

A NORFOLK MEDICAL CLUB

CHRISTIAN solicitude for the well-being and comfort of less fortunate fellow creatures was a matter of individual philanthropy rather than public conscience in the early nineteenth century, when Robert Copeman was the squire of the market town of Aylsham in Norfolk. He became the first chairman of the Aylsham Medical Club. This was effectually a working man's small private National Health Service. There was nothing novel in the venture, for the system of Friendly Societies in Norfolk as elsewhere was well established by the end of the eighteenth century, and it gathered strength during the first part of the nineteenth century.

It appears that the constitutions of only a few of these clubs survive and that sets of rules are rare.¹ Thus it may be interesting to comment on the Rules of the Aylsham Medical Club, recently discovered among some family papers.

The chief purpose of Friendly Societies and Medical Clubs was to provide their members with money allowances during incapacity for work resulting from sickness or infirmity and to make provision for the immediate necessities arising on the death of a member or his wife.² The early ones were purely clubs, mutual associations, which arranged provision in time of illness and provided for good fellowship. Subsequently they included other purposes such as the encouragement of thrift and the furtherance of local business activities. Insurance against doctors' fees during illness was the purpose of the Aylsham Medical Club—conviviality played no part. It did not meet in the more usual public house but in a school. One does not find, therefore, such clauses in the Rules as those arranging for payment of the beer. (One club demanded a fee of fourpence for this refreshment from every member at each meeting, regardless of his attendance!)

The Aylsham Medical Club was founded in 1838. It was possibly a little more enlightened in its policy and scope than its predecessor which had failed after a short life of only eleven years. The benefits of Friendly Societies were usually open to men alone—their wives being excluded; the Aylsham Medical Club welcomed applicants 'whether Male or Female'. Entry was not restricted by age but by earning capacity and was open to 'Householders, Lodgers, or Servants whose average earnings shall not exceed twenty shillings per week or whose yearly wages shall not exceed twelve pounds'. Like most such societies, the Aylsham Medical Club provided for the labouring classes. They were eligible if they were 'of sober habits and good character'. Aylsham was noteworthy in that it had also an unrelated society whose membership consisted of 'tradesmen, mechanics and other persons above the degree of common labourers'.

Membership of the Medical Club entitled the subscriber to be 'assured of Medical and Surgical Assistance and Medicine'. He was disqualified only if his disease was deemed to have proceeded from 'Imprudence'. Some clubs had special clauses which rendered members ineligible for benefit if their disability was caused by drunkenness, brawling, wrestling, attempted suicide, venereal disease or grand pox. They might be excluded if convicted of 'felony, larceny, swearing, for the use of traitorous, disrespectful or seditious words against the Sovereign, and suchlike misdemeanours'.

Many societies paid death benefits to widows, funeral expenses, unemployment benefits and old-age pensions. A higher premium was necessary to maintain these commitments. The Aylsham Club was less ambitious in its coverage. Its concern was to bring to its members the benefits of a 'Medical Gentleman' (whom they were free to choose) 'who will visit them at their own houses when unable to go out'. He would

AYLSHAM MEDICAL CLUB.



At a Meeting, held at the National School Room, in Aylsham, on the Twenty-ninth Day of October, 1838,

ROBERT COPEMAN, ESQUIRE,

IN THE CHAIR.

IT WAS RESOLVED,

Firstly.—That a Medical Club be established for Aylsham and its Vicinity.

Secondly.—That the Clergy and principal Inhabitants of the parishes of Burgh, Banningham, Cawston, Tuttington, Colby, Erpingham, Calthorpe, Alby, Thwayte, Ingworth, Iteringham, Oulton, Blickling, Saxthorpe, Corpusty, Marsham, Heydon, Brampton, Oxnead, Skeyton, Hevingham, Felmingham, Buxton, and Lamas be requested to promote the Establishment and Maintenance of such a Club by Benefactions and Subscriptions, and to encourage the Labouring Classes in their parishes to become Members.

Thirdly.—That each Person subscribing annually Five Shillings or more, shall be an Honorary Member.

Fourthly.—That all Persons of the Labouring Class, of sober habits and good character, whether Male or Female, and whether Householders, Lodgers, or Servants, whose average earnings shall not exceed Twenty Shillings per week, or whose yearly wages shall not exceed ^{exclusive} ~~£~~ Pounds, may, by becoming Members, be assured of Medical and Surgical Assistance, and Medicine (except in cases of Disease proceeding from Imprudience) by Subscriptions at the following Rates :—

	<i>s. d.</i>	
Each Person without a Child	1 0	} <i>Per Quarter of a Year.</i>
Each Widow or Widower with one Child under sixteen years of age	1 3	
Each Widow or Widower with two or three Children under that age ..	1 6	
Each Widow or Widower with more than three Children under that age	1 9	
Each Married Man for himself and his Wife	1 6	
Each Married Man for himself and his Wife and not more than three Children under sixteen years of age	1 9	
Each Married Man for himself and his Wife and all his Children under that age	2 3	

The Front Page of the Rules of the Aylsham Medical Club

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be responsible for prescribing medicine. This duty was thoughtfully aided by a clause in the Rules 'that Sick Members shall provide Bottles for Medicine and when able shall go between the hours of nine and ten in the morning to the Residence of their Medical Attendant'. The next clause orders that the expense of 'such additional nourishment as the Medical Attendant thinks necessary for restoring the health of a member shall be defrayed out of the subscriptions of the Honorary Members'. The Honorary Members were those who had subscribed more than five shillings a year and 'are for the most part the Clergy and Principle Inhabitants' of the two dozen or so parishes concerned. They constituted the Committee.

