186 medieval manuscripts that contain unpublished medical recipes, across the collections of the University Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum and twelve colleges. The manuscripts include recipe compilations and medical texts, but also non-medical books that include recipes written on their blank spaces or peripheries, thereby illustrating the many different routes by which medical knowledge was recorded, shared and disseminated. The earliest of them was made in the 11th century, but most were produced during the later 14th or 15th centuries. The majority were created in England, however the project encompasses manuscripts originating from across Europe – including Italy, France and the Low Countries – testifying to the international intellectual exchanges that enriched the knowledge of medieval medical practitioners.

Each manuscript is being digitised in full, with the images being published and made freely available on the Cambridge Digital Library. A team of dedicated cataloguers is composing detailed descriptions of each manuscript's textual contents, physical characteristics, origins and provenance, thereby placing the recipes in their intellectual, material and historical contexts, and enabling researchers to study them as part of a broader literate, medical culture. Conservation work will ensure the original manuscripts remain in good condition and safely accessible to researchers for the future.

Unusually for such a large-scale digitisation project, *Curious Cures* is also aiming to transcribe the text of these recipes in full. With perhaps 8,000-10,000 separate recipe texts over 7,000 pages, this is no small undertaking. As MS Add. 9308 illustrates, these simple instructional texts are short, usually anonymous, and highly variable; in almost all cases, they have never been published in print. To speed up this process, *Curious Cures* will use a platform developed by the University of Innsbruck called *Transkribus*, which uses machine-learning to enable scholars to create handwritten text recognition models. With sufficient training data, these models may then produce transcriptions from other, as yet untranscribed pages of the manuscripts, which outputs will then be checked and corrected by the project team – a faster process than manually transcribing each recipe.

By opening up the manuscripts' contents in this way, the project will enable historians of medicine to keyword search the recipes and find those most relevant to their studies. Researchers will also be able to compare different treatments for specific ailments over time, and better understand how particular recipes were formulated, tested and tweaked through the addition or substitution of ingredients, alterations to the quantities used, or the application of different preparatory techniques. Such a large corpus of transcriptions would also enable quantitative analyses: for example, to identify the most commonly co-occurring ingredients in treatments for toothache, nosebleeds, dry cough or diarrhoea. These could then form the basis for pharmaceutical experimentation, creating an opportunity for researchers to discover – or rather re-discover –

effective new treatments for ailments that have troubled the modern as well as the medieval readers of these manuscripts.

To find out more about *Curious Cures in Cambridge Libraries*, read blog posts or hear podcasts by team members, visit the project page at <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/curiouscures>

The digitised manuscripts are freely available via a dedicated collection on the Cambridge Digital Library: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/medievalmedicalrecipes>

Thomas Hull's book of remedies is now available to view in full via <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09308/1>

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