

Rotha Mary Clay, The Medieval Hospitals of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1909.

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CHAPTER XII

CARE OF THE BODY

“Let there be in the infirmary thirteen sick persons in their beds, and let them be kindly and duly supplied with food and all else that shall tend in their convalescence or comfort.”

(Statutes of Northallerton.¹)

In considering the provision for material comfort in hospitals, one must distinguish between residents and sojourners. Board and clothing had to be found for the leper or the almsman, and the sick needed food and shelter for a time. Travellers either called for doles in passing, or required supper, bed and breakfast. Upon every pilgrim, sick or well, spending the night at St. Thomas' Canterbury, four-pence was extended from the goods of the hospital. Bodily necessities of life may be classified under the headings food, fuel, baths, bedding and clothes.

1. Food.

(a) *Food for resident pensioners.*—There was of course a wide difference between the lot of the ill-fed leper who lodged in some poor spital dependent upon the chance alms of passers-by, and that of the occupant of a well-endowed spital. At the princely Sherburn hospital, each person received daily a loaf (weighing five marks) and a gallon of beer; he had meat three times a week, and on other days eggs, herrings and cheese, besides

--167--

butter, vegetables and salt. The statutes laid stress upon the necessity of fresh food, and it was forbidden to eat the flesh of an animal which had died of disease. This was wise, for the constant consumption in the Middle Ages of rotten meat, decayed fish and bread made from blighted corn predisposed people to sickness and aggravated existing disease. Forfeited victuals were granted to the sick in hospitals at Oxford, Cambridge, Sandwich, Maldon, etc. The Forest law directed that if any beast were found dead or wounded, the flesh was to be sent to the

leper-house if there were one near, or else be distributed to the sick and poor ; Dr. Cox in his *Royal Forests* cites instances of the lepers of Thrapston and Cotes benefiting by this statue.

Salt meat was largely consumed, but it was insufficiently cured on account of the scarcity of salt. Bacon was a most important article of food ; one of the endowments of St. Mary Magdalene's, Winchester, consisted of four fitches [one side of bacon] annually. About Christmas-tide, according to the "Customal of Sandwich," each person at St. Bartholomew's received a hog with the inwards and all its parts. The lepers at St. Albans had a similar custom, but they made their own selection for the salting-tub at Martinmas :— "we desire that the pigs may be brought forward in their presence . . . and there each, according to the priority of entering the hospital, shall choose one pig."

In some households, a meat-allowance was given to each person, perhaps two-pence a week, or a farthing a day. There were vegetarians among the residents as Southampton, for the account-rolls mention Sister Elena who for a time "ate nothing that had suffered death,

--168--

and Sister Joan, "who does not eat flesh through-out the year." In those days of murrain they were prudent, for it is recorded that an ox was killed for consumption in the house "because it was nearly dead."

In the later almshouses the inmates received wages and provided their own victuals, which were cooked by the attendant. It was directed at Higham Ferrers :—

"That every poor man shall buy his meat upon the Saturday . . . and deliver it to the woman, and she shall ask them which they will have against Sunday, and the rest she shall powder up against Wednesday ; she shall upon Sunday set on the pot and make them good pottage, and shall give every man his own piece of meat and a mess of pottage in his dish, and the rest of the pottage shall be saved until Monday."

The remainder was served up on Wednesday by the careful housewife, who was directed to buy barm on Fridays for the bread-making.

Baking was done once a fortnight at St. Bartholomew's, Sandwich, the allowance to each person being seven penny loaves. The exact provision of brown and white bread is sometimes given in regulation. Oats "called La Porage" was provided for the poor in Leicester almshouse, where there was a porridge-pot holding sixty-one gallons. Ancient cooking utensils are preserved at St. Cross, Winchester, at St. John's, Canterbury, and at Harbledown.

In most hospitals there was a marked difference between daily diet and festival fare. Festal days, twenty-five in number, were marked at Sherburn by special dinners. St. Cuthbert was naturally commemorated ; his festival

--169--

in March and on the day of his "Translation" in September were two-course feasts ; but the first falling in Lent, Bishop Pudsey provided for the delicacy of fresh salmon if procurable. Both at Sherburn, and at St. Nicholas', one goose to four persons. The "Gaudy Days" at St. Cross were also marked by special fare.

(b) *Food for casuals*.—Out-door relief was provided in many hospitals. St. Mark's, Bristol, was an almonry where refreshment was provided for the poor. Forty-five lb. of bread made of wheat, barley and beans, was given away among the hundred applicants ; the resident brethren "each carrying a knife to cut bread for the sick and impotent" ministered to them for two or three hours daily. A generous distribution of loaves and fishes took place at St. Leonard's, York, besides the provision of extra dinners on Sundays.

