

## NOTES ON ST. ANTHONY THE GREAT

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### I. ST. ANTHONY AND ENGLISH MEDICINE

Amongst the medical profession to-day, the term St. Anthony's Fire is used as a synonym or common name for erysipelas, a disease much rarer at the present day than fifty years ago, and is so defined in the New English Dictionary. Yet, as Dr. Rose Graham<sup>1</sup> states, St. Anthony's help was invoked in medieval times, not for the treatment of erysipelas but for a disease produced by ergot poisoning, which caused gangrene or death of the extremities, accompanied by much pain of a burning character. In consequence this disease became known as St. Anthony's Fire.

It may be of interest to enquire how it came about that the same term was applied to two different diseases.<sup>2</sup>

It is probable that occasional cases of gangrene, due to ergot poisoning, occurred without attracting much attention, but when, possibly owing to some special climatic conditions, the disease took on an epidemic form, as was the case in the South of France in the tenth century and at various times up to 1373, it is easy to understand that in the absence of any apparent cause, such epidemics would be regarded either as an instance of divine wrath or due to the direct intervention of the devil. This being so, it would be natural for the sufferers to seek help from the Saints in the hope of getting some relief, and of the several Saints whose succour was sought, St. Anthony's was the most efficacious. In addition to the spiritual help given by

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Journ.* LXXXIV, 341. The following short paper should be read in conjunction with Dr. Rose Graham's exhaustive account of St. Antoine de Viennois in *Arch. Journ.* LXXXI.

<sup>2</sup> Read (of Strasburg) in 1771 identified gangrenous ergotism with St. Anthony's fire.

the Brethren of St. Anthony, and attention to bodily comfort, surgical and medical skill were also available for the sufferers.

Although in some cases, perhaps in most, it was considered better to let the dead limbs drop off naturally, in others it was necessary to remove them by amputation. So that surgeons attached to these convents would acquire special skill in the performance of this operation. That such skill was sometimes in demand for patients outside the convent—not suffering from St. Anthony's Fire, is evidenced by a letter which the magistrate of Colmar wrote in 1451 to the convent at Issenheim—belonging to the order of St. Anthony—asking for a surgeon to be sent to perform an amputation on one of the townsmen.<sup>1</sup>

An item in the medical treatment may possibly be one factor in explaining the association of St. Anthony and the Pig—Hog's Lard was in common use as an application to inflamed skin, and it is on record that an ointment made from the fat of a young pig was used in some convents for the cure of St. Anthony's Fire.<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Hugh of Lincoln in the year 1200 visited the shrine of St. Antoine and the neighbouring hospital.<sup>3</sup> His chaplain and biographer tells of the miraculous cures they witnessed. 'Not one, not two, not hundreds, but innumerable.' sufferers, he says, might be on their way to recovery within seven days of their arrival, others might die within that time. Even so, if they had sought St. Anthony's aid with a true faith—*quem fide non ficta*—'the saints' prayers and supplications would be of such avail, that being removed from their filthy bodies they would attain everlasting life.'

And as throwing some light on the medical treatment the sufferers received, the biographer goes on to say that those who recovered with scars and deformities—as described in detail in Dr. Graham's paper (which indeed, are the natural end—results of the disease when the sufferer is put on a wholesome diet and properly

<sup>1</sup> *Aesculap* (Colmar Number),  
January, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronique Medicale*, 1928, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Rolls Series* 37, p. 308.

nursed), would be living witnesses not only to the fact that they had been stricken with this fell disease, but also would testify to the honour of the doctors—'ad honorem medici'—and be a warning to the fearful, and an incentive to devotion.

Such cripples are depicted in one of the compartments of the vault of the little church dedicated to St. Anthony at Waltalingen near Zürich.<sup>1</sup>

But, and this is the point I wish to make, this disease was unknown in England—there are no records of any such epidemics as ravaged France. The reason for this is not far to seek. Although rye remained a constituent of the English loaf down to the eighteenth century, yet rye bread was not favoured by the English people to the same extent as it was by the French, and further, the fungus which causes the disease of the rye, which in its turn causes the gangrene, does not grow readily in England.<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious with the extension of the Order to England followed by the establishment of the London House, the term St. Anthony's Fire must have become well known, but no one in this country would be familiar with the diseased condition which this term was meant to indicate, and in course of time its original meaning would be lost.

