

Medical remedies from 18th. century Limerick

by Aideen Ireland



In 1964 the Public Record Office acquired a notebook compiled by members of the family of Rev. William Twigge, archdeacon of Limerick from 1705 to 1726 (M. 6231). It was probably the work of his wife Diana and daughter Jane (later Pery) and written between 1704 and 1715. The notebook contains a large number of recipes for baking cakes, preserving fruit and vegetables and making drinks. The remedies show the kinds of illness which were prevalent among the class to which the Twigge family belonged and throw some light on how people thought they could be cured or alleviated.

There are several remedies for childhood ailments such as jaundice, convulsions, rickets and whooping cough. One cure for convulsions, made of gold, amber, coral, sugar and herbs is for use in the case of a newborn baby, while others show children being given medicine in beer and ale which seem to have formed a normal part of their diet. Although the family was well off, the Twiggés obviously suffered to some degree from malnutrition. There are two remedies for rickets and one for scurvy, both conditions which are caused by vitamin deficiencies, and this is corroborated by the lack of any mention of fresh vegetables in the recipes, the only vegetables mentioned being pickled ones. They also suffered from respiratory illnesses - consumption, spitting of blood, coughs, asthma and pleurisy - and, not surprisingly, given the unbalanced nature of their diet, from stomach complaints. The recipes in the notebook include pastries and rich cakes made with vast quantities of eggs, butter and flour. The use of a 'purging ale' twice daily for a month in

spring and autumn was recommended as a preventative measure.

Most of the remedies are based on herbs, spices, sugar and alcohol, but there are also some stranger ingredients such as snails, earthworms, pigeons and woodlice. A number specify the milk of a red cow and butter made in the month of May, while a remedy for rickets emphasises that it must be used 'with the new moon or within a day of the change'.

The archdeacon himself suffered from gravel in the kidneys or gall bladder. The notebook includes five different remedies for this condition, one given to his wife by a Mrs Story and another by the Earl of Inchiquin. A loose page contains on one side a note from Mrs Twigge to an unnamed person:

"Sir, you wear speking sumthing of a bath that would most relive Mr Twigge which had has a grate mind to have, for he says his stomach will not bear taking a dhossing. Be plesed to ordr the making it as sune as you can that the sarvant may bring the things with him. I am your frend and sarvant, Diana Twigge".

The remedy sent in reply to this and written on the back of Mrs Twigge's note was apparently effective, as it is copied in the notebeook under the heading 'a bath for the gravill'.

"If you can readily get them white lilly roots bruised 2 handfulls and the same quantity of marsh mallow roots slitt thin and bruised mallow leaves and pellitory of the wall of each 8 handfulls brok between your hands,

chamomel 4 handfulls, rue 2 handfulls, wheat bran a peck or more sowed in a bag. Boile all in a large kettle of water untill the water is slimy, then put it into a large deep tub with the bran and herbs and put to it so much cold water as will make it but blood warm. So let the archdeacon sit in it to his middle half an hour or more. He must drink of his mallow posset while he is in it. After he is come out of it he must be lapt in a warm sheet and dryd to so put on his shift".

The Twigg's notebook contains 46 remedies for various ailments of which ten of the more extreme are printed below. It would be interesting to know whether they have any scientific basis or not, but experimentation is not recommended.

The receipt of the plurisy water

Take a peck of stone horse dung, put to it a gallon of white win, 2 ounces of liquorish, 2 ounces of methridate. Let all this lie in steep for 24 houres then put into your still and distill it with a quick fire. This water cures all plurises drunk 2 a day four spoonfules at a time.

For the bloody flux

Take a quart of new milk with a good handfull of the inner bark of an oake. Boyle them together till one quarter bee consumed. Let the patient take sume of this to or three times a day as his stomacke will permitt. If only a flux without blood, take the bones of fresh porke, burn them to powder and give it to the patient in brandy.

A salve for old sores and ulcers.

Take a quantity of deer's suet, a pennyworth of white lead, a pennyworth of frankincence, a pennyworth of mastick, a pennyworth of beeswax, the like quantity of resin. Beat the lead, frankincence, rosin and mastick to powder and boile in a sufficient quantity of sack. When you see it melted and come to the face of the skellet take it off and anoint your hands with oile and make it up in roles and bottle up the sack to wash the wounds.

The ingredients of the purging ale.

