

# COUNTRY PRACTICE IN DAYS GONE BY

(as recorded in contemporary diaries)

## PART II

by

WILLIAM BROCKBANK

### 3. THE WOODFORDE DIARY\*

THE full text of this diary, entitled *The Diary of a Country Parson, 1758–1802*, was published in 1924–31 in five volumes under the editorship of J. Beresford. The following extracts have been taken from the abridged version of the diary, also edited by J. Beresford, in 1935, after reference to the complete edition when necessary.

The diary enables us to meet individually and personally the men and women who lived in the villages and country towns during the last half of the eighteenth century—farmers, shopkeepers, men-servants, maid-servants, squires, clergy, doctors, blacksmiths and travellers by many a coach.

Parson James Woodforde was born in Somerset in 1740. He was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford, being ordained in 1763. At first he worked in various parishes in Somerset, but most of the extracts quoted come from the period when he lived at Weston Longville Parsonage in Norfolk. He reached there in 1774 and remained until his death in 1803.

1767 March 24 I was bled this morning by Mr. James Clarke, and had two ounces of blood taken from me, for which I gave him 2s. 6d. N.B. My blood was very rich and, therefore, proper to be bled.

April 14 I read prayers this morning again at Castle Cary Church. I prayed for poor James Burge this morning, out of my own head, hearing he was just gone off almost in a consumption. It occasioned a great tremulation in my voice at the time. I went after prayers and saw him, and he was but just alive. He was a very good sort of a young man and much respected. It was the Evil which was stopped and then fell upon his lungs.

1768 February 28 My father and Doctor Clarke had a few words coming out of Ansford Church this morning, but all things were made up before they parted and the Dr. came and smoked a pipe with my father at Parsonage in the afternoon, with his wife . . .

1769 (Between June 9th and 16th the diarist is ill with a violent rash on his face, hands, breast, arms, &c., and all the symptoms, as he describes them, of scarlet fever or measles: sore throat, headache, weak eyes, fever. Dr. Clarke, however, merely tells him to keep warm indoors and eat as much as he liked, 'not to live low, but encourage the rash'. All this time he sees relations and friends constantly, and after some strong purges he is well again and out on the 16th.)

1773 April 17 The old doctor I find is not worth much less than 16000p<sup>d</sup>. (He has destroyed his will and the diarist induces him to make another in the interests of his family, as the money would be divided up unfairly if he died intestate.)

\* Reprinted by kind permission of the Oxford University Press and the Editor, J. Beresford.

Part I, containing extracts from (1) *The Memoirs of the Verney Family* and (2) the *Diary of George Ridpath* appeared in *Medical History* in January, 1960 (p. 65).

*W. Brockbank*

April 22 I went up to Dr. Clarke's this morning by the desire of Sister Clarke and James, and desired him to make a will agreeable to his family and himself and he agreed so to do which I am very glad of. The poor doctor cried a little . . .

1774 February 1 All friends pretty well but poor Dr. Clarke, who is worse than I left him, his legs swell and he talks but very little, and looks very ill indeed.

May 24 I made a visit in the morning to Mr. Clarke's and saw the poor doctor, who is greatly altered for the worse and am afraid he will be but a few days here. He was gasping for breath, knew nobody and never said a word. He walked about but not without a person to support him, being so very weak.

1776 November 3 This morning about 11 o'clock Dr. Thorne of Mattishall came to my house and inoculated my two servants Ben Legate and little Jack Warton (for small pox). (A very elaborate description follows of Dr. Thorne's method of inoculation—in the arm—and the diet and physics to be taken during the period of inoculation.) Pray God my people and all others in the small pox may do well, several houses have got the small pox at present in Weston.

November 22 My neighbour Downing, the father of the children that were lately inoculated has got the small pox in the natural way and likely to have it very bad—therefore I sent over Harry Dunnell this evening to Dr. Thorne's, to desire him to come to-morrow and see him, which he promised.

November 23 Dr. Thorne came this morning to poor Downing and I went to meet him there and saw him there. He has a great quantity (of spots) and I think will have a difficult matter to get over it. But by the blessing of God upon him, hope that he will do well. I told the Dr. that I would see him paid, if he would assist him etc. . . .

