

William Street: an apothecary's progress

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No fewer than thirty-six apothecaries sat on the Bath City Council during the eighteenth century, easily the largest occupational group. Nearly half of these attained the rank of Mayor (seven of them more than once) and accordingly became aldermen and served as justices too. But though Corporation office gave these members particular status, power and opportunities, most of Bath's other eighteenth-century apothecaries were also doing well. They had all benefited from a crucial legal ruling in 1704 giving apothecaries the right to advise patients on treatments as well as to prescribe remedies. Unlike physicians, they were not allowed to charge a patient for offering a diagnosis, but large profits were to be had from the actual dispensing of medicines if their advice were followed. Being treated by an apothecary rather than a physician still worked out cheaper for the patient as a rule, because a physician's prescriptions had to be made up anyway by his regular apothecary. The question was rather whose diagnosis should you most trust, the university-qualified physician's or the practically trained apothecary's? Either way, drugs of some sort were usually prescribed. Even the rituals of drinking the hot waters and therapeutic bathing were almost always preceded and accompanied by a regime of purges, emetics, sedatives, tonics, cordials, and similar potions supplied by the spa apothecaries at a nice profit.

William Street, the subject of this article, took full advantage of this demand for medicines – not only for what he, other apothecaries, and local physicians and surgeons personally prescribed but also for the many non-prescribed proprietary medicines that were nationally advertised and sold over the counter in large quantities. Indeed his wholesale and retail business at the sign of the Phoenix in Northgate Street might have been the largest of its kind at Bath, dealing not only in the *materia medica* of the traditional apothecary (and of the new chemist-and-druggist shops that first appeared at Bath in the 1750s), but also in a wide range of pre-packed and pre-bottled branded medicines. His advertisements at this period mention chemicals, drugs and herbal remedies that he prepared himself 'as cheap as in London', plus a good selection of proprietary nostrums for which he was agent, a dozen or so different mineral waters, and an odd assortment of other items:

Quicksilver Garters and Girdle..., an infallible Ointment for the Itch..., the Duke of Portland's Medicine for the Gout, a Spirit that takes Spots or Stains out of Linnen, without doing it any Injury, French Chalk, Writing Ink, an incomparable Liquor... [for making sour beer good again], Drenches for the Yellows, &c., a Liquor for the Foot-rot, fine Lucca Oil, Florence Ditto, Barbers Ditto, Gallipoly Ditto, Lamp Ditto, Linseed Ditto, Palm Ditto, Turpentine Ditto, true Flanders Oil Bays, Hartshorn Shavings, Sagoe, Vermicelli, true Gold and Silver, Dutch Metal, Almond Powder, Anchovies, Canary, Hemp, and Rape Seed, Candied Eryngo Root, Blue French Galls,... Gold-Beater's Skin, Spirit of Wine, Hungary Water, Ivory Black, Logwood..., Yellow Oaker, Vermillion..., a most excellent Tooth-Powder, and Lip-Salve, Salop, Black and Castile Soap, Pitch, Black and Yellow Rosin, Spruce Beer, Bees Wax and Honey, Leeches and Vipers, and Dr Hartley's Lithontriptic Mass for the Gravel and Stone.¹

We have no descriptions of the actual shop, but one can imagine an interior lined with shelves of gallipots and rows of labelled drawers, with an 'elaboratory' behind containing furnaces and other equipment for compounding drugs – as it certainly contained much later.² Lying next to the *Three Cups* on the east side of Northgate Street (just below the present Podium), the ground behind stretched towards the river and might easily have grown medicinal plants.

William Street had a good local pedigree. His grandfather William, vicar of Upper Swainswick (where he leased a property from Oriel College, Oxford), had been assistant master and then, from 1707 to 1713, headmaster of Bath Grammar School, living at a house he acquired on the west side of Broad Street.³ More than two years after his death, his son James, who delivered the School's Latin oration in 1712, was apprenticed in 1716 for seven years to the apothecary Henry Gibbes, and subsequently established the Northgate Street shop. The latter was only rented,⁴ whereas the family house and garden in Broad Street – a crucially important property later on – was their own leasehold.⁵ James Street and his wife Ann had several children including William, the subject of this article, born c.1727 and apprenticed to his father in 1743. By January 1750 James must have died since William was now in charge, but advertising from Broad Street and with the Northgate Street shop apparently on the market.⁶ If this was a crisis, it was soon resolved. The apothecary's shop resumed business (sooner or later symbolically named the Phoenix) and resources were found to set up William's elder brother Richard briefly as a woollen draper on North Parade.

