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English Almanacs and Animal Health Care in the Seventeenth Century

ABSTRACT

In seventeenth-century England, the health and welfare of nonhuman animals rested almost solely on the shoulders of their keepers. Veterinary institutions had not yet been founded, and academically trained animal doctors did not exist. Laymen, however, had access to a great deal of information on animal health care. A range of printed publications were available that offered medical advice. The most accessible and easily understood were the ubiquitous almanacs. This article will examine the type of medical guidance offered in these cheap, annually-produced reference books. The major focus was on preventative practices because it was recognized that it was far easier to maintain a state of health than to cure illnesses. When such efforts failed, readers could also obtain recipes for remedies and treatments in almanacs.

Most people probably know what is in an almanac, even if they have never purchased one. The first one published exclusively for an American audience dates back to Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*

(1732-1796).² This was followed by *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, begun in 1792 and still produced annually.³ For a country that is just over 200 years old, that

makes it a very old publication, indeed. Compared to European almanacs, however, it is merely a young prodigy.

There are both similarities and significant differences between modern and “old-fashioned” almanacs. As with their historical predecessors, contemporary publications contain monthly calendars with astrological predictions for the coming year. Forthcoming weather conditions have always been a vital component, complemented by a mixture of other interesting information. Mileage between cities, historical occurrences, dates of fairs, or other important events are just a few of the timeless facts that readers have always seemed to enjoy.

Seventeenth century almanacs also contained material that is surprisingly similar to late twentieth century “how-to” or “self-help” books. Depending on the author, readers might learn how to make a sundial or measure a field. Legal forms for employing apprentices or wills that could be copied were often included. Sometimes almanacs offered lists of names for prospective parents or sexual advice. Exercise and diet were common topics, as was that of personal hygiene.

One of the most obvious differences between the almanacs that we know today and those of three hundred years ago concerns the matter of animal health care. Until the first Veterinary College was founded in England in 1792, this lay in the hands of semi-professionals, or laymen.⁴ Surviving source material suggests that the majority of treatments were actually carried out at home.⁵ Almanacs were arguably the most easily accessible, and understandable, source for the dissemination of veterinary advice. Unlike their modern counterparts, seventeenth century almanacs were considered to be reliable, erudite reference books.

The respect that these small books commanded was not a trait that had appeared overnight. As the first section of this article will illustrate, almanacs were already a well-established part of European life three hundred years ago. Considering the mainly agricultural society that they addressed, it is hardly surprising that the care of animals would be an early and continuing

matter of interest. The second section will, therefore, provide an overview of the veterinary advice that was offered to seventeenth century readers. In the final section, specific preventative and remedial treatments will be discussed and compared.

The History of Almanacs

Although it is not known when they started, almanacs in one form or another can be traced back to antiquity. It is thought that the word itself comes from the Arabic for calendar, which was brought into Spain by the Moors. It is also, possibly, related to the Latin *manacus* or *manadius*, meaning the circle in a sundial.⁶ A mixture of the two describes their function perfectly, as a calendar based on the movements of the planets.

Before the advent of printing, European almanacs existed in two main forms. The most commonly used ones were known as “clog almanacs.” They were simple constructions made of sticks or rods with a calendar showing the lunar cycle and the Christian feasts marked by a series of notches and symbols.⁷ The second type was the hand-written or manuscript almanac. Surviving editions from the middle ages show a tendency to supply ecclesiastical information in addition to a calendar.⁸

Following the introduction of the printing press, rapidly rising numbers of almanacs began to be published on the Continent.⁹ The earliest printed edition of an almanac by Guttenberg dates from 1448.¹⁰ Regional versions written in different European languages swiftly followed. Many of these were imported to England, mingling with locally produced manuscript almanacs.

