

The Simpling Life

Gareth Evans takes us out on the road to find the vanished herb gatherers, country people, of the past whose business was to gather wild herbs.

During the centuries when herbs, or to be exact, the remarkable substances they contain, were the major sources of medicines, how and where was the bulk of the plant material obtained?

Herbs have always been grown and gathered for personal use, but how did city dwellers and medicine makers have access to raw ingredients? This article was prompted by an engaging early 19th-century print by John Thomas Smith (1766-1833) of three herb gatherers. They were referred to as simplers by Smith – a name derived from simple, an old name for a single medicinal herb. Proponents of a long-vanished occupation of which little was recorded in word or image, simplers are only mentioned marginally in medical and botanical literature.

Often confusingly referred to under the catch-all term, herb women, they appear as a distinct occupation from others that have been given this label: herb growers, market stall-holders, village herb wives and herb 'doctresses'. Not that there was ever an inflexible demarcation in roles.

Through their foraging, simplers were complementing the supply of medicinal plants grown in the many specialised nurseries. Many collected herbs that were too difficult to cultivate or that the 'physic gardeners' judged had too small a demand. This article, however, focuses on those country people whose business was to gather wild herbs; it was said of them that they were once as common as 'tinkers and sweepers'.

One of the best-known references to simplers is found in the childhood reminiscences of Sir Joseph Banks. Struck by the beauty of the wildflowers around Eton School, the 14-year-old teased 'every material piece of information' from the women at sixpence a time. This was an early example of his ability to pay his way, which was later to secure his passage on Captain Cook's first circumnavigation. Banks's 'herb women' were 'employed culling simples to supply the Druggists and Apothecary shops'. This was at a time when both these professions were eager to acquire status in the vertiginous medical hierarchy. Appearances were to be kept up. The unfortunate East Anglian doctor and poet George Crabbe (1754-1832) was to discover his patients' disdain for his medicines when they mistakenly thought he was picking his own herbs.

The great reliance of the medical profession on simplers was invoked to scare young apothecaries into knuckling down to their botany studies. William Curtis lectured his students: "How degrading for one of this honourable profession to be under the necessity of trusting to ignorant collectors of herbs, who may impose on him Cow-parsley for hemlock, or the leaves of Mullein for those of Foxglove."

This is by far the most polite of the medical references to herb gatherers. In what might seem to be a reversal of

expectations, apothecaries were ordering from the herb gatherers the nominally poisonous hemlock and foxglove that were then of current therapeutic interest (after the published works by Anton Störck of Vienna and William Withering of Birmingham). Could it be that, in this instance, by substituting similar-looking anodyne herbs for the well-known toxic species the simplers were showing an understandable caution?

More typical plant misidentifications may have been of a less sensational order. Such a one is described by Curtis when discussing the sharp-pointed dock, listed in the contemporary pharmacopoeia to be used for scurvy and skin conditions: "a plant that is by no means well understood, either by Botanists or Simplers, both of which in their turn mistake it for other species".

Herbals, and the later medical botany literature, routinely list the common errors of simplers.

Nonetheless this substantial rural industry continued uninterrupted for centuries, during which time individual relationships of mutual understanding and trust must have no doubt existed. There were evidently simplers of all sorts who supplied fresh plant material to whoever required it, from members of the public to physicians. In the larger towns and cities the simplers sold to specialised shopkeepers who then supplied the apothecaries and general public. There was a celebrated London herb shop (Butlers) on the south side of Covent Garden Market that became sufficiently substantial to be eventually termed a warehouse.

Simpler's List

Smith lists the herbs that the simplers maintained were in constant consumption: water-cresses, dandelions, scurvy grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*, which was both cultivated and wild-gathered for the popular 'spring juices' made with a combination of citrus, watercress and nettles), bitter-sweet (woody nightshade, *Solanum dulcema*), cough-grass (probably the demulcent couch grass, *Elymus repens*), feverfew and hedge mustard, jack-by-the-hedge or sauce-alone (garlic mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*). The following additional list of medicinal plants offered by simplers is the result of a non-exhaustive search of other contemporary sources: common buckthorn berries, dwarf elder, scabious, houseleek, comfrey, violet flowers, valerian root, ox-eye daisy flowers, bogbean, wild marjoram, wood sorrel, speedwell, field poppy flowers.