Through the 1750s and 1760s William Street consolidated his position, regularly advertising his shop and perhaps profiting more than his apothecary competitors from a strong regional wholesale trade. To what extent he had a medical practice or worked with particular Bath physicians is unclear, but he was fostering his career in other ways. From 1750, and for the next two decades, he became an active freemason in the Bear Lodge. He began taking apprentices at quite high premiums. He married Elizabeth Wood, daughter of architect John Wood, who had left her a substantial £1000 dowry,⁷ and five of their children appear in the St Michael's baptismal records 1761-74. Now solid and prosperous, he was elected onto the City Council in December 1763 and started on the usual ladder of office as Constable (1764) and Bailiff (1766). This made him privy to Corporation property transactions and building contracts, and placed him on influential sub-committees such as those for the intended new Guildhall (1766 and 1774), the Paragon (1767), water rents (1769), and the Town Common (1769)⁸. He also became a Commissioner under the Bath Improvement Act of 1766.⁹

All this suited his growing personal interest in developing property, and especially in exploiting the location of his house and large garden in Broad Street which backed westwards onto Milsom's Garden just below the Poor House. He must already have agreed terms before he became a Councilman for building four houses on his land in the new Milsom Street development, but erecting the Octagon Chapel on his garden ground as well seems to have been an afterthought and required a covered entrance corridor off Milsom Street running between two of his new houses.¹⁰ Put up in 1765-7, the Octagon was undertaken in partnership with the chapel's first incumbent, the Rev. Dr John Dechair, and employed William Herschel as its organist. The chapel became fashionable at once, and the partnership lasted until 1776 when William Street bought out Dechair and installed his own preferred preacher, the Rev. John Chapman, current Rector of Weston.¹¹

Other speculations followed. He seems to have had a stake in the development of Belmont,¹² and used the opportunity of the Pulteney Bridge and Guildhall projects in the 1770s to acquire several houses in Bridge Street as well as eight smaller buildings round the corner in Northgate and the leasehold of the *White Lion* (the former *Unicorn*) inn fronting the Marketplace.¹³ He also had a second house in Broad Street included from 1776 under the same lease as the first.¹⁴ His growing wealth appears in the loan of £1250 he made to the Corporation (repaid in 1781¹⁵) and still more so in his joining the consortium of partners (Horlock, Mortimer, Atwood, Anderdon, Goldney & Street) that established the Bath & Somersetshire Bank in March 1775. It was surely not a coincidence that the bank was located

in the new buildings covering the former Poor House site, immediately next to Street's Milsom Street and Octagon properties. He must have had a direct interest in this decision. Moreover, a fellow partner in the banking scheme, William Anderdon, was not only himself an apothecary and member of the Corporation elite but a named executor in William Street's will.

Eight years earlier Street had been involved in a quite different venture. Having brought a partner, Dr David Kinneir, into the apothecary firm at the old Phoenix, he became persuaded of the virtues of smallpox inoculation. Though inoculation was now a safer procedure than hitherto (still thirty years before the alternative of vaccination), keeping the newly inoculated away from general public contact was considered prudent all the same. When therefore his Corporation colleague, Alderman John Hickes, died in 1767, Street purchased the latter's estate at Lyncombe Spa comprising a substantial stone reception house, the attached chalybeate spa building, and the surrounding grounds. He then opened it as a small isolation hospital for inoculated patients, who would spend two weeks there in reasonably pleasant quarantine, visited and checked up on by Street or Kinneir only during the day unless there were complications. Meanwhile the spa water continued to be available to anyone prepared to brave possible smallpox infection. Patients were being accepted from July 1767 and again from April to December 1768, but how long the inoculation treatment continued after that is unknown, though it very likely ceased there well before May 1773 when Street's partner, Kinneir, died.¹⁶

Instead of reviving the health spa, Street then turned Lyncombe Spa into his country residence. No doubt he also lived much of the week in town, though, since his municipal duties had increased. He did second stints as Constable (1775) and Bailiff (1777), served a year as Chamberlain (i.e. city treasurer) in 1782-83, and was made an alderman in March 1784 preparatory to his induction as Mayor in September 1784 at the age of 57 or so. Unfortunately he never completed his mayoral year, but died in office on 26 May 1785.