Andrew Broode wrote the first English almanac in 1537.¹¹ During the sixteenth century the popularity of almanacs quickly grew, and The Company of Stationers began printing increasing numbers of specialized, domestic editions.¹² The rest of the century saw shifting fortunes for almanacs, with a large number appearing in the 1550s and 1560s, and then falling dramatically until about 1600.¹³ By the latter part of the sixteenth century their popularity had risen to such an extent that nearly every bookseller in London sold them.¹⁴

During the seventeenth century, the publishing industry in England experienced a phenomenal rise.¹⁵ About 1650, a great flood of medical literature

began to be printed, following the collapse of censorship and medical licensing.¹⁶ Medical literature printed in English and aimed at the general public proved to be especially popular.¹⁷ It was the cheap, annual almanac, however, that increased most dramatically.¹⁸ According to sales figures from 1664, about 400,000 almanacs a year were distributed.¹⁹ One conservative calculation suggests that some three to four million almanacs were distributed during the seventeenth century.²⁰

The historian Bernard Capp has dubbed the period of their greatest popularity (1640-1700) as their “golden age.”²¹ Although no exact figures exist for the number of titles actually published, we know that an estimated 1,600 different editions have survived from this period. At the time of writing this article, I have examined and collected information from 1,190 of these almanacs (approximately 75%). A total of 416 of these contain advice on the care of animals (35%).

An Overview of Animal Health Care in Almanacs

Much of the information concerning the care of animals fell under the heading of “husbandry,” or agricultural advice. This included the most propitious times for castrating, shearing, or mating animals. More important, readers were offered both preventative and remedial medical advice based on the cumulative knowledge of many centuries.²² In general, this advice appears to have been based on a conglomeration of astrological beliefs firmly entwined with Galenic theories.

The movements of the planets and the resulting effects were universally recognised and generally accepted as natural law.²³ Stars were thought to emanate a force that governed and directed all forms of nature.²⁴ As one almanac writer explained,

Long hath it been found by Experience
That the Seven Planets have such Influence
On Human Bodies, sublunary things,
Fixed, and moveable, yea nature brings,
No Creature forth, no Beast, Herb, Plant or Flower,
But what are subject to the Planets power.²⁵

The second-century Greek physician, Galen of Pergamon, combined earlier Hippocratic principles on health with his own thoughts.²⁶ He believed that disease was caused by an imbalance of the qualities and the humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood) in the body. Good health could either be retained or regained by maintaining the proper balance of humors.²⁷

Although most of Galen's works do not mention astrology, by the time of the Renaissance writers had inextricably linked Galenic and astrological medicine.²⁸ Together, they helped to explain variations in health and illness between different creatures and varying times.²⁹ An imbalance of humors was considered "the immediate cause of diseases," which was caused "by the various and different Aspects and Positions of the Stars."³⁰ It was said that God was "the chief Gouvernour" of the stars and used them to make his will known on earth.³¹ God was thought to show displeasure through astrological configurations that would increase or decrease certain humors, which would result in plagues or epidemics.³²

Almanacs offered detailed descriptions on the varying consequences for different types of what they called "cattel." In the seventeenth century, this was a generic term that was freely used to refer to most working animals.³³ Among the few exceptions were dogs, regardless of the type of jobs they carried out.³⁴ Animals regarded solely as "pets," such as singing birds, were also excluded from the category of cattle.

Working animals were generally further delineated into categories of "greater" or "lesser" cattle. The first type often included "the horse, ox, cow, &c."³⁵ The second heading referred to "lesser sort of Beastes, as Sheepe, Swine, and Goates: and of Fowles, Geese, Peacocks, Duckes, Pigiions, Hennes, Chickins and other poultrie."³⁶ Deer, conies (i.e. rabbits) and other "smaller creatures" were also often included under this title.³⁷

Almanacs suggested numerous ways in which readers could attempt to protect the health of all their "cattle." Although it was not possible to alter the course of the celestial heavens, authors nonetheless encouraged their patrons to take a stand against the forces of nature. As the following section will show, the main theories behind preventative health care in the seventeenth century are surprisingly similar to those of this new millennium.

