

Put in a large spider – a Caernarvon

Gareth Evans examines and interprets the herbal recipes in a pharmacists' notebook handed down to three pharmacists, all called Jones. The book is now in the hands of the daughter of the last of the three Jones pharmacists.

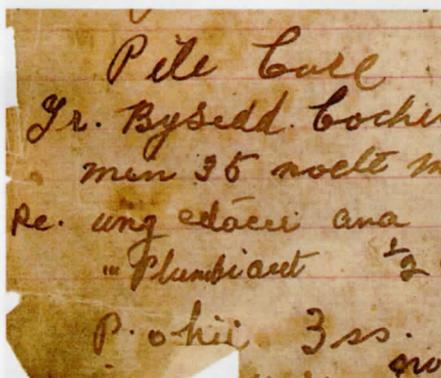
It has been suggested that within Wales the old-town pharmacists had inherited the public veneration once given to their predecessors, the 'old herb doctors'. If this is true then John Jones is an ideal candidate for this distinction (although neither group was totally male). Evidence lies in his surviving 19th-century notebook where he records prescriptions that were routinely made up for local farms and doctors.

However, unusually for this type of book, it contains many herbal recipes. At one extreme these are laid out like a medical prescription written in pharmaceutical Latin mixed up with English and Welsh. Otherwise, they are quickly scribbled notes, maybe either as inspiration struck him or from the mouth of an informant; the latter coming from the rich store of rural traditional practice found among farm families, gypsies and even navvies. Indeed, the total collection reflects the co-existing herbal cultures, both oral and published, that once thrived and interacted. We are fortunate that the book was valued by its successive owners so that we have the opportunity to glimpse into John Jones's multi-lingual mind, and I am personally grateful to the present keeper, Glenys Walters, for giving me the pleasure of working with it.

Piles (Navy Cure)

Plantain tea: Dail llydan y ffordd [lit. 'broad leaf of the road'; common plantain] *Coming down or Bleeding.*

Favouring the compacted soil by the side of roads and paths, common plantain (*Plantago major*) would have been a readily available remedy for pile-plagued navvies (railway or road workers). The combination of astringent and soothing constituents gives both the seed and leaf many medicinal uses but it was probably the latter that was imbibed for piles.



John Jones's Book

Even in the context of Wales it should be noted that this book has been in the possession of three successive 'John Jones' who were related only by profession.

My father, John Glyn Jones, a young man from old Caernarvonshire, North Wales, completed his apprenticeship as a pharmacist in 1931 under the tutelage of John Humphreys Jones MPS*, owner of Castle Pharmacy in Caernarvon, a shop situated on the main town square, directly opposite the magnificent medieval castle there. When the young apprentice moved onto further study, his employer presented him with a Victorian notebook, handwritten in a mixture of English, Welsh and pharmaceutical Latin, containing about 170 pharmaceutical recipes, including many herbal and veterinary remedies. John Glyn treasured the book until his death in 1969. The notebook's original owner had been a third John Jones (1831-1907), a pharmacist who had served his apprenticeship in Pwllheli from about 1848 to 1851, and who bought Castle Pharmacy in 1870. He was a farmer's son, as his own apprentice-master had been, hence the large number of veterinary and herbal remedies contained in the book.

Glenys Jones Walters

*Member of the Pharmaceutical Society

A page from John Jones's book showing information on Pile Cure

Pneumonia

Take 6 to 10 onions according to size put in a large spider over a hot fire then add same quantity of rye meal and vinegar enough to form a thick paste, stir thoroughly let simmer 6 to 10 minutes, then put in a cotton bag large enough to cover the lungs and apply to chest as hot as bearable in 10 minutes apply another thus continue by reheating the poultices and in a few he will be out of danger continue using until the perspiration starts freely from the chest.

This is one of the most detailed entries. A complete treatment is described, comprising ingredients, quantities and regime. The application of onion poultice is recorded as if it was dictated hastily with the informant present. It was recognised as a treatment that was 'an excellent application' in milder cases (no insects were harmed in the course of this recipe, a 'spider' is a metal bowl with legs).

Poultice Gipsy Mattery Bruised leg.

Marshmallow @ Tansy
P. Aequal [1] [1] (in equal parts)

The root of marshmallow can contain 25-35% mucilage, a property that has been exploited for medicinal uses down the centuries. Local botanist Hugh Davies described how the boiled root is provided an emollient plaster. Present in equal parts is another equally common wildflower, tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*). 'Tansy has been used externally with benefit for some eruptive diseases of the skin, and the green

pharmacist's herbal recipes

leaves, pounded and applied, will relieve sprains and allay the swelling' (Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal*, 1931). 'Matter' in this context refers to a festering wound.

