

WHAT THEY COST AND WHAT THEY CONTAIN

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The second half of the 19th century saw a massive growth in the numbers of proprietary medicines available to the public. Massive advertising campaigns and price cutting promotions encouraged the public to buy remedies for self-treatment.

It was not a legal requirement at that time for medicines to be labelled with the ingredients unless they contained certain poisons, such as Arsenic and Opium. Manufacturers used trade marks to protect the names of their medicines as this did not involve the manufacturer in disclosing either the ingredients or the method of manufacture as was necessary when applying for a Patent.

Additionally there were sales of chemists' nostrums which were medicines of the pharmacists' own manufacture. Customers could ask their pharmacist for a medicine for their particular ailment and he would prepare something in his dispensary or supply a prepacked medicine.

The British Medical Association (BMA) was not happy with the idea of self medication for the public as there was the possibility of diseases going undiagnosed and, it must be said, less revenue for the doctor.

Proprietary medicines were subject to duty under the Medicine Stamp Act. All proprietary medicines had to have a stamp attached showing the amount of duty paid, which was dependent on the manufacturer's retail price. So, for example, up to 1/- the duty would be 1½ pence, up to 2/6 – 3d.

Chemists' Nostrums were not subject to government tax.

The BMA used published Government figures to calculate how much the public paid for their medicine. We can see the medicines listed, the various taxbands and the numbers of articles stamped. In the year 1908 it was calculated that the public purchased just under 42 million proprietary medicines at a cost of nearly three and a quarter million pounds. Medicines were big business.

In 1909 the BMA published a book entitled '*Secret Remedies: what they cost and what they contain*'. It was an attempt to discredit the manufacturers of proprietary medicines. A number of the, then, current popular medicines were analysed and the ingredients costed. Costing did not include packaging and advertising. The manufacturers' claims for cures and efficacy were reported and commented on.

The BMA claimed: "Of the accuracy of the analytical data there can be no question; the investigation has been carried out with great care by a skilled analytical chemist...."

The book measures 21.4 x 14 x 0.7 cm and has 200 pages. There is a preface which describes its aims and to whom it is directed.

‘It is not, however, only the poorer classes of the community who have a weakness for secret remedies and the ministration of quacks; the well-to-do and the highly-placed will often, when not very ill, take a curious pleasure in experimenting with mysterious compounds. In them it is perhaps to be traced to a hankering to break safely with orthodoxy; they scrupulously obey the law and the church and Mrs Grundy, but will have their fling against medicine. Usually, however, people of these classes take to some system. It used to be electricity or hypnotism or some eccentricity of diet; nowadays it is more often Christian Science.’

(Mrs Grundy: A person who is too much concerned with being proper, modest, or righteous)

(**Mrs Grundy**, a character from Thomas Morton's play *Speed the Plough* (1798), was considered by English-language authors to be the personification of the tyranny of conventional propriety.)

There follows twenty chapters, nineteen of which concentrate on a particular medical condition and the twentieth which features a miscellany of ‘cure-alls’. Following these are an appendix and an index.

The layout of each chapter follows a similar pattern.

There is an introduction to the medicine group which describes the kinds of medicine examined and comments on their general efficacy. There then follows the products themselves.

I do not have illustrations for all of the chapters, nor, indeed the time to delve too deeply into each, but I can give you a flavour.

Crosby’s label reads – “A safe, speedy, effectual remedy for Coughs, Colds, Hoarseness, Difficulty of Breathing, Wheezing and Irritation of the Throat, Hooping Cough, Asthma, and Incipient Consumption”.
It contained tolu, chloroform, honey and acetic acid

Keatings – “may be safely administered to females of the most delicate frame, and to very young children, for they not only allay Cough and Nervous Irritation, but they sustain the constitution, by promoting a healthy state of the Digestive Organs. They have immediate influence over the following cases :- Asthmatic and Consumptive Complaints, Coughs, Shortness of Breath, Hoarseness, etc etc.” They contained morphine, Ipecacuanha, liquorice and sugar.

From the Chemist and Druggist, 1904. “The most successful remedy for consumption. Analysis revealed 28.5% alcohol, resinous substances, possibly balsam of peru or benzoin and cochineal.

Daisy Powders – contained phenacetin, so would actually work.

