

The Bowdon Sheaf

A BOWDON HISTORY SOCIETY PUBLICATION

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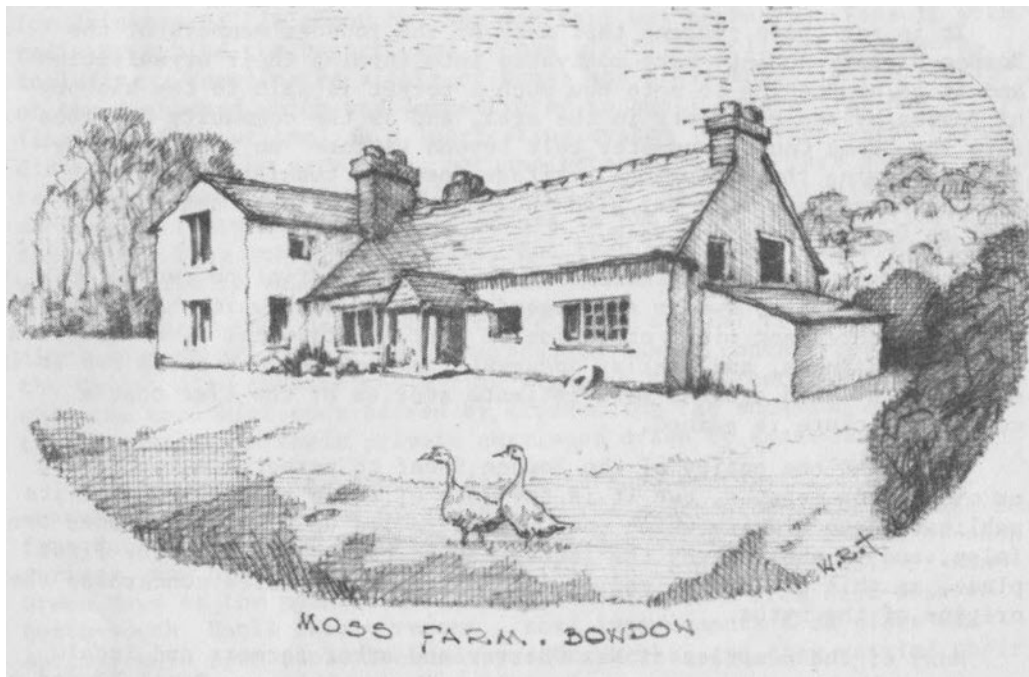
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A Local Eighteenth Century Remedy



Mrs Gaskell and her family regularly visited Moss Farm, often to recuperate from illness in a rural environment.

RECORDING THE PAST **by Ronald Trenbath**

Patrick Geddes, the Scottish sociologist, believed that historical heritage was the cornerstone of a stable society and the conurbation "accumulates and embodies the heritage of a region", and for this reason he was more interested in the renewal of historic towns than in the building of model garden communities.

Cecil Stewart, the architect and planner, taught his students that to ignore this important factor would have disastrous results and when his warning went unheeded and wholesale demolition and redevelopment took place in the inner cities, although undertaken with the very best intentions, the dire results can now be judged all too clearly. In further evidence of this fact it is interesting to note that the authorities responsible for building the new city of Brazilia landscaped and scheduled the contractors' compound and sheds as an area of historical interest, in the vague hope of providing some heritage on which to develop the community.

It is for these reasons that many of the founder members of the Bowdon History Society were motivated into forming their organisation and it is heartening to note how much interest is paid to the history of Bowdon by new residents in the area, and as the community develops into the "Home County commuter belt beyond Watford" so the necessity for preserving the historical heritage does not consist merely of buildings and monuments but also includes institutions, and customs and, as Geddes insisted, Folk.

In order to preserve these factors it is essential to record Folk Memories of people, events and legends from the past which have never been documented and might otherwise be lost. Statistical facts recorded in Census Returns, and similar documents, are of immense value but it is only when studied against more intimate stories of the time that a complete picture is gained.

It is not the policy of the Bowdon Sheaf to perpetuate inaccurate or misleading legends, but it is the duty of those responsible for its publication to clarify which ones may be relied upon and which ones are false, and to analyse why the latter should have occurred in the first place, as this can often lead to interesting discoveries concerning the origins of the myths.

Many of the memories of Max Chester and other farmers and local country folk have been incorporated into the articles on Rural Bowdon, and now those of Harold Bonson, in the urban area, are included in this edition of the Sheaf, and we are most concerned that these should be continued in future issues. We appeal, therefore, to all our readers to provide us with any interesting items of past events or buildings, for inclusion in this feature of our publication.

