

## **Monk's Medicine** **Teachers' Resources**

Rule of St. Benedict, 36 *"The care of the sick is to be given priority over everything else; so that they are indeed served as Christ would be served..."*

Care of sick or weak members of the community was as important to the monks of Fountains as it was to every monastery. The monks had to keep healthy in order to take full part in the physically demanding, communal life of the monastery. The care of the sick was, to the monks, not just a practicality – it was also an imitation of Christ, the divine healer. The medicine practised at Fountains is unlikely to have been very different to the medicine at other monasteries, Cistercian or otherwise. It was both preventative and restorative, with blood-letting believed to prevent against lust and promote a long life, and herbal medicine used to treat the symptoms of illnesses.

The monk in charge of running the monk's infirmary was a senior lay-brother known as the *infirmarer*. It was his job to manage the medical facilities and mediate between the sick monks and the rest of the monastery. He alone was allowed to speak to the patients. He celebrated services and offices in the infirmary chapel. Any member of the community who was sick or injured was sent to the infirmary, where he was cared for by the infirmarer and his helpers. The patients were allowed a less rigorous way of life than the other monks and ate better food, at times including red meat, to improve their health. Elderly monks who were unable to keep up with the pace of monastic life might spend long periods of time in the infirmary.

The infirmary at Fountains was built by Abbot John of Kent (1220-1247) to the east of the main cloister, probably replacing an earlier structure. Very little of it now remains, but in its time it must have been an impressive building, for John even had to divert the River Skell in order to lay the infirmary's foundations. It included a hall, a chapel, a kitchen and latrines, and had its own cloister to enable the recovering monks to take gentle exercise and get fresh air. Although the infirmary survived through to the Dissolution, it was greatly altered by Abbot John's successors, who divided the main hall into apartments, as the monk's concerns for privacy and comfort grew.

One of the infirmary's main functions was to provide a recovery-place for monks who had just undergone bloodletting. This was a preventative treatment frequently administered throughout the Middle Ages and was particularly popular amongst the many monasteries which adhered to the ancient Greek medical

theory of the “Four Humours”. This theory, which dominated European medicine until the 19<sup>th</sup> century held that the human body was made of four humours – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood, and an excess of any of these could lead to illness. Four times a year, the monks at Fountains went, in batches, to the warming-room off the cloister to be bled. It was believed that this would balance their humours, counteract lustfulness, keep them in optimum health, and even improve their singing voices!

The monks kept their own herb garden and the infirmarer and his staff were undoubtedly well-versed in the medical uses of herbs. Although we don't actually know the exact herbs which the monks at Fountains grew, it is likely that they were similar to those at other monasteries from the same period. The herb garden at Shrewsbury, a Benedictine foundation (the Cistercian order started as an offshoot of the Benedictines) has been reconstructed, and contains many of the ingredients for a 12<sup>th</sup> century medicine chest, including cumin, fennel, mint, lovage, sage, rue, savory, flag iris, pennyroyal and rose, amongst others. Abbot Wibald, who ran monasteries in Belgium, Germany and Italy during his career, wrote to a friend recommending a mixture of catmint, lovage, pennyroyal, celery, thyme and fennel for a cold. Combining herbal medicine and humour theory, he claimed that these were hot and dry to counteract the cold and moist phlegmatic symptoms. The monks of Fountains probably used herbs in a similar way, unless a monk was seriously ill, in which case an outside physician might be brought in, with potent plants like mandrake and opium.

Herbal medicine was largely used to treat the symptoms of illnesses, rather than the causes, as the monks often held the causes to be personal sin and misdemeanour, which were, of course, only curable by repentance and prayer.