Clarke’s is not recommended to cure every disease – there are many it will not cure. But it never fails to cure Scrofula, Scurvy, Scrofulous Sores, Glandular Swellings and

Sores, Cancerous Ulcers, Bad Legs, Syphilis, Piles, Rheumatism, Gout, Dropsy, Black-heads or Pimples on the Face, Sore Eyes, Eruptions of the Skin or Blood, and Skin Diseases of every description.

It contained potassium iodide, sal volatile, spirit of chloroform and burnt sugar.

The diseases that Townsend's cured were very similar. Its content was similar to a British Pharmacopoeia preparation - Compound Concentrated Solution of Sarsaparilla, BP

Blair's Pills – claimed that for gout “in many cases of extreme torture relief has been obtained in two or three hours”. They did seem to have the right idea – they contained colchicum corm and, from my own experience, colchicine does seem to work.

Warner's “Safe” Cure. The leaflet states that Bright's Disease is one of the harassing complaints which physicians in family practice seldom have the patience to investigate and manage with sufficient care. It contained potassium nitrate, oil of gaultheria, taraxacum, glycerine and 10% was pure alcohol. The dose was a tablespoonful up to six to eight times a day. At least it made you feel better!!!

Antipon. “Within a day and a night of taking the first dose there will be a reduction of weight varying from 8 ounces to three pounds, in extreme cases even more,” It contained citric acid and red colouring.

Zam-Buk. “A preparation virtually capable of growing new and healthy skin.” Included in the 68 conditions it claims to treat are dog bites, centipede stings, glandular swellings, blind and bleeding piles, perspiring feet, rheumatism and toothache. It contained Eucalyptus Oil, Colophony, hard and soft paraffin and green colouring.

Steedman's Soothing Powders. Treats feverish heats, fits, convulsions, sickness of stomach and debility. They contained calomel (mercurous subchloride), sugar and maize starch. In the 1940's the calomel was replaced with phenolphthalein. The EEs were highlighted to stop confusion with Stedman's powders.

Singleton's Eye Ointment was around for nearly 300 years before Secret Remedies described it. “An absolute specific for all eye troubles and diseases”.....”also cures piles and scorbutic eruptions”. It contained red mercuric oxide.

Doan's Ointment. “The thorough cure for Piles, Excema, Shingles, and Itching Diseases of the skin.” It contained Calomel, Zinc Oxide, Phenol, Beeswax and Soft Paraffin.

Includes Beecham's Pills, Williams Pink Pills for Pale People and Burgess Lion Ointment. The entry on Beecham's Pills quotes a circular wrapped round the box that promises a cure for over thirty medical conditions. (The pills contained aloes, ginger and soap). Pink Pills could cure Anaemia, St Vitus Dance and the special ailments of women, thanks to the ferrous sulphate content. And Lion Ointment, thanks to its

lead and beeswax ingredients could cure over 40 conditions including cancer, toothache, deafness and ulcerous affections of the womb.

The range of diseases mentioned in *Secret Remedies* that, it was claimed, could be cured was staggering. Asthma, Consumption (Tuberculosis), Diabetes, Rheumatism, Syphilitic Affections, Cancerous Humours, Bright's Disease as well as Epidemics and Plagues. There was a four-day cure for years of drink and drug taking called, believe it or not, "The Teetolia Treatment". There were obesity cures with "Reducing Pills" and "Reducing Lotions".

'*Secret Remedies*' proved to be very popular with the public, thousands of copies being sold. This copy claims to be the hundred and fourteenth thousand copy. 1912 saw the publication of a sequel entitled '*More Secret Remedies*'.

So what was the impact of *Secret Remedies*? What was the reaction of the public who rushed to buy this book? Did the BMA win the fight against proprietary medicines? The answer as far as those medicines featured in *Secret Remedies* are concerned, has to be yes, but it took some time. Owbridges was discontinued in 1972. Singleton's Eye Ointment was discontinued in 1974 after nearly 400 years, Bile Beans went in the 1980s. Beecham's continued until 1997, their last active ingredient being aloin – a derivative of aloe which was the main ingredient of the original pills.

So it took nearly a century to rid the world of these medicines. Now, of course, it is not possible to advertise doubtful remedies. OR IS IT??

Thank you for your attention.