Given the circumstances there was a full civic procession through Bath for 'our late excellent Chief Magistrate', as William Street's body was carried from Lyncombe to be buried in the family vault at Swainswick: the Corporation in their robes, masonic brethren, band with kettledrums, the Bluecoat school children singing a dirge, mourning carriages, and the funeral hearse drawn by six horses.¹⁷ The deceased's financial affairs probably needed some careful disentangling, but at least his executors had no apothecary's shop to dispose of since the Phoenix and its 'elaboratory' had passed in 1782 to Joseph Dibbens, a grocer.¹⁸ The Lyncombe Spa estate eventually had to be sold. Enlarged in Street's time by acquisitions of adjoining land, it amounted at his death to twenty-five acres of garden and pasture, the large house itself (equipped with a cold bath), a five-stall stable, green- and hot-houses, and of course the mineral spring.¹⁹ Some of the Bath properties, however, were retained. The executors renewed the lease of the Broad Street house, perhaps occupied by William Street's widowed sister Ann.²⁰ His wife, Elizabeth, was still living in one of the Bridge Street houses when she died in April 1793,²¹ an event conceivably hastened by the recent sudden failure of her husband's old bank, the Bath & Somersetshire, in which she doubtless had funds. One of their sons, Thomas (born 1765), was by then a clergyman. He served as curate of Lyncombe and Widcombe from 1795 until his death in 1830.

¹ Bath Journal 25 Nov 1754.

² Bath Chronicle 11 Apr 1782.

³ K.E.Symons, *The Grammar School of King Edward VI, Bath...* (Bath, 1934), 211-13; Bath Council Minutes 20 Feb 1706/7 and 27 Mar 1710.

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- ⁴ Isaac Axford renewed the lease in 1748 for 40 guineas – Bath Council Minutes 26 Dec 1748.
- ⁵ Renewed by James Street in 1739 and 1747, and by his widow Ann in 1751 – Bath Council Minutes 31 Dec 1739, 5 Oct 1747 and 30 Sep 1751.
- ⁶ Bath Journal 22 Jan 1749/50.
- ⁷ Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *John Wood, Architect of Obsession* (Bath, 1988) 209.
- ⁸ Bath Council Minutes 6 Oct 1766, 14 Feb 1767, 3 Apr and 12 Aug 1769, 3 Oct 1774.
- ⁹ Ibid. 30 May 1766.
- ¹⁰ Bath Record Office, F.615, counterpart lease 10 Sep 1765, refers to the Milsom Street houses but not yet to the Octagon.
- ¹¹ Bath Chronicle 26 Sep 1776.
- ¹² One new Belmont house in Street's possession was advertised in Bath Journal 9 Oct 1769. The same notice also mentions his Upper Swainswick property.
- ¹³ Bath Council Minutes 27 Mar 1780. In 1781 he obtained an extra strip of land behind the *White Lion* (requiring the re-siting of the weighing machine) and applied to lease New Market Row and its slaughterhouses – Bath Council Minutes 5 Jan 1781; Bath Record Office, Hall Notice Books 28 Sep 1780.
- ¹⁴ Bath Council Minutes 1 May 1776, when £40 was deducted from the fine in consideration of the 'great improvement made on the estate' – i.e. presumably the Octagon chapel and the Milsom Street houses.
- ¹⁵ Hall Notice Books 18 Aug 1781.
- ¹⁶ Bath Chronicle 30 Jul 1767, 11 Apr, 17 Nov and 22 Dec 1768, 13 May 1773.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 2 Jun 1785.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 11 Apr 1782 and 2 Jan 1783.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. 18 Aug 1785 and 1 June 1786.
- ²⁰ Bath Council Minutes 3 Oct 1775.
- ²¹ Bath Chronicle 23 Apr 1793. The identity of another Mrs Street, certainly a close relation, who died in 1789, is uncertain – Bath Journal 13 Jul 1789.