LOCAL MEMORIES

by Harold Bonson

Mr Bonson writes that "in the 1920s and presumably long before, curfew bells were rung from Bowdon Church tower at 8.00 p.m. every evening during the winter, and possibly in summer as well. The practice was to ring for about ten minutes and then, on a single bell, to chime out the date with one stroke for each day of the month. The sound of the curfew was a good signal to mothers who lived within earshot to pack their offspring to bed".

According to Ingham the curfew was rung on the fifth bell. The sixth bell was tolled for funerals followed by all six thrice each for a male, but only twice for a female.

The origin of curfew was coeve-feu or firecover, an earthenware cover which had to be placed over fire upon the sounding of the warning in order to prevent a conflagration. One such cover was recently excavated at Bewsey Old Hall, near Warrington.

Mr Bonson goes on to report that "in the mid-1920's there stood a solitary taxi outside the Griffin, where there was a long strip of setts in the middle of the road to form a taxi-rank. There was a similar strip opposite the Stamford Arms round the corner. The fountain was then opposite the north gate of the church and there were no flower beds for drinkers to lie about on. The one taxi was probably a Renault with radiator behind the bonnet, and it had plenty of polished brasswork, including a complicated affair of brass and glass tubes in the middle of the dashboard which was demonstrated to small boys of the day (including the writer) as a lubricating system (drip-feed). The driver did not seem to be very busy, perhaps because private cars and telephones were diverting business from his 'pitch', but his taxi was an elegant feature of the quiet square in the heart of the village. The taxi-ranks long outlived the taxi, but they eventually disappeared. It would be nice to think they were still under the tarmac.

It is said that before 1914 there was a special train from Altrincham to Manchester each Thursday to enable concert-goers to attend the Halle. Also that it was a fine sight in the streets of Altrincham when the wealthier ones passed by, dressed for the occasion on the way to the station in their private carriages drawn by smart horses. The geology of the Bowdon hill, with sand overlaying clay, encourages the formation of springs on the south slope. The private road from Park Road to Bow Green Road has at the lower end a series of such springs, now hidden under concrete flags in front of the wall of Bow Green Mews at the point where Bow Green Road turns from east-west to north-south. Until fairly recent road improvements took place the springs were open pools bounded by stone kerbs, and they carried their fair share of tadpoles, etc, in the spring.

On the other side of the hill is Spring Bank House and adjoining recreation ground, and Spring Road (in Hale but in Bowdon Parish). The old Bowdon-Altrincham and Bowdon-Hale local authority boundary ran along the footpath west of Spring Bank, down Stamford Road and across the junction towards Hale Station, down Peel Avenue and across the Grammar School field.

Part of the route across the field used to be an open stream which disappeared into the grounds of The Coppice, South Downs Road and eventually reached the Bollin via Motley Bank at a point below the foot of Grange Road. One can guess that much more of the boundary route was once a stream fed from springs at Spring Bank, especially as the sound of water can sometimes be heard (traffic permitting) coming from a manhole in the middle of the Langham Road-Ashley Road junction.

A VISIT TO BOWDON IN 1790
by John Byng

John Byng travelling through Bowdon in 1790, noting good inns in Cheshire, records in his diary that:.... "leaving Bowdon Church, to my left, soon entered Altrincham, a long straggling market town. At the Unicorn Inn, I was received, and treated, much to my travelling wishes, in a clean, whitewashed room, with a stone floor (for the day was hot); where a sirloin of roast beef, potatoes, cold pigeon pie, and cheesecakes, were spread forth before me, upon a clean, coarse cloth, covering a large old, oaken table, and I must needs order in addition a gooseberry pie. Most unluckily, Dunham Massey, a seat of Lord Stamford's (and lately belonging to the Booths, Earls of Warrington) was not to be seen upon a Sunday.

This place, if visible, I had not gone from or from my inn so soon (a good summer's day stop), had not a trader been turned in upon me; and that destroys all reveries, or touring accounts.

| | £ | s | d |
|--------|---|---|----|
| Dinner | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Wine | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Beer | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Horses | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Total | 0 | 3 | 4 |

T.B. (Byng's servant, Thomas Bush) who has no more religion than my horses, observed, with some asperity, that they are all 'Methodishes' here".