A humane clause was the one which allowed any person to 'subscribe for his or her infirm Parent or Parents (if they were unable to work and were living with their family) on the same terms as children under the age of sixteen'.

Rules 'seventhly' and 'eighthly' deserve notice. 'That the wife of a member may be attended in her confinement by paying to the Medical Attendant, three weeks before she expects to be confined, the sum of seven shillings and sixpence (a further three shillings being paid out of the subscriptions of the Honorary Members).'

'That the members shall be entitled to have their children vaccinated'; (and the second half of this clause is significant) 'but, in case of their refusal to have them vaccinated they shall not be entitled to any attendance if attacked by the Smallpox.' One can understand the diffidence of a parent to have his child vaccinated in those days. Many dangers could attend the procedure, not least the transmission of disease and the infection of the site of inoculation. Fifty years were to pass until it fell to the great-grandson of the Chairman of the Aylsham Medical Club, Dr. S. Monckton Copeman, to invent glycerinated calf lymph for vaccination. This revolutionary discovery in 1891 abolished the hazardous 'arm to arm' method and transformed vaccination into a safe undertaking.

The failure of most of the earlier societies was due to difficulties in organization, inability to find security for their funds (embezzlement and theft was the end of more than one club) and their small membership. This last resulted in such societies being short-lived, which brought hardship to the elderly members; for either the members were mostly young (with the prospect of sickness and old age remote) and they outvoted the older ones and decided to terminate the Society and divide the funds; or if there was an older membership the outpayments tended to exceed the income, a situation unlikely to attract the younger members.

The organization of the Aylsham Medical Club was not in the hands of the members themselves but in those of a responsible committee. This must have contributed to its stability. A large membership was ensured both by the number of villages from which members were drawn and by its powerful local patronage.

Friendly Societies survived until the present day through mergers of a great number of these small associations into the several larger ones. They were extremely successful and popular institutions, doing great service to the community. Their combined membership had grown to be over six million by 1948.³ But after that time, with the extension of public social and medical services, and the deprivation of their former function of handling the State's sickness funds along with their own, their numbers went into a steep decline, and with this much good fellowship disappeared.

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P. W. MONCKTON COPEMAN

REFERENCES

1. PRITCHARD, M. F. L., *Notes and Queries*, 1956, III, 401-4.
2. *The Times*, 29 April 1957.
3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., article on Friendly Societies.

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SERMON ANENT
THE PESTILENCE

THOUGH now quite forgotten, the Rev. Archibald Skeldie (or Scaldee—his name is spelled in various ways) seems to have been a much respected clergyman in Edinburgh during the earlier part of the seventeenth century. He graduated M.A. (Edin.) in 1620 and was then noted as 'Caecus'. It was probably this blindness that prevented his being appointed to any parish. His name does not appear in Scott's *Fasti*, the 'Who's Who' of the Scots Church since the Reformation, but he was frequently called upon to preach in such Edinburgh churches as were, for the time being, without a pastor. Sir William Brereton, an English traveller who toured Scotland in 1636, and who heard Skeldie preach, refers to him as 'a blind man—much to be admired'. This is testimony of some weight, as Brereton admired very little north of the Tweed! Johnston of Warriston, that unhappy fanatic, often mentions Skeldie in his diary, and always with respect.

The Public Library of Edinburgh possesses a printed copy of one of his sermons in which he advises his hearers how to behave if the plague, then spreading through southern Scotland, should reach the capital. It was published in 1645 by James Lyndesay, Printer to the University. There is no indication of the date on which it was preached, but that may be fixed approximately, as Skeldie explains that the wrath of God against Scotland is being manifested—'by the devouring sword that hath killed many of our brethren in the North, and by the plague of pestilence . . . in the South, wherewith now this citie and the places about are fearfully threatened'. The 'sword' in the North must be that of the Marquis of Montrose, who had defeated the army of the Covenant at Tippermuir on 1 September 1644, and had stormed and sacked Aberdeen a fortnight later. The plague, spreading from the north of England, appeared in the Scots borders about the middle of October and reached Edinburgh about the beginning of 1645—possibly rather earlier. It seems likely, then, that Skeldie's sermon was preached between mid-October 1644 and the end of the year. It is interesting to observe that he considers Edinburgh fortunate in being more likely to fall into the hands of God—that is, to be attacked by plague—than into the hands of man—in this instance, Montrose. As things turned out, it was because the plague was raging at Edinburgh in August 1645 that the great Marquis, fresh from the victory at Kilsyth, was unable to occupy the capital.

Taking the 92nd Psalm, verses 5 and 6, as his text, Skeldie declares that it is useless to discuss 'the second causes of the plague and the fittest outward preservatives from the contagion of it' until one has first considered 'the hand of God, which is the principall efficient, and Sin, which is the procuring cause of it'. But—wiser and more honest than some of his colleagues—he does not attempt to show that disregard of the Solemn League and Covenant, or indifference to ministerial authority, are the special sins that have called down divine punishment. Nor does he suggest that the plague may be stopped by the fasting, public repentance and self-abasement that the Kirk