1783 April 30 I called on Dr. Thorne before dinner, saw his wife, garden and house—all very neat indeed but small.

August 14 Dr. Thorne came here whilst we were at dinner, and he dined with us but obliged to leave us immediately after dinner, having a great many patients to visit. He ordered that Lizzy should begin to take the bark (quinine) immediately as the fever was abated, and which I sent for to his house this evening. She begun taking the bark at 10. this night and is to take it every two hours till she has taken a dozen papers. If it purges her she is to have 4 drops of laudanum in her bark when she takes it, then 3 drops—then 2, then 1 drop which will take of the purging. Betty is to set up till 4 in the morning to give her the bark and then Will as he brews to-morrow, will give it to her.

1784 March 13 Dr. Thorne and Betsy Davy with him on a little hobby called on us this morning and stayed with us about half an hour, but could not prevail on them to dine.

September 28 My maid Betty has not been able to do any thing for this last week owing to a bad thumb and is still bad. Poor Molly Dade my other maid very bad in a cough and am afraid it is rather consumptive—She has increased it to day by easing the other maid in helping her and she is so foolish to tell Molly that she is in a consumption—which makes the poor girl very unhappy.

November 3 Sent Will this morning to Mr. Smith's at Mattishall with a hare—told him to call on Molly Dade, during the time that he was gone Molly's father called here—he gave us a very poor account of our worthy maid poor Molly Dade—that he believed she cannot recover. We were extremely sorry for her. He came after her stays that were here, the others being too large for her—so much of late has she fallen away. Mr. Dade could not stay to dine with us to day. Will on his return also told us that Mr. Thorne had given poor Molly over and that he could do no more. Pray God Almighty comfort her—and with patience wait the Almighty's will—as good a girl as ever lived.

1785 January 6 To Betty Dade for half a yrs. wages due to her and her sister Molly between them pd. 1.6.6. Mem: I then told Betty Dade that from this time I intended to give her 5 guineas per annum as I designed the same to her poor sister, if her health would have permitted to stay with us—but now that is all over, she daily getting worse and worse, as her father who came over here this morn' told us, by whom Mr. Smith sent us some medlars.

April 27 My new boy Jack Secker came back from Mr. Thornes after inoculation this morning to us. Clerk Hewits son Will brought him here behind him, gave Will 0.6. . . .

*Country Practice in Days Gone By*

1786 March 23 Poor Mr. Michlethwaite is gone to Lynn, and it is thought will never return again as he declines very fast in a consumptive complaint.

1787 February 3 Nancy (the diarist's niece who had been troubled for some weeks with a painful knee) had but an indifferent night and after taking her physick this morning was very sick and brought up some of it, her breakfast would not stay on her stomach also, nor anything else but a little water gruel, and that but a little time, was extremely ill all the day long till about 8 in the evening and then was a small matter easier. The mercury she took last night was much too strong for her weak frame at this present. The physic she took this morning had little or no effect, as she brought it up almost the whole, therefore she had violent griping pains in her bowels the whole morning without much coming from her. Mr. Thorne called here this morning accidentally having been to bleed Mrs. Custance at Weston House. He was not pleased on hearing that Nancy was so bad as not to be seen by him being above stairs. I am afraid she caught cold, as her pain within her was so bad that she could not get from the close-stool for near 2 hours together. I went up to see her in the evening, and she was very low and cried a good deal—but seemed rather easier—after she had her tea and toast she seemed something better and soon after came down stairs and stayed the rest of the evening. When she went to bed she was tolerably easy. I was very uneasy indeed the whole day on my dear niece's account.

February 10 Nancy tolerable this morning but did not come down to breakfast, nor was below stairs till noon, just as she was coming down stairs Mrs. Custance came to us and stayed till near 3 o'clock. She seemed far from well, having a low nervous fever hanging about her, and very far gone with child. I tried to divert her as much as I could, showed her some medals of mine &c. I was quite sorry to see her so very low and weak. Nancy dined, supped &c. below stairs and was tolerably well and cheerful all day.

February 12 Nancy breakfasted, dined &c. below stairs again and was better than she was yesterday, her spirits very good with a good appetite, but her lameness still continues, tho' I think not quite so bad. Mr. Thorne also called here about Noon to see his patient, stayed here about an hour, during that time Mrs. Custance made us a visit and stayed with us till 3 o'clock. Mr. Thorne left no medicine whatever for Nancy.