Glenys Walters writes: My father's apprentice-master John Humphreys Jones (1879-1949), inherited a large ancestral farm near Caernarvon, and was an extremely knowledgeable herbalist. His nephew recalled that each summer a group of gypsies came to do casual work on his farm, led by a black-haired old woman who was 'full of herbal remedies'. He remembered this one for eczema: 'Fill a top hat with dial gron (pennywort) and put into a pan. Mix with goose fat and simmer with water. Let it set and it makes an ointment'.

Ringworm Cure

fol Sambuci

elder leaves (folia sambuci)

fol Digitalis

foxglove leaves (folia digitalis)

Llysiau pen to houseleek

fol. Plantain

plantain leaves (folia 'plantain')

Dail gron navelwort, or pennywort

ft. Ung.

Fiat unguent, 'make into an ointment'

This delightfully eclectic mix of pharmaceutical Latin, Welsh and English is what gives this book an extraordinarily rich and personal quality. It appears to be scribbled down without any quantities maybe from memory, or extempore as a mixture that might be worth trying out.

The round dimpled leaves of navelwort are often seen in Wales, Cornwall, Devon and the south of Ireland in the crevices of walls and rocks. It was a popular ingredient in remedies in rural Wales and is notable for being reported in use in the Caernarvon area, as recently as 2004, in a remedy for shingles together with woodsage and greater stitchwort.

Liniment

*Agrimony & Solomon's Seal
Toz each, boil in quart of water
& bath the patient lying on a
table belly upwards.*

The root of the graceful Solomon's seal has a long reputation as a remedy for bruises. The tall, slender, yellow-flowered agrimony makes a pleasant tea but is here used externally. Nicolas Culpeper (1616-1652) states that 'by bathing ... with a decoction of this plant [it heals] all inward wounds, bruises, hurts and other distempers'. Culpeper's Civil War London seems a long way from Jones's Victorian Caernarvon. However Culpeper's herbal writings have been a mainstay of British publishing since his death; indeed what is largely a Welsh translation of *The English Physician* (*Y llysiuylfr teuluaidd*: gan Nicholas Culpeper) was published in Castle Square, Caernarvon, in the 1880s by Hugh Humphreys. This popular edition is considered to be one of the first printed herbals in a country otherwise noted historically for its strong oral traditions.

Cure for Swelling Rheumatic

*Steep blood red onions in
Holland's Gin and
take freely.*

Qualities attributed to garlic and onions include anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, expectorant and, as utilised here, anti-rheumatic. The presence of gin as a solvent rather than pharmaceutical spirit or alcohol may indicate the domestic origin of this recipe.

Herbal Sciatica remedy

*Wysgen lwyd [mugwort]
Tea, freely partake of.*

The unspectacular mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) was identified here by the Welsh name (g)wysgen lwyd literary 'grey haulm' or 'grey stems'. This is an apt description of what we know today as a weed of

waste land with inconspicuous flowers. However in Northern European pre-Christian culture its place was one of veneration, being sacred to the thunder gods. Its use in Welsh traditional medicine was very varied, although its place was significantly usurped throughout the country by its more glamorous overseas cousin, wormwood (*A. absinthium*). Generally recommended for sciatica in the past, other Welsh traditional uses include treatment of worms, loss of appetite and heart conditions. The uninhibited dosage instructions in the recipe would be frowned on today as we now know of its mild narcotic properties, which may help to explain its ancient reverence.

Healing Ointment

*Plantain husk, Young elder
bark, Red rosin, Mutton suet,
Olive oil*

*Resin to thicken and roll out in
sticks of salve.*

In this domestic recipe the soothing mucilage of the humble plantain is combined with the soft green inner bark of the elder. The solidifying base is of readily available suet in which the plant material was probably cooked then strained, the mixture is then stiffened by the addition of rosin (colophony, or pine resin) to be made into salve sticks. The latter technique is possibly a refinement by the pharmacist to produce a commercial item from a traditional source.

Editor's Note:

In Gareth Evan's article on George Herbert published in *Herbs* Volume 38/3, George Herbert's dates were incorrect. They are 1593-1633.

Gareth Evans, a freelance writer and researcher specialising in the history of botany and medicine, is a regular contributor to *Herbs* magazine. He has worked in and with botanic gardens for 16 years, and was a co-ordinator for the Welsh programme 'Plants & Medicine' of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2009, Washington DC.