Preventative Health Care for Animals

In the early modern period, sickness was not thought to be the result of an “invasion” of germs but rather a combination of external and internal factors. Instead, because illness was seen as personal and internal, it followed that a good regime could help prevent it.³⁸ One author suggested that

... if we were careful to keep out diseases, we should not be troubled to drive them out: Reason tells us 'tis better to keep out an enemy, then to let him in, and afterwards to beat him out.³⁹

Since many illnesses were thought to be the result of God’s displeasure, one way to protect animals was to pray and “sin no more.”⁴⁰ However, readers may have felt more in control by following recipes that would protect their animals. One such preventative remedy was to, “Wash his mouth [oxen] with his own Water [urine] and White Wine vinegar.”⁴¹ An alternative was to feed cattle a mixture of white wine vinegar, thyme and salt.⁴²

Readers were also urged to follow a proper health regime, and to provide a similar one for their animals. This was based on the six non-naturals that contributed to the good health of man and beast. These consisted of air, motion and rest, sleep and waking, diet, evacuation, and the passions.⁴³ The various aspects involved in conducting a healthy lifestyle appeared to be equally important. Although there was no attempt to award equal space to each in almanacs, it is clear that they were not to be heeded in isolation. *The Haven of Health*, written in 1612, illustrates this philosophy:

The chiefest thing in mans life is, to keepe a measure. Everie man therefore that hath a care of his health as much as he may, must not onley use a measure in those fine things, that is to say, in labour, meate, drinke, sleepe, and Venus, but also must set them in such order as Hippocrates hath promised them: that is, . . . To begin the reservation of health with labour: after labour to take meate: after meate, drinke: after both sleepe: and Venus last of all.⁴⁴

Most of these principles also applied to the maintenance of health in animals. The most important of these related to not over-working animals and providing them with sufficient dry shelter, rest, food and drink. “Moderation” was always the keynote, as illness was thought to follow excessive con-

sumption of all these things.

The first non-natural of air, or the weather, was an important consideration for all forms of living creatures. The majority of animals lived in the countryside, where the air was thought to be cleaner than in the towns. Even so, foggy and misty weather in any setting was thought to be detrimental to health.⁴⁵

Excessively wet years were especially feared because of the resulting spread of sheep rot.⁴⁶ This was the most devastating illness in sheep and affected an estimated eleven million in England in 1695.⁴⁷ Wet and windy weather was considered the surest portent of rotting sheep.⁴⁸ Husbandmen were often told to take heed of forecasts of such conditions. *The Shepherd's Legacy* offered the following advice in prose:

Then observe this Rule of mine, May,
That Sheep will not rot till the next,
Provided that you give them wholesome hay,
For if it be Mow-burn, Dun, or red,
Before May come your sheep will be Dead.⁴⁹

The second non-natural, motion and rest, was a vital part of a good regime for animals. Popular husbandry books constantly warned that overwork would directly result in "pestilence."⁵⁰ Sufficient time was to be provided for beasts to rest and for the third non-natural of sleep. This was seen as "a medicine to that weariness, as a repairer of that decay" that resulted from hard labor.⁵¹

Many almanacs addressed the question of proper diet for animals, which was the fourth non-natural. It was the duty of the caretaker to attempt to ensure that sufficient foodstuffs were available throughout the year. In the 1690s, one bullock required a ration of at least two hundred weight of hay a week for up to five months of the year.⁵² Since this winter stall-feeding was an option only for the wealthier farmers, many people slaughtered their animals before the cold weather began. An alternative method consisted of keeping sheep in the house and feeding them a mixture of beans, ground round, bran, and a few oats.⁵³ In the latter part of the century, new crops such as clover and turnips provided enough nourishment to over-winter larger numbers of ani-

mals successfully.⁵⁴ If animals appeared to go off their food, readers were provided with recipes guaranteed to “give beasts a stomach.”⁵⁵

The fifth non-natural of evacuation was one that applied equally to humans and animals. This was based on periodical treatments meant to rid the body of excessive humors. Bleeding and purging was regularly carried out as a preventative measure and to cure diseases.⁵⁶ It was thought to “clarifie the blood” and thereby discourage illness.⁵⁷ William Dade recommended making an incision on the necks of horses and drawing blood on the first day of April to make them stay healthy “the whole year.” George Naworth praised the practice of bleeding on the basis that it was “antient tradition” and because it was “natural Reason and true Physiologie.”⁵⁸

