

## Staying Alive in 1620, by Laura Quigley

In Plymouth, 1620, living was a battle against disease. Plague, smallpox and typhus remained too common, along with new arrivals including malaria and yellow fever. Increasing urbanisation and poor waste management created the perfect storm of contaminated water, unhealthy environs and overwhelming quantities of dung from livestock. Add back-yard latrines, rats and a reluctance to bathe, and disease seemed inevitable. Punishing a woman by 'ducking' her in Sutton Pool was not only humiliating, it was life-threatening.

The 17th century was an age of 'do it yourself' healthcare. The dissolution of the monasteries had shut all health services, from the Maudlyn quarantine facilities on North Hill, to the infirmary in the Carmelite Friary just north of Sutton Pool. By 1620, healthcare was a volatile market-place of competing physicians, apothecaries, barber surgeons and 'wise women'.<sup>1</sup> In essence, you got what you paid for, and at least a third of household income was spent on health. This left the desperately poor seeking charity in the workhouse, also known as the Hospital of the Poor's Portion, near St Andrews Church.

'Self Help' books were bestsellers and Philip Barrough's *The Method of Physick*<sup>2</sup> was one of many regularly reprinted. The East India Company commissioned an excellent medical book by John Woodall, and *The Surgion's Mate*<sup>3</sup> became the required standard for all naval medical personnel.

Science was transforming medical knowledge, with Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood in 1618 undermining the credibility of blood letting as a universal cure. However, the correct diagnosis of ailments took centuries to catch-up. A 17<sup>th</sup> century medical advertisement lists symptoms for scurvy that have more to do with typhus and kidney stones. So, although the cure for scurvy was well-known, oranges failed to cure cases mis-diagnosed as scurvy. There were more deaths on the North Atlantic caused by bad weather, bad water and body lice than scurvy, but the horror of scurvy still haunted the seas.

Although Plymouth's adult population was increasing, population growth across England was stalling with the birth-rate slowing. Families that once had a dozen children, though a 50% survival rate were, by 1620, having three children at most, with long gaps between ages. Andrew Hinde<sup>4</sup> suggests effective birth control to explain the statistics, and he's right, in a way, because Plymouth's sea-faring fathers were abroad for months if not years, with increasingly high numbers not returning.

Plymouth became a town with a high ratio of women in residence, taking charge of their family's healthcare, with an emphasis on food as medicine. The 17<sup>th</sup> century also sees the rise of the commercial laundry, run by women, and the hillside above what is now Regent Street was fields of laundry spread out to dry. (Early Plymouth has a surprising amount of green space.) Fighting typhus outbreaks required boil washing linen to kill body lice, not just bleaching, so healthcare added to the consumption of local wood and fresh water from the new conduits.

Home-based distillation was popular, with householders not only distilling fermented grain to produce aqua-vitae as a painkiller and antiseptic, but also producing a range of cordials, fragrances and medicines, e.g. rose water was highly regarded. Despite these advances, there was limited knowledge of disease transmission, leaving care-givers contracting disease even after the patient was saved, with the Mayflower passengers of 1620 being a tragic example of the wrath of epidemic typhus.

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