Special gifts were also provided occasionally, on founders' days or festivals. At St. Giles', Norwich, on Lady Day, one hundred and eighty persons had bread and cheeps and three eggs each. Maundy Thursday was a day for almsgiving, when all lepers who applied at the Lynn hospital were given a farthing and a herring. "Obits" were constantly celebrated in this way. The eve of St. Peter and St. Paul, being the anniversary of Henry I's death, was a gala-day for lepers within reach of York ; bread and ale, mullet with butter, salmon when it could be had, and cheese, were provided by the Empress Matilda's bounty, in memory of her father. The ancient glass reproduced on Pl. XX depicts hungry beggars to whom food is being dealt out.

The Maison Dieu, Dover, kept the memorial days of



THE BEGGARS' DOLE

[Illustration: Plate XX The Beggars' Dole.]

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Henry III and of Hubert de Burgh and his daughter. The fare and expenses on such occasions are recorded, *viz.* :—

“Also in the daye of Seynt Pancre yerely for the soule of Hughe de Burgo one quarter of whete: vj. viiiij*d.*

Also the same daye if it be flesshe day one oxe and if it be fische day ij barrels of white heryng: xx*s.*”²

Probably the annual distribution of three hundred buns at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Sandwich, is handed down from some ancient custom on the patronal festival, but almost all these charities came to an end at the Dissolution. The Commissioners who visited St. Cross, however, (1535) allowed the continuation of daily dinners to the hundred poor, on condition that distribution was made

“to them who study and labour with all their strength at handywork to obtain food ; and in no case shall such alms be afforded to strong, robust and indolent mendicants, like so many that wander about such places, who ought rather to be driven away with staves, as drones and useless burdens upon the earth.”

The “Wayfarer’s Dole” still given at St. Cross is the only survival of the former indiscriminate entertainment of passers-by.

2. Firing and Lights

The wood necessary for firing was collected from the vicinity by permission of the manorial lord. In Henry III’s charter to St. John’s, Oxford (1234), he granted wood to Shotover “to cook the portions of the poor and to warm the poor themselves.” He also permitted the gathering of faggots for St. John’s, Marlborough, one

--171--

man going daily for dry and dead wood “to collect as much as he can with his hands only without any iron tool or axe, and to carry the same to the hospital on his back for their hearth. Early rolls record constant grants of firewood. St Leonard’s, York, was supplied with turves [chunks of peat or turf] from Helsington Moor.

The supply of fuel was regulated by the calendar. A benefactor (*circa* 1180) granted to the lepers of St. Sepulchre’s near Gloucester, a load of firewood “such as a horse can carry” daily from November 1 to May 3, and thrice a week for the rest of the year. From Michaelmas to All Saints, the lepers of Sherburn—unconscious of their coalfield all around them—had for their eight fires two baskets of peat daily, after which until Easter four baskets were supplied ; on festivals extra fuel was given, and at Christmas great logs were specially provided. Finally it was directed that :—“if any leprous brother or sister shall be ill so that his life is despaired of, he shall have fire and light and all things needful until he amend or pass away.”

3. Bedding

In early days, the sick and poor were laid on pallets of straw, but wooden bedsteads were probably introduced late in the twelfth century. A dying benefactor left to the brethren of St. Wulstan’s, Worcester, the bed on which he lay and its covering of bys, or deer-skin (1291).³ A Durham founder bequeathed money to “amend the beds what tyme they shall happyne to be olde or defective” (1491). A strange civic duty was performed at Sandwich. It was customary for the mayor and townsmen, as

“visitors” of St. John’s House, to examine the condition and number of the feather-beds, and bedding, and to ascertain if all was kept very clean. Where travellers came and went, it was no light task to supply fresh linen. At St. Thomas’, Canterbury, and annual payment of xlvjs. viijd. was made “to Rauf Cokker keeper of the seid hospitall and his wif for kepyng wasshyng of the beds for poure peple” (1535). The same year, the inquiry made into the condition of the Savoy hospital included these items :—

“Whether the hundred beddes appoynted by the founder be well and clenely kept and repaired, and all necessaries to theym belonging.

Whether any poore man do lie in any sheets unwashed that any other lay in bifore.”

4. Toilet

Bathing and laundry arrangements are occasionally mentioned. The regulations for the Sherburn lepers direct a strict attention to cleanliness. Two bath-tubs (*cunæ ad balneandum*) were supplied ; heads were washed weekly ; and two laundresses washed the personal clothing twice a week. In the fifteenth-century statutes of Higham Ferrers matters of health and toilet are detailed. None might be received “but such as were clean men of their bodies” ; and if taken ill, a bedeman was removed until his recovery. Every morning the woman must “make the poor men a fire against they rise and a pan of fair water and a dish by it to wash their hands.” The barber came weekly “to shave them and to dress their heads and to make them clean.” When the Savoy was officially visited in 1535, the authorities were asked

“whether the bathes limited by the founder be well obserued and applied.”

