

Thomas Beecham: Address for the Oxfordshire Blue Plaque Ceremony at Beecham Cottage, Curbridge, 21st May 2022.

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We're here today to honor the birthplace of Thomas Beecham, self-styled botanist, herbalist and chemist and founder of what would become the multinational pharmaceutical company known as Smith Kline Beecham. Thomas was born in Curbridge at precisely 11:34pm on 3rd December 1820 to Sarah and her husband of just two months Joseph Beecham and baptized in the Parish Church two weeks later. The family was poor and tied to the rural Oxfordshire landscape. But – although we know rather little about Thomas's early life – the seeds of his future are discernable. And that's the story I want to share with you today.

Every life is a journey and, for a historian like me, there is fascination in every story.

Thomas's life journey took him from Curbridge, in the midst of the rolling Oxfordshire countryside, to Liverpool and, ultimately, to the nearby seaside town of Southport, where he died on 6th April 1907. As a child, Thomas was surrounded by a large and growing family. He was devoted to his mother, and inherited from her the slender hands and long fingers that would become indispensable in his chosen trade of pill making. His schooling is unknown but – as I'll relate in a few minutes – he learned not just to read and write, but to write rather lovely poetry. He also acquired the family interest in clairvoyance and cottage cures, a context that perhaps explains the roots of his fascination with herbal medicines. He learned strong and lasting Christianity – a faith that was expressed in care for his employees if not in marital fidelity. And he loathed drunkenness – a plague of the age and one that surrounded him throughout his life.

Poverty was a condition of Thomas's childhood and, at a very young age, he followed his father on to the land, becoming a shepherd boy with a wage of 1s. 6d. per seven day week. We may wonder at a society in which small children were put to work like that. But remember that this was still the period before Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* highlighted the plight of child workers and Charles Dickens' serial novels drew attention to child poverty.

We may infer from Thomas Beecham's later life that he soon saw no future in work as a shepherd. But we also know that it was during this period that he began to search for remedial herbs, using these to cure, first animals and, later, people.

Thomas's physical travels began when he was about 11, when he was sent to work for a man named Chamberlin at Lawn Farm, in Cropredy near Banbury. That's a distance of about 30 miles, a considerable separation for a child of that age. I wish I could tell you why he was sent so far from home, but I can't – although we may speculate that the position was particularly desirable in some way.

In fact, the time Thomas spent in Cropredy was formative. His character was becoming fixed: a clever, ambitious, mercurial youth who sought to evade the ties of marriage and children although he was attractive to, and enjoyed the company of, women; a largely self-educated, deeply religious teenager who read "The English Physician Enlarged" and, on 18th April 1837 aged just 16, inscribed the pocket Bible he took everywhere with this poem:

Within this awful volume lies
The Mystery of mysteries;
Happiest they of human race
To whom their God has given grace
To read, to fear, to hope, to pray,

To lift the hatch, to face the way:
And better had they ne'er been born
Who read to doubt or read to scorn.

To me, that poem explains more than anything else I've read about Thomas Beecham: to read and hope; to face the way. This was someone looking for a way out – of poverty, and of agricultural labor. And he knew where he would find it: in learning and in Godliness.

Cropredy was where dabbling and experimenting with herbs led Thomas to make his first pill – a purgative compound of aloes and ginger with soap that he rolled by hand into pills for sale to the local population. I told you those long fingers were important! Thomas Beecham always believed pills were better rolled by hand. By the time he left for the North of England in 1847, Thomas Beecham was known as “a good quack,” someone whose remedies could be relied on.

I'm not sure how I'd feel about taking a pill made of soap. But I thought it might be worthwhile to reflect for moment on the state of medicine in 1840s Britain.

Anesthesia was in its infancy and there was no antisepsis, which meant that surgery was radical, brutal and rarely successful. The possibilities for treating internal disease were extremely limited – and physicians' repertoire of chemically pure drugs was restricted. Laudanum – a tincture of morphine in alcohol – was the medicine of choice for almost every ailment. But poor people had no access to such expensive remedies. The causes of disease, meanwhile, were still commonly identified with bodily imbalance – an idea due to the Greeks. So a strong purgative – like Beecham's compound of aloes, ginger and soap – what we'd call a laxative – was an excellent candidate as a cure-all. And, at just pennies a box, it was a lot more accessible to most of the population.

Thomas Beecham's first destination in the North was Liverpool. But he did not stay there long, soon moving to nearby Wigan and later St Helens. Throughout this phase of his life, change was a constant: new premises, new wife, children, his first medical license – to prescribe, not practice as a doctor. He set and sustained a punishing 14 hour work day, gradually building his pill business to include more specific remedies for women's problems and toothache. Beecham was a natural salesman, who used preacher's rhetoric to persuade people to buy his wares. His wares also seem to have worked, prompting his first advertising slogan: "Worth a guinea a box." In fact, these words were strongly associated with Beecham that his great granddaughter Anne Francis took the phrase as the title of her 1968 biography.

Beecham lived through an era of change: capital displaced land, as agricultural populations were drawn to industrial, urban centers and the whole was increasingly connected by railways. Science – especially chemistry – was building a new world on the global wealth of plants and the wastes of coal gas production. Beecham's own immediate area of operation, pharmacy, was becoming more regulated – e.g. by the 1867 Pharmacy Act – as well as more powerful: by the time he died in 1907, chemically synthesized, patented drugs were supplementing proprietary remedies.

Beecham opened the hatch and found his way from poverty to riches. He married three times and had four children, beginning with Joseph, father of the conductor Thomas Beecham. But our Thomas Beecham never forgot his ties to Curbridge, the place where he'd first learned to love herbs. Every year, he returned to visit the mother he adored, showering family with generous gifts. And he never lost his Oxfordshire burr.