

# INTRODUCTION

Numerous papers have been written on individual apothecaries, men of the calibre of Samuel Dale (1659–1739) or W. T. Brande (1788–1866), and apothecaries *per se* have warranted a small section in any book devoted to a general history of medicine, but there is no study in depth of the profession in the important years between the Restoration and the Act of 1815. Still less work has been done on the provincial apothecary of England and Wales. Pharmaceutical history, until recently, has commanded but little attention, and most of that has dealt with London, but, as Trease has written, “To complete the picture we must study not only London records but those from the Continent and our provincial towns. Local pharmaceutical history is as yet a neglected field but one well worth cultivating. We may then obtain answers to such questions as, how numerous were apothecaries in the provinces, and how did their training, practice and financial position compare with London colleagues. . . . Material from a single county may seem trivial but collected and studied for the country as a whole it should add much to our present knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

This study of the English apothecary has three main features – synthesis, social history, and reassessment. The apothecary was a multidisciplinary man; material relating to him may be found in out-of-the-way journals and books of limited circulation, material that must be collected together in order to create a more truly rounded person. His expertise over a wide scientific spectrum was of value and led him into a deep involvement with the new medical and paramedical specializations. As a man of science he played his part. He was intimately concerned in the Scientific Revolution and made considerable contributions to the emerging disciplines of botany and chemistry, as well as to medicine itself. His effect on the development of the general practitioner, the druggist, both wholesale and retail, the chemist, both experimental and manufacturing, and the dispensing pharmacist was enormous but to date none of this has been systematically investigated.

The background, work, and life of those apothecaries who have made a mark in the world, primarily the scientific world, have in some degree been investigated and further facts are not difficult to elucidate, but the story is different for the “ordinary run-of-the-mill chap”. His activities and position in the community have been but rarely scrutinized. The Thomas Botts of Coventry or the Lewis Dickensons of Stafford made no mark in the worlds of science or the arts; they were not members of any of the societies then beginning to emerge, but they were the very men who formed the warp and woof of the apothecarial cloth in the busy market towns of England. Knowledge of their lives promotes an understanding and explanation, not only of their training and expertise, but of the community in which they lived. Their friends and relatives, their interests, and their account books all serve to delineate the picture. This type of detailed investigation of apothecaries’ lives shows that their social origins were frequently far higher than has been generally allowed, and that their status within their own community was enviable. Monetarily, their position was often sound

<sup>1</sup> F. N. L. Poynter (editor), *The evolution of pharmacy in Britain*, London, Pitman Medical Publications, 1965, presidential address by G. E. Trease, p. 11.

*A study of the English apothecary from 1660 to 1760*

and an examination of the apprenticeship premiums shows that they belonged to the more favoured sections of the community. Their educational standards and the opportunities they had to obtain this education are important to the realization of the apothecaries' position, some idea of which may be garnered from contemporary letters and memoranda. Self-education was undoubtedly necessary, with the result that many apothecaries retained a keen interest in spheres not directly related to the winning of mere bread and butter; many, in fact, can be regarded as cultured men.

Holmes, in a recent study of the professions in England 1680–1730, a period lying almost squarely within my own, writes that “. . . far too little is known about their members, either as individuals, or occupational groups or as social entities.”<sup>2</sup> The question immediately arises as to whether the apothecary may be regarded as a professional man. Just what constitutes a profession is open to debate. We talk of a professional musician or a professional cricketer when we mean one who earns his livelihood by the playing of music or cricket; on the other hand, we use the term professional engineer to separate one of higher education and recognized qualifications from a turner or fitter, electrician or mechanic. In the present context, a profession can be seen as an occupation that demands that its members must have a good education and be orientated towards a particular career specialization; their expertise must be particularly valued by the community. Further, “a profession” implies a notion of service to the community, a vocation, such as the administration of justice, defence of one's country, or efforts to improve spiritual and physical well-being. Finally, this image is projected by a professional body with powers of registration, supervision, and regulation. Holmes believes that “. . . such concepts as these were not alien to the seventeenth and early eighteenth century Englishman”, but does admit that “. . . even the major and indisputable professional groups of Augustan England must have had difficulty in experiencing anything resembling a common 'professional' solidarity.”<sup>3</sup> In fact Holmes does not go far enough in trying to define the professions, as he places insufficient emphasis on standards and, more importantly, the framing of a code of ethics. He has also a too innocent belief in the powers of enforcement of the regulatory bodies, or their desire to do so. Turning a blind eye was almost a full-time occupation in those years. For these reasons one cannot say, in the modern sense, that the professions were fully fledged by 1760.