Phlebotomy needed to be used cautiously, however, as “the letting of blood is very dangerous, and openeth the way to many grievous infirmities” if not properly administered.⁵⁹ As with other medical procedures, there were astrological rules to be followed. Samuel Ashwell warned that “the signe be not in the heart, nor in the place where the incision is made, nor in the day of the change of the Moone.”⁶⁰ He also stressed the need to be frugal with the quantities bled from the animal:

And where the Blood is naught and most distempered, there is greatest danger of all in effusion; contrary to the opinion of some vaine Chirurgions, and idle brain'd People, who thinke that if the Blood be evil a larger quantity may be more safely exhausted.⁶¹

Another form of evacuations could be said to fall within the fifth and sixth categories. The final non-natural of the passions encompassed a range of emotions from anger to sexual feelings. While little could be done for unhappy or out of sorts animals, it was possible to meddle with their sexual activities.

The most dramatic and permanent form of surgical intervention was castration. It was thought that castrated male animals were easier to handle and that the inability to dissipate energy on sexual activity would result in a healthier animal.⁶² Almanacs did not offer recommendations on the operation itself, which was done by either ligature or cauterising,⁶³ but on the precautions that readers needed to take. Of paramount concern was knowing when the moon was in an aspect favorable to such surgery. In general, read-

ers were recommended to “lib and geld” animals while the moon was in Aries, Sagittarius or Capricorn.⁶⁴

Remedial Health Care

Obviously, preventative measures were not always effective, and so almanacs also provided remedial treatments. In general, these consisted of herbal remedies based on what was referred to as “kitchin physick.”⁶⁵ They consisted mainly of mixtures of herbs and other plants commonly grown in home gardens specifically for these purposes. Mint, basil, and thyme were just a few regularly included in such recipes.⁶⁶

All these plants were associated with specific planets and zodiac signs and were thought best suited to specific organs and parts of the body.⁶⁷ The theory behind this was known as the Doctrine of Contraries.⁶⁸ Once the nature of the humoral imbalance was determined, an herb with the opposite properties would be chosen to correct it.⁶⁹ For example, fleabane, which was a Martian herb, was thought to cure headaches caused by the actions of Venus.⁷⁰ Balm was “an herb of Jupiter, and under Cancer” and thought to have many virtues, such as aiding digestion.⁷¹

According to *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, “arrsmart” or water pepper was under the dominion of Mars, and had cooling and drying properties.⁷² Readers of Swan’s almanac were therefore advised to rub unwell horses with arrsmart, and then to lay “a good handful or two” of the herb under its saddle.⁷³ Another soothing remedy consisted of bathing a sick animal in ale infused with bay leaves, followed by a rub down with oil and wine.⁷⁴ Bay was thought to be “a tree of the sun” and was under the sign of Leo. Nicholas Culpeper considered it to be especially effective against “all the evils of Saturn can do to the body.”⁷⁵

Other organic substances such as urine, dung, and feathers were often included in recipes.⁷⁶ Occasionally, inorganic substances were also added to these mixtures. When this was done for medical purposes, it was referred to as *materia medica*.⁷⁷ Various treatments for warts on animals illustrate both “kitchin physick” and *materia medica*. An example of the first is a salve made from “black water that stands in the root of an hollow Elm-tree.”⁷⁸ William Dade

suggested taking eight or ten pieces of horsehair, tying them tightly around the wart and leaving them until it fell off. If that failed, then a mixture of herbs and mercury was to be applied to eat the wart away.⁷⁹

Such a procedure was closely linked to other surgical procedures, such as the drainage of tumors or other foreign objects from the body. The treatment for “blain in the tongue” is just one example of a combination of surgery, followed by herbal therapy. This ailment involved.