THE GASKELLS AND MOSS FARM

by Myra Kendrick

Bowdon's strongest literary association is probably with the Cheshire novelist Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-65) brought up in Knutsford and after marriage having her home in Manchester. Her letters give evidence of regular visits to Bowdon, especially during the 1850s, when Moss Farm was a loved retreat from Manchester atmosphere. Surviving letters to her eldest daughter Marianne between May 1851, when Marianne was away at boarding school, and January 1857, show how much the care of Miss Walker, the farmer's sister, was valued for the younger girls during periods of convalescence.

The first reference to the Bowdon farm (not named) appears in a letter of May 1851: "The two little ones are going with Hearn to lodge at Bowden in a farmhouse on Saturday." At this period Mrs. Gaskell regularly used the spelling Bowden.

A letter of 4 September 1851 shows that, with the opening of the Manchester/Bowdon railway in 1849, it was possible to escape for a day to country air at the farm, which the mention of the name Walker identifies as Moss Farm (on the present South Downs Road); it was then the only Bowdon farm tenanted by Walkers. "It was a dismal morning and we doubted if it would clear off; and indeed we gave up the thought of going to spend the day at Bowden as had been planned. Then it cleared up so I sent Hearn and the three girls off with a dinner in a basket and tea and sugar to drink tea at Miss Walkers (where they lodge you know). I got away after a lunch-dinner, rushed to Bowden called on Mrs Haughton. Drank tea with the children, came home at six." Hearn was the children's trusted nurse, and the three girls Meta, then aged fourteen, Florence (Flossy or Flossie, variously spelt) eight and Julia, four.

A year later the five year old Julia was taken by her parents to Bowdon after a short, acute illness. "She is quite well now," her mother wrote to Marianne on 28 August 1852, "though easily tired and feeble owing to the hot weather; but well enough to go to Bowdon with Papa and me and stronger than I was in the walking way." This suggests another day-visit; it is not explicitly stated that the family visited the Walkers, though it seems probable.

Mrs. Gaskell herself was far from strong and very busy with Manchester commitments, so the children were used to staying at Moss Farm with their nurse, without their parents. Sometimes a Gaskell servant named Mary escorted them.

A particularly interesting reference to these visits appears in a letter of May 1851: "Hearn Meta Flossie and baby (Julia) went to Bowden yesterday. Mary took them as I was too weak and Papa too busy to go; and returned last night. Flossy was dreadfully tired when- she got there. You have no idea how weak and ill she looks, and how very weak she is. But I am glad to hear her appetite seems better. Mary says she enjoyed the farm house bread and eat an egg which she has not been able to do for a long time and planned to have milk put by for breakfast a la Silverdale." (The Gaskells spent about six weeks each summer at Silverdale on Morecambe Bay.) "Meta has taken crochet, Mr Scott's poems and her sketch book to Bowden."

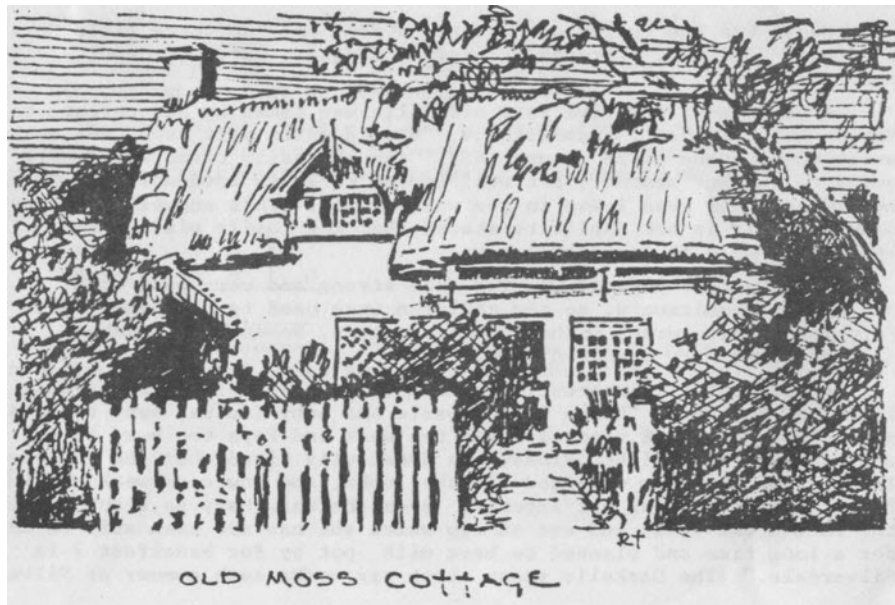
Then comes a valuable brief description of the farm: "It is a small old fashioned farm (like Wood's at Green Heys*) at the foot of the hill. More's the pity." Mrs Gaskell would obviously have preferred fresher air on the hilltop. "They have a double bedded room and a sitting room. They will stay a fortnight I think. But much will depend on Flossy. Papa intends to go over on Thursday and see if she is gaining strength."

