

MAGIC MEDICINES FROM MUD

Passing the flaying arms on windswept Soutra, few would guess at the memory of strange and ancient medical practices lurking beneath the soil at Soutra Aisle. That barren location did once contain the gory contents and offal remains of a drainage system containing the scientific evidence of archaic medieval medical practices. This was the site of The House of The Holy Trinity run by the Master and Brethren of the Augustinian Order there established around 1164. The mystery of its purpose and location was expertly and amusingly revealed in a talk to the Society by Dr Brian Moffat, a botanist, archaeologist and geographer. He has spent a quarter of a century researching these gruesome remains.

Little remains above ground of this once thriving institution, apart the 1686 burial vault of the Pringles at Soutra Aisle. Located at the junction of major routes from England, including the Roman *via Regia*, and interlinked with religious houses such as Melrose and Dalkeith, this hospital or 'spital' was at the centre of a network of connections in the medieval world with its roots in central France from whence the medical practices and religious rituals originally emanated. The history of the Scottish Borders is, of course, littered with battles, skirmishes, reivers (cattle rustlers), pilgrimages, trade routes and intercourse at all levels of society in the Middle Ages. The prevalent pain and sickness can hardly be imagined.

All this knowledge has been gathered from the seeds and chemicals which survived in the Soutra soil for centuries. Today's findings have been cross-referenced with scientific and botanical data and, in particular, to the voluminous records of the Augustinian Order. Research is continuing by cross-referencing finds and data with today's interested medical professions, researchers and producers of medicines, naturalists, herbalists, botanists and relevant scientific institutions. Little wonder then that Soutra Aisle should prove to be such a mine of information. It seems to have proved to be an industry in itself that could be of great value to mankind.

Among the archaeological discoveries was an intentionally blocked drain at the hospital. This suggests evidence of anthrax, a deadly poison, which had to be prevented from spreading. It was the reason why the drain contents were contained and not dispersed. The basis for the research is in their microscopic study. Among the findings, Dr Moffat regaled us with hair-raising tales of treatments and operations varying from minor ailments to major surgery. The latter was shown by the excised part of a bone from a deformed foot. The operation would have been excruciating without the use of a mixture of poisons in the shape of Hemlock, Deadly Nightshade and (*what was the third?*), all gathered locally. Rather than instantly killing the patient, these would anaesthetise him for perhaps several days.

The strangest find, and perhaps the most difficult to prove in practice, was the discovery of a Vetch that grows wild over much of northern Europe, including the southern third of East Lothian. Its root may well have been known from time immemorial as an antidote to starvation, an affliction very common in the Middle Ages all over Europe. Apparently, the root corms can be ground into a draught which, if taken by mouth, removes any appetite for food for an indefinite period, maybe six months. This would have enabled the poorest in Europe to survive failed harvests. However, an experiment in the C19 to test its efficacy in ships crews in the British Navy resulted in mutiny at all ports round the country.

Sadly, the whole monastic institution and edifice had declined into obscurity by 1400 and its lands and wealth dispersed. However, it is fortunate that the knowledge survives in libraries. While history does not relate what happened to those who drank the Vetch potion, it might help slimmers. We must thank Dr Moffat for opening our eyes to the meaning of Souta Aisle and for his life-long interest in this extraordinary research. *BY*