For example, Drake<sup>3</sup> in his history of York, written in 1736, referring to the Hospital of St. Anthony, founded about two hundred years previously, says that the Brethren used to go begging and were usually well rewarded. If not so they grumbled, said their prayers backwards and told the people that St. Anthony would plague them for their meanness. The people, Drake continues, were usually so awed by this threat, that when a sow pigged one of the litter was set apart for St. Anthony, or fattened, and then given to the Brethren. Writing in 1756 Drake explains that the disease which St. Anthony was supposed to inflict was

<sup>1</sup> *Mittheil d. antiquar. Gesellsch. in Zurich*: vol. 24, 1898, p. 233. The author thinks the Cripples are seeking the aid of the Saint. But cf. *Arch. Journ.* xxxiv, p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> A mild but extensive epidemic

occurred in 1928 in Manchester among Jews who eat rye bread. *Brit. Med. Journ.*, 1928, 1, 302.

<sup>3</sup> Drake, *Eboracum*, p. 315. Drake confuses St. Anthony the Great with St. Anthony of Padua.

an inflammatory cutaneous disease (i.e. erysipelas), well known at present by the name of St. Anthony's Fire.

Again, in 1762, a family living at Wallisham, near Stow Market, were attacked by a disease which caused the death of two children, four other children together with the husband and wife recovered with the loss of their extremities. Fortunately for science, Dr. Wollaston, later to become famous for his physical and chemical researches, was at the time practising at Bury St. Edmunds, and with the aid of Mr. Bones, the vicar of the parish, made a thorough investigation of the case, and reported it to the Royal Society.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, Sir G. Baker, F.R.S., came across a paper by a Dr. Tissot of Lausanne, which, amongst other matters, described symptoms that might arise from eating ergot. Baker was at once struck by the resemblance of these symptoms to those described by Wollaston in the Wallisham case, and referred the latter to Tissot, who, in a lengthy reply,<sup>2</sup> concluded with some reserve that the disease was caused by ergot. This is not the time or place to go into the medical details of this outbreak, but the matter of interest is that throughout all the communications in connection with it, no mention is made of the term St. Anthony's Fire, and the word 'ergotism' is used as a foreign word.

It seems probable that in this country the term St. Anthony's Fire never dropped out of use, but was used in a loose sort of way without any definite meaning being attached to it.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the first attempts were made by Cullen to put medical nomenclature on a scientific basis, and St. Anthony's Fire is officially accepted as a synonym for erysipelas; Cooper in his *Surgical Dictionary* published in 1840, accepts this meaning for St. Anthony's Fire, and goes on to explain that it is so called from 'its tendency to draw the neighbouring parts into the same state,' quite oblivious of any connexion with ergotism.

<sup>1</sup> *Phil. Trans.*, 1762, 52, p. 523.

<sup>2</sup> *Phil. Trans.*, 1765, 55-108,

Brewer in his *Phrase and Fable*, gives St. Anthony's Fire as meaning Pestilential Erysipelas, and this definition is quoted in parenthesis in the *N.E.D.*, and referred to by Dr. Graham. Brewer, at the time he wrote, would be unlikely to know anything about ergotism, but he would know that St. Anthony's Fire was a common name for erysipelas, and wishing to indicate a particularly virulent form of the disease, used the qualifying word pestilential. This was the more natural, as Braver wrote before Lister had made surgery safe, a time when erysipelas was a real scourge if not a pestilence.

## 2. ST. ANTHONY AND THE PIG

The Pig is the emblem associated with St. Anthony in medieval art. The association of St. Anthony with a pig, has, as Dr. Graham points out, no existence in his life time, but can in part be explained by the curious privilege the Brethren had of allowing pigs given to them as alms, to feed in the streets, such privileged pigs being known by having bells round their necks. Further, a pig rejected by the supervisor of the London Meat Market as unfit for food, had a bell attached to it by a Proctor of St. Anthony,<sup>1</sup> and was then free to roam the streets, and might fatten on the gifts of the faithful, who, when they heard the tinkle of the bell, would open their doors and give them food. Such roaming pigs might be useful as scavengers, but they might also be a source of danger. Thus, on May 19th, 1322, a month old baby died in consequence of a bite of a sow which strayed in at the open door of an unattended shop in the Parish of St. Michael, Queen Lithe.<sup>2</sup> The record does not state that the sow belonged to St. Anthony, but it was unlawful for other pigs to roam the streets, but this rule was frequently broken. Another association of St. Anthony's name with a pig has been previously noticed.

<sup>1</sup> V.C.H. London, i, 581.

<sup>2</sup> Cal. Coron. Rolls, ed. D. Sharpe, 1300-78, p. 56,

## 3. ST. ANTHONY IN ENGLISH ART

To the list of churches containing representations of St. Anthony given by Dr. Graham, should be added Winscombe in Somersetshire, Westhall in Suffolk, and perhaps Stoke Poges—but the glass in the latter, which may have had a German origin, was removed in 1929. I had notes of a large figure of St. Anthony in the north porch of Stoke Poges church, and on visiting the church in connexion with this paper, was told that the glass in the porch had been recently sold—the porch and its contents belonged to the Manor House.

