

## Patent Medicines

Imagine the perfect pick-me-up. Whether you're feeling up, down or sideways, are suffering from a hangover, a queasy stomach, a niggling cough or a headache, a dose of the wonder cure and you're ready for all that life can throw at you. It might be Chinese, it might be homeopathic, it might even be yoghurt. If it works, who cares ?

If we're constantly looking for the universal panacea today, they were obsessed with it in the 19th Century. When a day off work meant a day without pay, and doctors' fees started at the roof and then went higher, anything that promised cheap health and happiness was worth a try. For a shilling or so a time, it delivered a miracle in a bottle or a box.

Welcome to the world of the patent medicine.

All who'd escape the worst of ills,  
Sickness and thundering doctor's bills,  
Should take The Doctor's Stomach Pills.

It was in the cities of Victorian Britain that the patent medicine held sway, where the difference between life and death was a narrow one, and where the fear of infection was highest. But also - and here's the point - it was in the city that the whole paraphernalia of Victorian commercial enterprise could be brought to bear: invention, marketing, advertising and delivery.

Let us try a bottle of Solomon's Drops, available in containers of one, two or five shillings. As the advert in the Birmingham Advertiser vividly put it in 1834, Solomon's Drops will put flight to "obstinate eruptions, undue evacuations and chronic rheumatism". Marvellous.

Dr Solomon also had up his sleeve his celebrated cordial, "Balm of Gilead", which was effective in all cases of "nervous disorder", and especially efficacious with women's problems (which had to remain nameless).

The nomenclature is particularly cunning here. By deploying the name of an Old Testament King, and what sounds like one of Moses' miracles, Dr Solomon was getting a celebrity endorsement from none other than God himself. If it worked for the Lord of Hosts, it had every chance of working in Small Heath. So, to all those other patients whose miraculous return to health are outlined in the advert, we can add the Almighty. I can hear you reaching for your purse already.

Where to purchase this wonder drug ? At this point there is a detail that might just make us pause. The sole distributor of Solomon's Drops in Birmingham is William Hodgetts of Spiceal Street, who just happens also to be the printer and publisher of the Birmingham Advertiser.

Mr Hodgetts was far from unique in combining the zeal of a newspaper proprietor

with the enterprise of a pharmacist. Pearson and Rollason, the printers of Aris's Gazette, similarly acted as sole Birmingham distributors for many of the patent medicines on the market. The Gazette carried adverts for a dozen in January 1777 - including Grana Angelica, Appleby's Balsam of Health and the Specific Drops - all of which were available solely through the printer.

Such product placement could be very blatant indeed, and even the obituary column was not free of it. In May 1810 Swinney's Birmingham Chronicle carried death notices for two women - one of whom was the housekeeper at the Royal Hotel - who had died of "spasmodic attacks". This was immediately followed by a recommendation for 'Dr Taylor's anti-spasmodic pills'. A handful of these was the easiest way to avoid being in next week's obituaries.

Of all the local papers, only the Birmingham Journal declared that it would not carry such adverts.

If the proprietors and the quack doctors had an unhealthy close relationship, they did not have it all their own way. Once a patent medicine gained a sufficient reputation, then there would be soon be even more unscrupulous quacks out there who would be pirating it. In 1834 the manufacturers of "Morrison's Vegetable Universal Medicine" were obliged to advertise in the Birmingham papers, warning of "spurious imitations" on the market, and specifying those agents who were alone legally able to supply the original.

The cunning way to avoid legal action was subtly to changed the title of the product. When Dr Jordan generously offered free medical advice to the poor from his consulting rooms in Great Charles Street 1832, it was principally, if not exclusively, to go off and purchase a bottle of his patented cordial "Balm of Rakasim". Any connection to the "Balm of Gilead" was, of course, purely coincidental.

It was not simply that this whole system was fraudulent and corrupt; it could be deadly as well. Cases of inappropriate medicine being given to children filled the coroner's courts in the early 19th Century.

In January 1836, for example, a child of 16 months died in Cox Street died from a dose of Morrison's Pills. At the inquest the coroner denounced "a sort of infatuation (for he really could call it nothing else) that pervaded the public mind, that Morrison's pills might be given to any individual, however young."

So what was in these patent medicines that made them so harmful ? James Morrison's Universal Medicine consisted of little more than gamboges (a kind of tree bark), cream of tartar and aloes. In short, it was a violent purgative. Indeed, it triggered just the kind of "undue evacuations" that Dr Solomon's Drops were designed to address. Troubling enough for an adult, they could be fatal to a young child.

It was best, then, to have more than one of the miracle cures on the shelf. With any luck they might just cancel each other out.