Take 6 ounces of senna Alexander, 6 ounces of polypodium of the oake, two ounces of bay berries huld, 2 ounces of anyseed, 12 drams of rhubarbe or if it be English rhubarbe halfe the quantity, 3 ounces of ashe keys bruised, 2 ounces of sasafra wood, one ounce of sarsaparella, 2 ounces of saldanella. All these must be bruised into gross powder except the senna. Then take 4 gallons of the first sprouting of strong worte, tun it up in a stand and put the above named ingredients into a canvas bag with hazelstick through the bag soe that the end of it may be out of it two inches below the botome of the bag or else put a stone in it to keep it from floating on the top with the barme and hang it soe it may come within 2 inches of the bottome of the vessell. Put barme to it and within two or three days as soon as it hath done working it will be fit to drink. It must be drunk spring and fall for a month together, in the morning fasting half a pint and about eleven a clock take a little warme broath, goeing to bed take 3 parts of a half pint and nothing after it.

To make the snail water for the consumsion or cough of the lungs.

Take 2 quarts of house snails well washt in water and salt five or six times over, their heads being cut off, one quart of earth wormes washt as the snails, chickweed, mallows, maidenhair, coltsfoot, hysop, aspeckane, liverwort, white horehound, ground ively, hartstongue, wild time and the tops of rosemary, of each one handfull. Pick and cleanse all these herbs very well and chop them with the snails and worms. Steep them well cleansed in red cow's milk for a whole night and let the milk cover

them a hair's breadth. Add to these one pound and a halfe of the best raisens of the sun stoned and bruised, one pound and a halfe of the best figgs slit and bruised. Then add a capon slaid and bruises to mash, two young pigeons slaid and bruised to mash, 4 ounces of liquorish scraped and bruised, 2 handfulls of parsly roots sliced and bruised. Then cover all the above named things ordered as above in a hand's breadth of red cow's milk in your limbeck pot, then put on your limbeck lid and let them stand and steep some time. Be sure to past your limbeck head that noe aire come out. Then draw your water with a pretty quick fire and put white sugar candy in the mouth of your receiver in a fine cloth for your water to run through. You must tak off your limbeck head for fear of burning. You may draw 5 or 6 quarts of water from the above quantity. You must put into each bottle of water an ounce of white sugar candy in powder. You may drink a glass of this water thus prepared morning and evening for some time and you will finde effects from it.

An excellent medicine for a stitch.

Take a turfe of the pareing of the floor where much goeing is and boile it on a gridiron. Bast it on both sides with vinegar and when it is broiled well put it between two foulds of a linen cloth and lay it on the place where the paine is as hot as you can well endure it and drink of the powder of bay berries in posset drink or broth. Do this till your paine be gone.

To heale a burn without a scarr.

Take a handfull of the yellow scurk that grows on old walls and halfe as much of the white of hen's dung and as much fresh hog's lard as will make it into an ointment. Let it boile well and then strain thro a fine cloth and keep it for use. It must be annoited with it twice a day with a fether and in a short time it will heal it.

For jaundice in children.

Good rhubarb cut into thin slices four scruples. Be pleased to put to the four scruples of rhubarb half an ounce of currants shrid to the weight of forty grains of cinnamon bruised. Boyle it gently in a quarter of a pint of water to halfe. Strain it, pressing it hard. Give the child a spoonfull of this every other morning and those days you do not, give her a spoonfull or two of the juice of rough dandelion with the third part of a spoonfull of honey and 3 or 4 spoonfulls of slender beer first in mornings and att 4 or 5 a clock in afternoons.

A receipt to make surfeet water.

Take 6 handfulls of cardus, 3 handfulls of the best spermint and 3 handfulls of wormewood. Strip all these from the stalkes. Unto these herbs put 2 gallons of new milk warm from the cow and let them steep all night. Then putt the milke and the herbs into a cold still and keep under it a soft fire that the milke curdle not and as they still, sometimes stir them that they grow not to the bottom of the still. The last runing is the weakest and best in a high fever. Both the first and the last is good against surfeets, feavers, agues, headakes, all distempers and in the stomach proceeding from heate or cold. A good wine glass full is the quantity usually taken.

To make the oyle for the rickets.

Take a handfull of maidenhair, an handfull of liverwort, one handfull senicle and as much hartstongue. Chop and bruise the herbs and put to them a pint of the best canery and a pound of butter made in May. Boyle them all together very well till it look very green and the substance be all out of the herbs, then strayne it and anoint the child with it night and morning for two months or longer. If need require a diet drink of the seame herbs is of good use in the seame distemper.