I was able to trace the glass to Sotheby's, and obtained a description and picture of it, but I do not know its present whereabouts. The glass is poor,<sup>1</sup> and the colour inferior, but the figure is nearly life size and well drawn, and probably dates from the middle of the sixteenth century. The right hand of the saint holds a bell, and also a short staff which may have a tau top; the left hand supports an open book, and a rosary hangs from the wrist—there is a tau worked on the left shoulder of the scapular.

Winscombe church, finely situated on a southern spur of the Mendips, has some good medieval glass which can be dated to between 1520–1532, and may be of Bristol manufacture.<sup>2</sup> St. Anthony is figured in the east window of the north aisle, and is shown wearing a white habit, with a black scapular, blue cloak, with a hood drawn over the head. He holds a closed book in his right hand, his left grasps a yellow tau staff from which hangs a bell—one arm of the tau has been destroyed in fitting the glass into its present light—and below is a sow with bell round its neck.

St. Anthony naturally finds a place in the Gallery of Saints in Henry the Seventh's Chapel (Pl. i). The statue is in the second bay from the west in the north Triforium of the nave. It is impossible to appreciate fully the beauty of this figure when viewed from below. Seen from the opposite side, and on the same level, the restful pose of the saint is very attractive. He is

<sup>1</sup> Westlake, *History of Design in Painted Glass*, ix, 62.

<sup>2</sup> *Som. Arch. and Nat. History Soc.*, xv.



STONE FIGURE OF ST. ANTHONY (ABOUT THREE-  
QUARTERS LIFE-SIZE) IN HENRY VII'S CHAPEL,  
WESTMINSTER ABBEY



WINDOW WITH FIGURE OF ST. ANTHONY, CART-  
MELL CHURCH, WESTMORELAND

represented reading from an open book held in his right hand, from one of the long, tapering fingers of which hangs a bell, and a rosary hangs from the wrist. The tau staff, seen with difficulty from below, is supported between the left hand and the chest. Below is a boar with a collar round its neck, but there is no bell visible.

On one of the bronze plaques that ornament Henry Seventh's tomb is a representation of St. Anthony with hands clasped, a rosary hanging from the left wrist, facing St. George, to whom he seems to be appealing. The head of a pig appears from behind the saint. The association of St. Anthony and St. George also occurs in the picture by Pisanello in the National Gallery. Perhaps the design is intended to convey the contrast of the carnal and spiritual weapons employed by the two saints.

There are many features of interest in the little church dedicated to St. Anthony, situated on Cartmell Fell, about eight miles from the well-known Augustinian Priory church at Cartmell, and three miles from the southern end of Lake Windermere. The glass in the east window of this church almost certainly came from the neighbouring priory about a hundred years ago, and cannot be dated earlier than 1520.<sup>1</sup> The window (Pl. ii.) is one of the rare seven sacrament windows. The north light contains a figure of St. Anthony, probably one of a series of saints formerly in the Priory church, and when the glass was removed from the latter, it would be natural for the saints to be placed in the church already dedicated to him. The image is of particular interest as it displays all the emblems usually associated with St. Anthony. The saint with a long beard is figured in a white robe, edged with yellow, supporting an open book on his left hand. Under his arm he holds a long tau staff with a bell hanging from it. On the right shoulder of his robe is a worked letter tau placed obliquely and not very obvious at first sight, resembling that depicted on the rood screen at Ashton in Devonshire. A pig,

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. Cumb. and West. Arch. Society*, xii (1912), 297.

coloured yellow with a bell round its neck, is apparently about to climb up the staff.

Among the numerous saints depicted on the East Anglian screens, St. Anthony, according to my observation, only occurs once, viz. in the church of Westhall, near Halesworth. St. Anthony is represented in a golden yellow cloak, over a black robe, with a book coloured red in his right hand, holding a black staff which may possibly have a tau top. At his feet is a pig with a big bell round its neck.

Finally, at the Church of East Rudham, in Norfolk, are preserved some fragments of Nottingham alabaster figures, probably derived from the neighbouring Loxford Priory.<sup>1</sup> Among those fragments is one which may be St. Anthony. It is a headless figure, a fat pig with a bell round its neck at the feet, and the lower portion of a thick staff. The animal has been described<sup>2</sup> as a horned sheep, and the figure attributed to St. Agnes, but I have no doubt that the animal is intended for a pig, although it is a very different looking animal from that accompanying the image of St. Anthony in alabaster, now in the museum at Oscott College, and noted by Dr. Graham.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> V.C.H. *Norfolk*, ii, 380.

<sup>2</sup> *Journ. Arch. Assoc., New Series*, Pl. v.

<sup>3</sup> *Arch. Journ.*, LXXXII, p. 34,

vol. 7, p. 118.