



# DIGGING DEEPER SERIES

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## Common Georgian Ailments and Present Day Treatments

Now that you have visited the Cellar of Sickness and discovered what were the most common Georgian ailments and what cures were prescribed for these by the apothecaries at that time, here is some further information on these diseases and a brief explanation of present day treatments:

### Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition in which abnormally high levels of glucose (sugar) are present in the blood and urine. The term is the shortened version of the Latin “diabetes mellitus”. “Mellitus” means honeyed or sweet and, up until the 11th century, diabetes was commonly diagnosed by Water Tasters who decided whether or not the patient’s urine tasted of honey!

There are two main types of diabetes:

Type 1 - The body's immune system attacks and destroys the cells that produce insulin.

Type 2 - The body does not produce enough insulin or the body's cells do not react to insulin.

Type 2 is far more common than type 1 – In the UK, around 90% of all adults with diabetes have type 2.

#### Symptoms

Symptoms include increased thirst and frequent urination (hence why it was originally believed to be a disease of the kidneys or urine and known as the “pissing evil”), fatigue, blurred vision, and weight loss or gain.

#### Causes

Both types of diabetes can be hereditary (i.e. the carrying of certain genes which are linked to the disease). Type 2 can be triggered by being overweight, being physically inactive and having high blood pressure and having high blood fats (cholesterol and triglycerides).

Being a member of the upper class, Lady Bridgewater could afford to over-indulge at the dining table and this is the most likely cause of her diabetes. Another risk factor would have been her inactive lifestyle, the result of not needing to take employment herself and employing servants to carry out her household chores.

### Present Day Treatment

The main treatment for type 1 diabetes is insulin, which replaces the hormone which the body isn't able to produce.

Type 2 diabetes can sometimes be managed by lifestyle changes (diet and exercise) alone. If these lifestyle changes don't lower the blood sugar, medication will need to be taken and this may include insulin.

*There would have been no benefit in Lady Bridgewater having to endure the apothecary's medicine of pulverised sheep's stomach, but the exercise she would have taken as part of the Buxton Cure (such as taking a brisk walk on the Slopes each day) would certainly help to reduce her blood sugar.*

## **Rheumatism**

Rheumatism is the former term for what we now call musculoskeletal diseases. This covers more than 200 distinct diseases which affect the joints, tendons, ligaments, bones and muscles, many of which fall under the category of arthritis.

### Symptoms

Symptoms include inflammation, pain and loss of motion in the affected areas. It is known that John Carr, the hard working architect commissioned by the Fifth Duke of Devonshire to design the Crescent, suffered from severe rheumatism. His letters reveal that he was tortured by the pain and, when his condition was at its worst, he could only move around by crawling over the floor.

### Causes

Most of these diseases occur when the immune system goes awry and attacks the tissues. The cause of this can be hereditary or the result of an infection. Recent research suggests that rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disease which affects the joints, could be the body's reaction to trauma or intense stress.

John Taylor's rheumatism may have been caused by a lingering infection, due to antibiotics not having been discovered, or it may have been triggered by the stressful lifestyle which came hand-in-hand with being a person of rank.

### Present Day Treatment

Present day treatment for musculoskeletal diseases mainly focuses on medication to reduce inflammation and pain, improve movement and suppress the immune system. Regular exercise, stress management and drinking plenty of water (to help to fight inflammation and keep joints well lubricated) will also be prescribed.

*The leech bloodletting, prescribed by the apothecary, would have been very unpleasant and could have caused further infections, as we now know. However, there is no doubt that John Taylor would have benefitted in many ways from the Buxton Cure - Regular exercise, taking the waters and reducing his stress levels by taking a relaxing bathe or socialising in the Assembly Rooms. It is interesting to read in John Carr's letters that his rheumatism began to abate after only ten days of taking the Buxton Cure.*

## Scrofula

Scrofula is the inflammation of lymph nodes in the neck. Until the 18th century, scrofula was called the “king’s evil” as doctors thought the only way to cure the disease was to be touched by a member of royalty!

### Symptoms

Scrofula causes hard swellings on the neck, which are usually painless but can drain pus after several weeks and so look very unattractive. It can be accompanied by a fever, a general feeling of being unwell and unexplained weight loss. If the swellings attach to the nerves in the throat they can result in the loss of speech.

### Causes

It is caused by the same bacteria which causes tuberculosis in the lungs. It is the most common form of tuberculosis infection that occurs outside the lungs.

Rose Hathersage would have been particularly at risk of the tuberculosis bacteria taking hold, due to the likelihood of her living in overcrowding conditions and suffering from malnutrition, both situations being typical for the working classes at this time.

