

A Barnstaple Poisoning

If asked about the use of opium in Victorian England, some people will think of Limehouse opium dens and recall the fictional evil Dr Fu Man Chu. Others will think of De Quincy's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater" representing the cultured opium-user indulging in an arcane, secret habit. But few will have heard of 'Godfrey's Cordial' and other such widely available narcotic potions.

In 1850, my great-grandmother Ellen Cawsey gave evidence at an inquest which was reported in the North Devon Journal on 7th November 1850. This related to the death of a Barnstaple baby, Charles Edward Brent, killed by an overdose of narcotic poison. The mother Caroline Brent had given her fractious child a dose of "Godfrey's Cordial" and because the child remained extremely cross, she was on her way to buy a further pennyworth of Godfrey's Cordial from Mr Tatham's shop when she met Ellen Cawsey who mentioned that **"Mr. Weeks's stuff was much better than Mr. Tatham's - that it was more composing, and quieted the child directly"**.

Ellen herself gave evidence, saying **"I have a child which is six months old, and I occasionally give it, when very cross, a dose of Godfrey's Cordial. In consequence of Mr. Weeks's mixture being better than Godfrey's Cordial I have later had his. When I give my child a dose, it will sleep soundly for three hours, say from ten in the morning to one. The child is not dull or stupid afterwards that I can see"**.



Opium (in some form) was the active ingredient of Godfrey's Cordial, of "Mr Weeks's mixture", and of many other uncontrolled remedies. Godfrey's Cordial was originally devised by Thomas Godfrey in the early 18th Century. Though a bottle did not contain very much opium, the opium tended to settle to the bottom of the bottle and hence overdosing was common.

'Weeks', whose mixture apparently killed the child, was John Weeks, Grocer and Tea Merchant of Joy Street Barnstaple. Tatham, who sold the Godfrey's cordial, was John Walkinghame Tatham, Chemist and Druggist also of Joy Street. And another interested party was William Avery. He was not only the proprietor of the North Devon Journal, but he also sold patent medicines including Godfrey's Cordial and other opiates. He advertised these in the Journal.

Now John Tatham was the Foreman of the Inquest Jury - even though he was obviously an interested party. Perhaps he selected himself? He was a power in the town, and was just about to be elected by the Town Council as Mayor of Barnstaple and Chief Magistrate. (See footnote)

The Inquest Jury led by Tatham delivered a verdict which attached great blame 'to the party selling such description of medicine' (Mr Weeks), as well as attaching great blame to the mother. The North Devon Journal report also led the reader to believe that the 'Week's' mixture contained 4 drops of tincture of opium per dose - a very high figure. John Weeks took issue with this, and wrote a letter published a week later, insisting that his mixture contained about 1 drop of opium per dose - "two thirds of the strength allowed by the College".

Cases like this were widespread - in real life and in contemporary fiction. Flora Rivers' baby in the Charlotte Yonge novel, *Daisy Chain* (1856), was killed by an overdose of Godfrey's Cordial given for fretfulness by an ignorant nurse.

The North Devon Journal report itself commented on **"the dreadful and dangerous practice, so prevalent among the working classes, of mothers accustoming their offspring to noxious doses, for the purpose of quieting them to rest, and thereby permitting their parents to be free for other engagements, practice, we are afraid, exceedingly common, and which, if not often productive of immediately fatal consequences, as in the present instance, must in numerous cases lay the foundation of delicacy in future life, and probably induce premature decline and decay.**

But it was not until the 1868 Pharmacy Act that the supply of Opium and other such substances began to be regulated.

Returning to my Great-grandmother, Ellen Cawsey, we do not know whether she continued buying Godfrey's Cordial or other such opiates. We do know that Elizabeth, the baby she referred to in this case died at the age of two. But Ellen then went on to have 16 more children, of whom about 10 lived to be healthy adults. My grandfather, Thomas, is the small child at Ellen's knee in this picture of the family.



Footnote

In the years from 1850 to 1852, the Barnstaple Town Council was riven by bitter dispute, and William Avery (printer) and John Tatham were at the heart of it, as was a second William Avery (woollen merchant, Alderman, and a previous Mayor). This started with the 1850 contested election of John Tatham as Mayor. His suitability was not universally agreed. His friends referred to his honour, strict integrity and liberal hospitality, and declared that the sword of justice could safely be placed in his hands. His opponents suggested that a great number of Barnstaple's inhabitants were strongly opposed to Mr Tatham. (For reasons which included the fact that he wore a cap!)

In 1851, William Avery, the printer and Journal proprietor, was elected to the Council by a tiny majority over Thomas King, and then chosen as Mayor to succeed Tatham. Ballot-rigging in the Council election was alleged, and this led to cases in the Devon Assizes, in which both the William Averys were accused. Though it seemed to be a fact that ballot papers had been stolen, the two Averys, and other accused parties were found not guilty. William Avery (printer) remained Mayor, and was also Mayor in several later years. But the case also led to bitter exchanges of correspondence between William Avery and Thomas King, published in the Journal in 1852.

David Cawsey

1, Beechwood Close, Cheltenham GL52 6QQ

davidcawsey@oakside.myzen.co.uk

Mem. 5802