March 27 Mrs. Custance made us a morning visit and stayed with us an hour—She is quite hurried and uneasy on account of her little boy, William, having got the measles, and herself never having them, and also that she is very near her time of being brought to bed, having scarce a month to go with child. Am exceeding sorry for poor Mrs. Custance indeed and likewise for Mr. Custance who must be very much concerned.

May 6 Soon after my return from Church, one of Mr. Custance's servants called here to let us know that Mrs. Custance was brought to bed of a boy about 11 o'clock this morn'. She with the little stranger as well as can be expected.

1789 June 3 Mr. and Mrs. Thorne sent a note whilst I was from home to-day, that they could not dine with us to-morrow, as they could not leave their daughter Hannah she being much worse in her fits than usual. Mr. Thorne might however come I think.

1790 February 4 Dr. Thorne of Mattishall called on us whilst we were at dinner, had about half dined, and he sat down and eat very hearty of a roasted pigg, drank tea with us and left us a little before 8.

September 24 Nancy was taken very ill this afternoon with a pain within her, blown up so as if poisoned, attended with a vomiting. I supposed it proceeded in great measure from what she eat at dinner and after. She eat for dinner some boiled beef rather fat and salt, a good deal of a nice rost duck, and a plenty of boiled damson pudding. After dinner by way of desert, she eat some greengage plumbs, some figgs, and rasberries and cream. I desired her to drink a good half pint glass of warm rum and water which she did and soon was a little better. For supper she had water-gruel with a couple of small table spoonfuls of rum in it, and going to bed I gave her a good dose of rhubarb and ginger. She was much better before she went to bed.

1791 March 7 The small-pox spreads much in the parish. Abigail Robert's husband was very bad in it in the natural way, who was supposed to have had it before and which he thought also. His children are inoculated by Johnny Reeve, as are also Richmonds children near me. It is a pity that all the poor in the parish were not inoculated also. I am entirely for it.

March 8 Gave poor Roberts one of my old shirts to put on in the small-pox—his, poor fellow, being so extremely coarse and rough, that his having the small-pox so very full, his coarse shirt makes it very painful to him. I sent his family a basket of apples and some black currant robb. There are many, many people in the parish yet (who) have never had the small-pox. Pray God all may do well that have it or shall have it.

March 11 The stiony on my right eye-lid still swelled and inflamed very much. As it is commonly said that the eye-lid being rubbed by the tail of a black cat would do it much good if not entirely cure it, and having a black cat, a little before dinner I made a trial of it, and very soon after dinner I found my eye-lid much abated of the swelling and almost free from pain. I cannot therefore but conclude it to be of the greatest service to a stiony on the eye-lid. Any other cats tail may have the above effect in all probability—but I did my eye-lid with my own black tom cat's tail. . . .

March 15 My right eye again, that is, its eye-lid much inflamed again and rather painful. I put on a plaistor to it this morning, but in the aft. took it of again, as I perceived no good from it. I buried poor John Roberts this afternoon about 5. o'clock, aged about 35 yrs.

March 16 My eye-lid is I think rather better than it was, I bathed it with warm milk and water last night. I took a little rhubarb going to bed to night. My eye-lid about noon rather worse owing perhaps to the warm milk and water, therefore just before dinner I washed it well with cold water and in the evening appeared much better for it. (It is noteworthy that he did not use the cat's tail a second time.)

Mr. Custance gave me a guinea to pay for the inoculation of Harry Dunnells children 6 in number, which was extremely kind and good of him—The parish refusing to pay for the same, tho' at the same time they agreed to the inoculating Case's family and have had it done, tho' a farmer and better off. I wrote a note this evening to Mr. Thorne to desire that he would come to Weston to morrow and inoculate Harry Dunnells 6 children. I gave the note to Harry Dunnell for one of his children to carry it very early to morrow morn' to Mattishall to Mr. Thorne before he goes out.