A later letter seems to suggest that Hearn's home may have been in Bowdon, so she was, perhaps, the connecting link between the Gaskells and the Walkers of Moss Farm.

If Mrs Gaskell wrote any letters about her own periods of staying at Moss Farm, they appear to have been lost, perhaps through the destroying zeal of her unmarried daughters Meta and Julia, in respect for their mother's love of privacy.

*William and Elizabeth Gaskell, after their marriage, lived in Dover Street, on the edge of the Green Heys area of Manchester, now largely covered by university buildings, but then open farmland with a view of the Pennine hills.

The extracts are taken from *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* edited by J.A.V. Chappie and Arthur Pollard (1966) and reproduced by kind permission of the publisher, Manchester University Press.

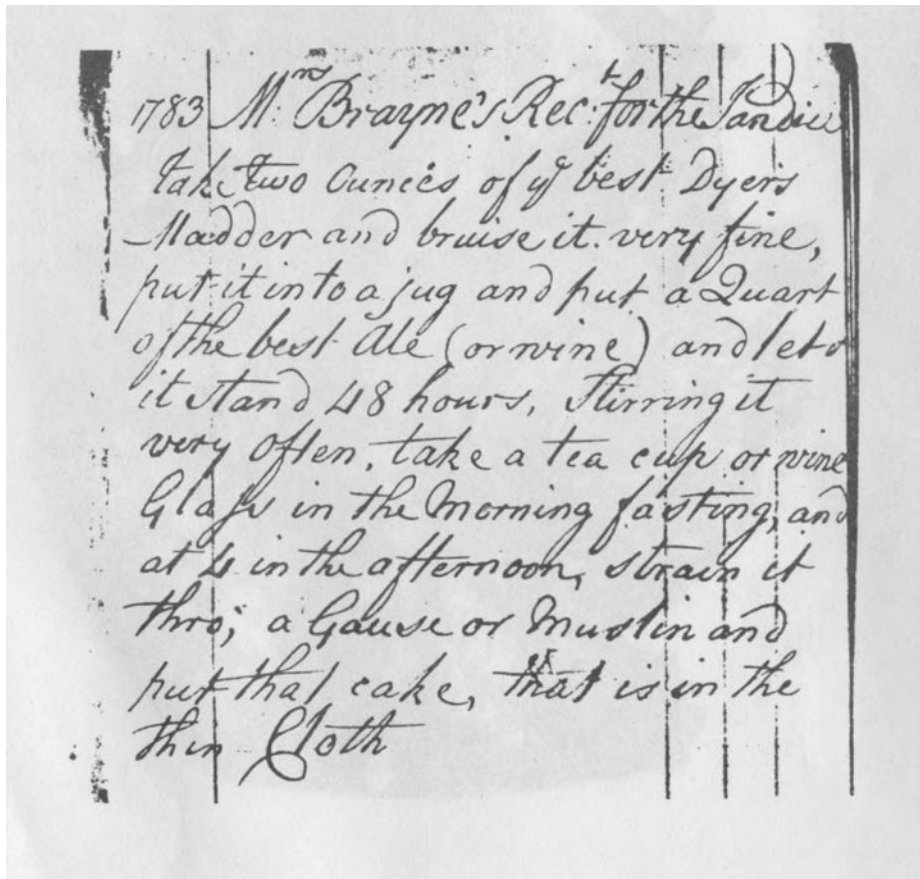


A LOCAL EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY REMEDY

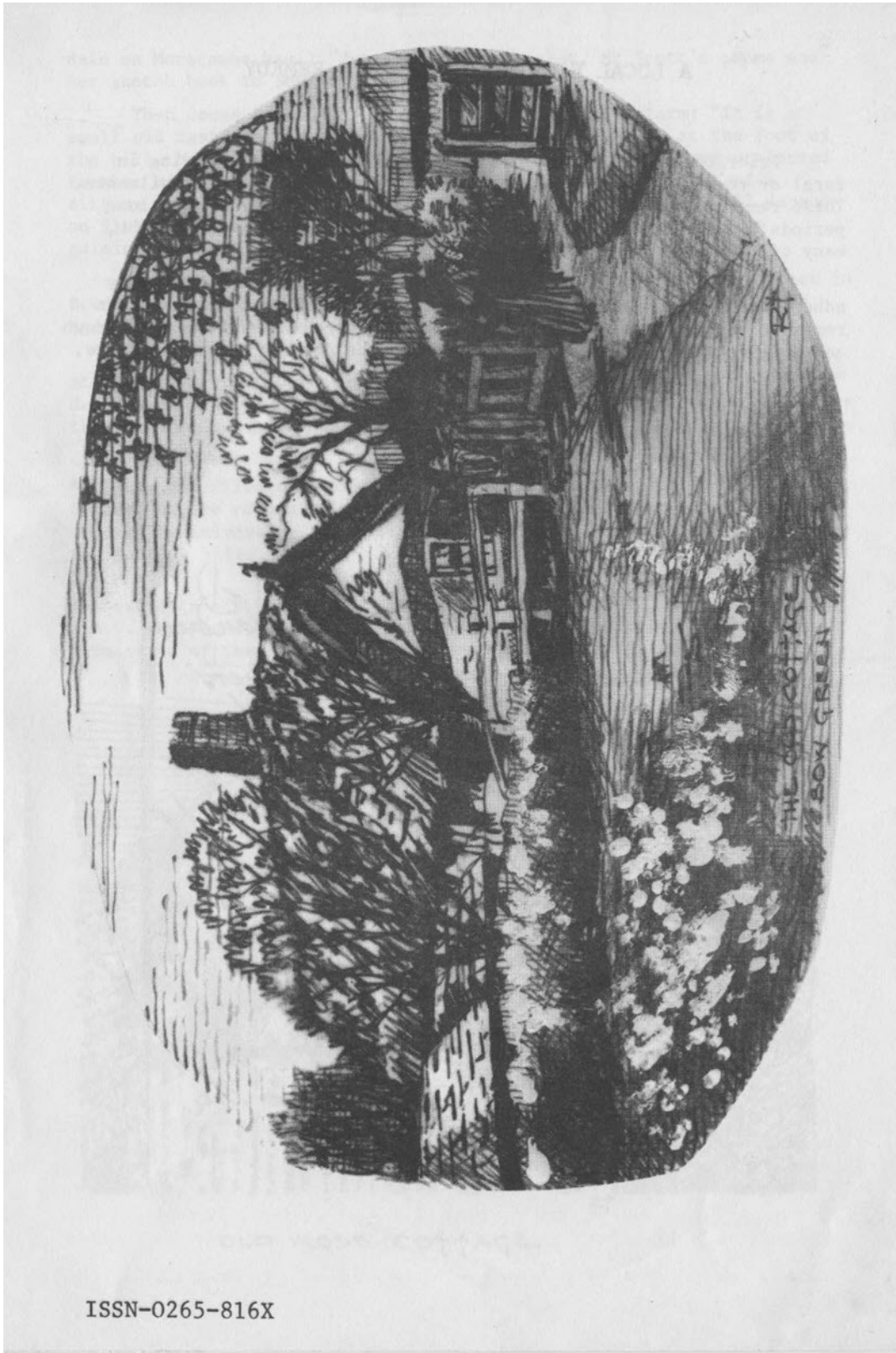
Prior to the introduction of modern medicine people living in rural or remote areas had to rely on local remedies for their ailments. These remedies were the results of experiments carried out over long periods of time and were quite often efficacious although, no doubt, many of them could have had side effects.

Families regularly had their own favourite remedies which they adhered to for generations and there are many local residents who can remember having, in pre-war years, to take concoctions for whooping cough and similar childish illnesses, as well as the dreaded spring medicine, made from the formulae of local families.

The following local remedy for jaundice was given to William Trenbath by Mrs Brayne which he recorded in his account book in 1783.



1783 M^{rs} Brayne's Rec: for the Jaundice
Take two Ounces of y^e best Dyers
Madder and bruise it. very fine,
put it into a jug and put a Quart
of the best Ale (or wine) and let
it stand 48 hours, stirring it
very often, take a tea cup or wine
Glas in the Morning fasting, and
at 4 in the afternoon, strain it
thro; a Gauze or Muslin and
put that cake, that is in the
thin Cloth



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