As to hair dressing, “tonsure by the ears” was commonly used by the staff. After profession at Chichester it was directed :—“then let the males be cropped below the ear ; or the hair of the women be cut off back to the middle of the neck.” Among the instructions in the register of St. Bartholomew’s near Dover is one about the round tonsure, and there is a marginal note as to the mode of shaving the head. The visitation of St. Nicholas’, York (*temp.* Edward I), showed that formerly brethren and sisters were tonsured, but that Simon, recently master, had allowed them to change both habit and tonsure.⁴

5. Clothing

(a) *The habit of the staff*.—The dress worn by the master and his fellow-workers was usually monastic or clerical, but it varied considerably, for the priests might be regulars or seculars, the brethren and sisters religious or lay persons.

Occasionally the warden was not in orders [he was not a professed religious man] ; it was directed at St. Leonard's, York, that "when the master is a layman, he shall wear the habit of the house." In an ecclesiastical type of foundation, the dress was commonly after the Augustinian fashion, consisting of black or brown robe, cloak and hood with a cross on the outer garment ; white and grey were occasionally worn by officials of both sexes. The Benedictine brethren of St. Mark's, Bristol, were clothed in a black habit with a quaint device, namely, "a white cross and a red shield with three white geese in the

--174--

same." Secular clerks had more latitude in costume ; the sombre mantles were enlivened by a coloured badge, a pastoral staff at Armiston, a cross at St. John's, Bedford, etc.

(b) *The almsman's gown*.—The early type of pensioner's habit is perpetuated at St. Cross. Ellis Cavy, having somber tastes, provided for his poor men at Croydon that "the over-clothing be darke and browne of colour, and not staring neither blasing, and of easy price cloth, according to their degree." This stipulation was probably copied from the statuettes of Whittington's almshouse, which as a mercer he would know. The usual tendency of the fifteenth century was to a cheerful garb. The bedeman of Ewelme had "a tabarde of his owne with a rede crosse on the breste, and a hode accorynge to the same." The pensioners at Alkmonton received a suit every third year, alternately white and russet ; the gown was marked with a tau cross in red. At Heytesbury the men's outfit included "a paire of hosyn, 2 paire of shone with lether and hempe to clowte theme, and 2 shertys" ; the women had the same allowance, with five shillings to buy herself a kirtle. The two servitors at St. Nicholas', Pontefract, wore a uniform "called white livery."

(c) *The leper's dress*.—The theory of the leper's clothing is described in the statutes of St. Julian's ; they ought "as well in their conduct as in their garb, to bear themselves as more despised and as more humble than the rest of their fellow-men, according to the words of the Lord in Leviticus : 'Whosoever is stained with the leprosy shall rend his garments.'" They were forbidden to go out without the distinctive habit, which covered them almost entirely. The outfit named in the *Manual* consisted of

--175--

cloak, hood, coat and shoes of fur, plain shoes and girdle.

The hospital inmate in his coarse warm clothing was readily distinguished from the ragged mendicant. The brothers and sisters at Harbledown were supplied with a uniform dress of russet, that is to say, a closed tunic or super-tunic ; the brethren wore scapulars (the short working dress of a monk), and the sisters, mantles. At St. Julian's hospital, the cut of the costume was planned ; thus the sleeves were to be closed as far as the hand, but not laced with knots or thread after the secular fashion ; the upper tunic was to be worn closed down to the

ankles ; the close black cape and hood must be of equal length. The amount of material is recorded in the case of Sherburn, *vis.* three ells of woollen cloth and six ells of linen. At Reading the leper's allowance was still more liberal, for the hood or cape contained three ells, the tunic three, the cloak two and a quarter ; they also received from the abbey ten yards of linen, besides old leathern girdles and shoes.

Lepers were forbidden to walk unshod. At Sherburn, each person was allowed four pence annually for shoes, grease being regularly supplied for them. Inmates of both sexes at Harbledown wore ox-hide boots, fastened with leather and extending beyond the middle of the shin. High boots were also worn by the brethren at St. Julian's "to suit their infirmity" ; if one was found wearing low-cut shoes—"tied with only one knot"—he had to walk barefoot for a season.

For headgear at Harbledown, the men used hoods, and the women covered their heads with thick double veils, white within, and black without. Hats were sometimes

--176--

worn, both in England (Fig. 9) and in France. (Fig. 26.) In the Scottish ballad (*circa* 1500), Cresseid is taken to the lazaret-house dressed in a mantle with a beaver hat. This was probably the secular fashion.



[Illustration: A leper (with clapper and dish).]

~Footnotes

1. Surtees, Vol. 56. Gray's Register, p. 181.
2. *Val. Ecc.*, i. 56.
3. *Giffard's Register*, p. 388.
4. P. R. O. Chanc. Misc. 20, No 13.

-end chapter twelve-