### Present Day Treatment

Scrofula is a serious infection and can often require treatment of multiple antibiotics for six months or longer. Sometimes doctors may also prescribe oral steroids, which can help to reduce inflammation.

*Thee apothecary’s cure of live millipedes would have been extremely gruesome and slicing Rose’s lumps away could have put her at risk of a severe infection, due to the possibility of bacteria passing through the hole left between the lymph node and the body.*

## Dropsy

Dropsy is the former term for oedema (or edema). This is a condition in which blood vessels leak fluid into nearby body tissues. The name originates from the Old French “hydropsie” and this, in turn, originates from the Greek “hydro” (meaning water).

### Symptoms

The build-up of fluid in the body tissues results in watery swellings, bloated limbs and puffiness around the eyes. It usually occurs in the feet and legs, but can occur almost anywhere. It will cause difficulty in breathing if it affects the lungs.

### Causes

Oedema can be caused by either systemic conditions, such as kidney disease, or local conditions, such as varicose (inflamed) veins in the legs.

### Present Day Treatment

Long-term treatment of oedema focuses on treating the underlying cause. If necessary, diuretic medication is prescribed, which helps the kidney tubules (small ducts) to regulate salt and water balance.

*Medical opinion during the Georgian era did not acknowledge that dropsy is a symptom of a disease and not a disease in itself. So any cure would need to be directed at the underlying disease and the apothecary's horrendous purging tonic would certainly have been ineffective in curing Althea Cromford's systemic disease or varicose veins.*

*However, Althea may have been fortunate enough to have been helped by the Buxton Bath Charity, which was set up in 1779 to fund the cost of providing a public bath specifically for the poor. It is said that Buxton's water is a natural diuretic and so drinking the water may very well have helped her condition. Furthermore, bathing in the water would almost certainly have given her temporary relief from the discomfort and immobility caused by her swollen parts.*

## **Gout**

Gout is a type of arthritis, which causes a sudden attack of joint inflammation and is usually confined to a single joint.

### Symptoms

Symptoms are an intense burning pain in a joint and hot, swollen, red skin over the affected joint. It typically affects the big toe and an attack usually lasts between five and seven days.

### Causes

Under normal circumstances, the body dissolves uric acid (a by-product of the breaking down of certain proteins called purines) and removes it via the kidneys and urination.

However, if there is too much uric acid for the body to deal with, it accumulates in the bloodstream and crystals are deposited in the joints. Susceptibility to excess uric acid can be hereditary, but can also be triggered by obesity, chronic kidney disease and specific foods (such as red meat and game, high fat dairy products and alcohol).

There is no doubt that Alexander Clapham's gout attacks were due to him eating the type of food which can trigger this ailment; food which was typical in the diet of the upper classes.

### Present Day Treatment

When gout is mild it can be treated with lifestyle changes and diet (particularly avoiding or minimising the foods which are known to trigger gout). However, medications are generally necessary for severe cases. These are prescribed to either prevent a gout attack or to provide immediate relief from the pain.

*The apothecary's cures - the stuffed fat goose and the drink which contained brandy – were, ironically, just the sort of food which Alexander Clapham should have been avoiding! If he could have brought himself to replace his alcohol consumption with Buxton water and had been able to hobble to the baths, he would have benefitted from some degree of prevention and relief related to his gout attacks.*

## Digestive Problems

Digestive problems cover a wide range of ailments which affect the organs within the abdomen (the part of the trunk below the ribs and above the pelvis).

### Symptoms

Symptoms of digestive problems include abdominal pain or discomfort, indigestion, feeling nauseous, gas and constipation or diarrhoea.

### Causes

Digestive problems are caused by inflammation (e.g. gastroenteritis or a “stomach bug”), distention (e.g. a tumour obstructing the intestine) or the loss of the blood supply to an organ. Problems can also be caused by abnormal contractions of the intestinal muscles or abnormally sensitive nerves within the intestines, in which case a diagnosis of Irritable Bowel Syndrome or IBS is given.

The symptoms of the stable hand, Godfrey Whittington, are typical of gastroenteritis, which could have been picked up from poor standards of hygiene when handling the horses (and their manure).

### Present Day Treatment

Diagnosis is usually challenging and is based on physical examination, testing, and even surgery. Treatment ranges from lifestyle changes (eating a healthy diet, taking regular exercise and avoiding excess alcohol) for indigestion to surgery and chemotherapy for more serious conditions.

*The apothecary’s disgusting ‘aromatic’ ointment, which contained excrement, would at best make Godfrey feel even more nauseous and, at worst, would exacerbate his condition due to the amount of bacteria present in it.*

## References

Wragg, Brian, “*The Life and Works of John Carr of York*” (Otley, 2000)

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Fay Fallows

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