The apothecary and his close companion, the surgeon, of the century between 1660 and 1760 do not fulfil all the criteria of professionalism. Their work certainly demanded skill and academic knowledge acquired mainly from apprenticeship but also through books and latterly often by attending courses of lectures. In London, they had to satisfy their companies' courts of assistants that they had a sufficiently high standard of education to commence training, and at the end of their term to pass an examination. To what extent these standards were enforced in the provinces we have no proof, but there is evidence that provincial guilds in some cities at an earlier period were insistent on a standard being maintained. Education and training were by no means uniform throughout the country, or even from master to master, as Crabbe

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England. Professions, state, and society, 1680–1730*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1982, preface, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 7.

## Introduction

so bitterly complained. Qualifications were not easily identifiable, ranging from the frequently ludicrous bishop's licence of the surgeons to the considerably more searching one of the London Society of Apothecaries, to say nothing of hurried trips to the Continent for medical degrees, or those so easily handed out by the universities of Aberdeen and St Andrews.

As to the legalities, it would seem that, despite bitter complaints by all parties, a medical practitioner, were he self-styled physician, surgeon, or apothecary, could practise illegally with a fair degree of impunity in small towns, boroughs, cities, and even the metropolis itself. Whatever royal charter or act of Parliament had been obtained to give a body legal recognition, its enforcement was quite another matter in the absence of any adequate regulatory machinery. Because no registers were kept, it was impossible for a man to be the equivalent of "defrocked" or "struck off". Indeed, all the medical bodies, the College of Physicians not excluded, showed a greater concern with the maintenance of standards for their own wellbeing than for that of the patients, with etiquette rather than ethics.

It was not until some fifty years after our period that it was recognized that the adherence to standards set up for the benefit of the profession and for the patient was inseparable and essential. Nevertheless, the concept of professionalism was growing during the years from 1660 to 1760. There was an increase in self-awareness, of the importance of the apothecary and surgeon to the community, and of their place within it, which led to an increasing degree of group cohesiveness and pride in their occupations. William Boghurst, when writing of his experiences in the Great Plague, gave as his view that those apothecaries who acted as physicians were "... bound by their undertakings to stay and help as in other disease. Every man that undertakes to be of a profession or takes upon him any office must take all parts of it, the good and the evil, the pleasure and the pain, the profit and the inconvenience altogether, and not pick and chuse; for ministers must preach, Captains must fight, Physicians attend upon the sick, etc."<sup>4</sup> Nearly a century later, young Tom Harris wrote a letter of commiseration to his friend Richard Pulteney, another apothecary apprentice, who had recently been turned over from his Loughborough master to a Mr Wylde in Nottingham. He pitied him for being "... as it were debarred from the Society of the Brothers of your profession", and then added, "I assure you I have conceived a very indifferent idea of your Nottingham gent. and am afraid the sons of physic pay more adoration at the Courts of Venus than those of Aesculapius and I am apt to believe a Rochester or a Cotton would take place before a Mead or Huxam [*sic*]."<sup>5</sup>

The idea of professional responsibility was gaining ground, and if the medical practitioner of 1660 or 1760 cannot be said to have belonged to a profession, it would not be inaccurate to say that he belonged to a proto-profession, whether he were apothecary, surgeon, or physician.

The apothecary was more than just a medical practitioner; he also sold medicines and chemicals, and dispensed prescriptions. He fulfilled an essential role in his society. Without doubt, both his position and his contribution to the community have been greatly undervalued.

<sup>4</sup> W. Boghurst, *Loimographia, an account of the Great Plague of London in the year 1665*, edited by J. F. Payne, London, Shaw, 1894, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Linnean Society, Pulteney letters, letter from Thomas Harris to Richard Pulteney, 15 June 1752.