... a certain Bladder growing above the root of the Tongue against the Pipe, which grief at length with Swelling, and will Choak and stop the Wind: You may perceive this Distemper by his Gaping and holding forth of his [the animal's] Tongue and foaming at the mouth, without a speedy Remedy it will kill him.

The only way to save the animal was to slit the swelling and, once it was bleeding, to “wash it with a little Vinegar and Salt.”⁸⁰ Many writers thought that this bladder was actually a swollen sac holding a worm. This “worm under the tongue” dates back to some Anglo-Saxon texts, where it was claimed to lead to canine madness.⁸¹ Although people could get bitten by an animal with this disease and contract many of the symptoms, they would not acquire this swelling. Instead,

They shall have in their sleep fearful dreams & sights, & anger without cause . . . it is the venomous spittle of the dogs heat that doth infect; and if the venom of him that doth bite, is drawn to the like place wherewith he biteth, which is the brain & there it worketh. . .⁸²

The symptoms of the disease suggest that it was related, along with that of the “mad dog,” to what is now called rabies. The symptoms of this second illness also included gaping and dribbling and would result in death for the animal. This was thought to result not from worm infestation but from an excess of black choler in the dog's body, whose “vehement heat overcometh the senses and maketh him mad.”⁸³

Conclusion

To modern readers, some of the theories and remedies presented in almanacs might appear to be bizarre and counter productive. The most obvious exam-

ple is the use of “phlebotomy” or the letting of excessive amounts of blood for medicinal purposes. Although leeches are still occasionally used to draw blood for certain conditions, incisions in major veins and arteries are now known to be extremely dangerous.

Many of the ingredients used in early modern remedies also are now thought to be ineffective and sometimes lethal. Certain substances, such as mercury, are now known to be poisonous. The later twentieth century has seen renewed interest in alternative forms of medicine, but drugs must be clinically tested before public claims can be made for their effectiveness.

There have also been huge strides in veterinary care in the past few centuries. In the late twentieth century, there have been tremendous changes. Practices can be found in most parts of the country, with 1998 figures showing a total of 24,727 practitioners.⁸⁴ Many of these offer high-tech forms of surgery once thought only suitable for humans. Practically the same range of high-tech drugs and treatments are available as well, for a price. However, the practice of health care for animals is much more complex and difficult than that for people. This is because veterinarians have to deal with many different types of creatures, with the greatest emphasis on pets and other domestic beasts.⁸⁵

A rising interest in alternative health care has been growing steadily alongside professional advances. Some of the “modern” ideas sound surprisingly similar to those advocated three hundred years ago. For example, western doctors have long concentrated on treating symptoms of illness. Today, the concept of preventative medicine has once again become popular. Although the term “non-naturals” is no longer used, the principles of good diet, exercise, and sleep still apply.

In addition to preventative health care, two other traits have a parallel in modern times. The first is an interest in growing and using herbs. For humans, there is a range of manufactured products, such as herbal teas or herbal supplements. These are no longer restricted to health food stores but can be found in supermarkets or drugstores nation-wide. There are also a number of items marketed for animals, ranging from herbal flea collars to health tonics. Some of these are surprisingly similar to those advocated by alternative practi-

tioners or sold over-the-counter in drugstores.

However, the third and most noticeable trait that seventeenth century English almanacs share with their American descendants are astrological predictions. Then, as now, they were known as compilations of useful, monthly advice and information. At one time, readers who were dependent on the weather for their livelihoods relied heavily on such forecasts. Although farmers can now rely on the Meteorological Office, rather than on the popular press, almanacs still offer projected weather conditions. The monthly horoscopes almanacs offer are probably of even more interest to modern readers.

This illustrates the ability of these publications to adapt to different times and places. In seventeenth century England, readers were interested in learning how to care for the health of their animals. As Keith Thomas has rightly said, animals were “subsidiary members of the human community, in many ways bound by mutual self-interest to their owners, dependent on their fertility and wellbeing.”⁸⁶ As such, their owners and caretakers were obliged to do everything in their power to maintain and promote their health. Almanacs offered a cheap, easily accessible means of obtaining such information.

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Notes and References

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