March 20 The first thing almost that I heard this morn' was the death of John Greaves, my carpenter, a very inoffensive good kind of a young man as any in my parish. Poor John was very suddenly taken of. He had been ill but a few days, but in a very dangerous disorder, called the peripneumony (pneumonia). Mr. Thorne was sent for and attended him but I am afraid he was not sent for soon enough. I had not the most distant idea that he was in such danger as it turned out.

1793 April 4 Just as we were going to set down to dinner, Dr. Thorne called on me, on my late poor butcher's account, as he is one of the executors. I paid to him, due from me 9.2.0. I asked him to dine with us but he declined.

1794 October 20 Had but an indifferent night of sleep last night my ancle being painful most part of the night, and also towards the morning had a gouty pain on the great toe of the other leg, but not bad. It made me hobble however between both this morning. Dr. Thorne called on me about 1. o'clock and dressed my leg. No discharge but kind of blood on the lint appeared. Yesterday did more harm than good I apprehend and which occasioned so much pain in the night. The doctor dressed it to day with yellow basilicum only, except a little corner of the wound where was a little speck of proud flesh on which he put a very small matter of red precipitate powder, instead of ointment and that covered with basilicum ointment. The red precipitate powder gave me much pain for a little time but after being dressed some time, my ancle much easier.

1795 March 28 Mr. Thorne waited on me again this morning and looked at my ancle, applied a caustic to it just touching the part with it with a small kind of fine hair pencil in a quill-case. He much recommended again the resting of it.

1796 April 20 Mr. Thorne, my doctor, called on me and stayed a considerable time with us. I paid him a bill of 3.13.6.

1797 February 26 Dr. Thorne came to see Nancy this afternoon about three o'clock stayed near an hour with us, I asked him to dine with us, but he could not. He said, that her complaint proceeded from a feverish kind, and had affected a weak part. He told her to live as usual, by no

### *Country Practice in Days Gone By*

means lower, to poultice her knee by night with a milk poultice, and to keep a bandage on it by day. Not to walk on it but little, no cold water whatever to be applied. To take some camphor &c. pills some of which he left with her, 10. of them to be taken at 2. different times between 5. o'clock this evening and before she went to bed. To-morrow he said he should send something for the knee to be bathed with. He said he did not think it of any great consequence.

March 22 Nancy continues still to get better by drinking plentifully of port wine, at least 1. pint in a day.

March 29 Mr. Thorne came to see Nancy this morning. He strongly recommends port wine and to drink rather more than less. She drank to day between a pint & a quart without having the least effect upon the brain. She has not drunk less than a pint for many days.

May 13 Had a very indifferent night last night. This morning taken very ill, could scarce get down stairs. Sent for Mr. Thorne, who ordered me immediately to bed, having had a fit in the last night and there I laid all night in a very bad state scarce sensible all the night long. In the night had a blister put between my shoulders which discharged very much indeed in the night and which made me soon better. But before that was put on was all but dead, quite senseless. Nancy and Betty up with me most part of the night.

May 20 Had a good night again last night thank God and got up very early. N.B. Sally a bad sitter up at nights. Dr. Thorne called on me again to day, found me much better.

May 31 Somewhat better, thank God this morning, but very weak yet. I find by my niece that I have been very dangerously ill indeed, quite senseless some times. I have been blistered and I do not know what I have suffered. Quite senseless at times, and in very great danger indeed. Dr. Thorne with me very often indeed and did me great service.

July 20 I find myself rather getting strength but very slow indeed. Have at times uncommon sinkings within me—tho' I constantly take cake and a glass of port wine every morn' about 11. o'clock and strengthening cordial twice a day the first thing before breakfast and at 2. in the afternoon being an hour before dinner—which I have constantly been taken for the last month if not longer. Finished my last dose this afternoon and now am to drop it. Dinner to day, fried soals and boiled beef &c.

October 15 Weaker this morning than I have been yet. Scarce able to make a walk of it to day. No appetite still. Dinner to day, rost beef and plumb pudding &c. I eat some plumb pudding for dinner but nothing else. In the evening thought myself a little better. The medicine that Mr. Thorne sent me seem to do good. For the last two days I have been very bad indeed not able to put on some of my cloaths or pull them off.

October 24 Thank God! I had a good night of rest last night and found myself pretty strong and hearty this morning without any assistance or attendance whatever I got up. Dinner to day fried beef and potatoes and a rost chicken.