A soldier-turned-simpler was described as having not only the strength but the good eyesight required for his occupation. Knowledge of significant locations for particular species was part of their expertise since a key part of the simpler's role was to collect herbs to order. This local knowledge was occasionally called upon by passing tourists with a botanical interest. Long miles



Above: The print published by John Thomas Smith in his book, *The cries of London: exhibiting several of the itinerant traders of antient and modern times* (London 1839) was the starting point for Gareth Evans research into the foragers of another era.

Below: Dandelion is one of the plants that were constantly in demand on the simplers' lists.



of travelling were part of the job, both to find locations and then to bring the material to market. Simpler's joy (vervain, *Verbena officinalis*) is a wildflower that was thought to grow only in the vicinity of human habitation. Depending on how this has been interpreted, the simpler's happiness stemmed from starting the day knowing that this much-used herb was probably not too distant or, alternatively, it was from the anticipation of shelter at the end of a long day.

Some sites could be quite remote. Phillip Miller recorded that vitamin C-rich sea scurvy grass was abundant within the tidal zone of the salt marshes in Kent and Essex, the markets being supplied by people "who make it their Business to gather this Herb". It has been mooted that some loss of local plant populations may have been due to excessive commercial gathering for medicinal use. There is such a case local to me: the demand for stinking hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*) for use as a vermifuge (to treat intestinal worms) might have caused the loss of its previous 'abundance' in a wood on the Gower peninsula at sometime in the mid-19th century.

The simplers' lot

The customary emptiness of the countryside that we are used to today was far from the norm in the past. The noise of work, and working people, made some of the more leisured classes long for the calm of Sunday. Smith starts the text that accompanies his print by telling us that "those people who live in the country and rise with the sun can bear testimony to the activity of the Simpler." He describes a male simpler who gathered mushrooms (interestingly, also leeches, snails and vipers) who slept rough in barns. This also appears to be the mode of living of the women themselves for, although they had a fondness for brass rings on their fingers, their clothes are as ragged as those of the man. "Their faces and arms are sunburnt and freckled, and they live to a great age, notwithstanding their constant wet and heavy burdens, which are always carried on the loins".

Smith's prints

An appreciation for the routinely overlooked was no doubt a valuable quality for Smith in his post as Keeper of the Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. In the published collections of his own prints he applied it to such subjects as 'shambolic antiquities', 'fast ruinating cottages' as well as 'remarkable beggars'. His artistic eye focused on the simplers as part of a 'picturesque' view of the world. Nevertheless in his written description he does show some consideration of the simplers' lot (not always the case with his other subjects). In doing so he is one of the few contemporaries to portray simplers without a professional axe to grind. "To the exertions of these poor people the public are much indebted, as they supply our wants every day; indeed the extensive sale of their commodities, which they dispose of to the herb-shops in Covent Garden, Fleet, and Newgate Markets, must at once declare them to be a most useful set of people."

The simplers in this print are depicted heading homeward down Stockwell Road to rural Croydon, a round trip of about 32km. The artist has positioned himself in the simplers' wake the better to capture their



Bogbean was one of the medicinal plants offered by the simplers to their customers.

weary trudge. You can almost judge the rhythm of their gait – hand on walking stick, rush bag over shoulder. They appear to be vanishing into the foxed page of the book itself, as they were to do in fact, into history. It was the shift to a purely chemical pharmacy in formal medicine, and a decrease in the number and diversity of informal practitioners, that led the simpler to be a gradually disappearing feature of the countryside.

By the 1870s, an authority on vernacular British plant names (Prior) could regret that these key informants had, he believed, died out a generation ago: "The herb-doctors, and the simplers, generally females, who used to collect for them. It is doubtful indeed whether anyone of this class could now be found".

Further reading

Phillip Miller, *The Gardeners' Dictionary*, 8th ed., London 1768.

William Curtis, *Flora Londinensis*, London 1777.

John Thomas Smith, *The cries of London: exhibiting several of the itinerant traders of antient and modern times*. London 1839.

Jonathan Mullard, Gower, Collins *New Naturalist Library*, 2006.

Geoffery Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora*, 1955.

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