

**ILLNESS, HEALTH AND DEATH:
EVIDENCE IN A WORKING-CLASS AUTOBIOGRAPHY
1790-1835***

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The scarcity of first-hand evidence about the experience of ordinary people is a major potential problem for social historians investigating the period before the late nineteenth century. While records of the middle and upper echelons of society are relatively numerous those produced by the 'lower orders' are far less easily found. This deficiency arises from causes which are not in themselves difficult to identify: lack of ability — in that levels of literacy were generally low until the mid-eighteenth century and only began to approach modern levels; lack of opportunity — since long working hours militated against activities which would produce written records; lack of resources — for the purchase of paper and pens was a luxury which was rarely deemed worthwhile; lack of motive — since poorer households and individuals in the past generally had less practical need for keeping records; and lack of inclination — since an appreciation of the need for record-keeping is often a product of higher educational attainment.

All these factors meant that the output was always small, and the circumstances in which written records were produced by poorer groups also perhaps tended to reduce the survival rate of those records. The evidence of 'working class' experience and attitudes which has come down to us therefore derives mainly from second-hand sources. The observations of those higher up the social scale, the reports (ever more voluminous from the late eighteenth century onwards) of social reformers and bodies such as Royal Commissions charged with investigating issues of contemporary concern, the eyewitness accounts of conditions and events which were published in newspapers — sources such as these are of immense value, but all have undergone some form of filtering process. The prejudices and preferences of the observer, the agenda of institutional and investigative bodies, the lack of personal first-hand experience itself, all cloud the evidence. Even in the often-quoted examples of the witnesses who gave information to the Royal Commissions investigating such celebrated issues as child labour and women in coal mines (evidence which is the closest we can approach to the actual experience of those concerned), we must bear in mind that there was a selection process. How were the witnesses chosen, what of those rejected, how overawed were they by the questioners, were they giving answers which were in accord with the preconceptions of the interviewers ... we cannot escape from such uncertainties.

First-hand evidence produced by one of the poor is therefore of special interest. There are a handful of working-class autobiographies from the age before the advent of universal education, and they have long been regarded as being of unusual value. When we are considering contemporary attitudes to questions such as family life, crime, politics, food and diet, housing and medical care, such sources give us a rare insight into the feelings and beliefs of the poor themselves. One autobiography of this type is that of Benjamin Shaw, a mill-mechanic born at Dent in the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1772.

* Based on a paper delivered to the Liverpool Medical History Society on 9 May 1996.

He moved first to the rural textile mill at Dolphinholme in North Lancashire in 1791 and then in 1795 went with his young family to Preston, where he lived until his death in 1841. Benjamin Shaw wrote his *Family Records* in 1826, recounting in detail his own life and also giving biographies of some thirty of his immediate family. Together these form a quite exceptional record of a comparatively unremarkable family and they are thus of particular interest to the social historian.¹

Benjamin was a self-taught writer but one of considerable talent, whose ability to convey detail in short and often pungent phrases is a major strength of the book. One of the themes which was dominant in his adult life is ill-health and death. He scarcely touches upon such matters as housing or food and diet, but constantly returns to the physical well-being or otherwise of himself and the members of his family. The book is therefore very revealing as a source for contemporary experience of the 'patient' in the field of health care — a rarity indeed, since most medical history is of necessity written from material produced by or for the 'establishment'.

References to health occur in the descriptions of the older members of the family, though inevitably (since some were long dead, or were only known to Benjamin when he was a child) the detail is limited. We can perhaps see the effects of a stroke in the report that his great-uncle Edward (1702-1776) had 'some sort of a fit took him and from that time he never recovered his reason was disposed to ramble away — was a deal of trouble to watch and keep at home',² while the use of vaccination explains the reference to his great-aunt Ruth who 'took the naturall Small Pox when she was above 60 years old'.³ The comparative longevity of Benjamin's grandmother Peggy Noddle was a tribute to a healthy (tea-less!) diet and sound constitution. Despite a hard and difficult life she died when she was well over eighty, having 'got plenty of milk in the Summer time, 4 quarts for a penny, & as she did not use tea that was a good deal of her living'.⁴ Benjamin was a firm believer in healthy living, detesting drunkenness and also well aware of the stresses and strains of family life. Of his aunt Isabella Watson he uses a very telling phrase which shows something of the contemporary burdens of large families in difficult circumstances: 'they had only one Child [& so] they enjoyed all the advantages of a married life without much of the care & labour common in rearing a family'.⁵

When describing his brothers and sisters, wife and children, and his own health problems, Benjamin gives much more detail. The alarmingly high rate of infant mortality which is such a powerful theme in the social history of the times is well-exemplified, although the patchiness of its impact (something less apparent from the generalised statistics drawn from official sources) is also revealed. Benjamin's parents lost five of their family of eight in childhood (including one stillborn child), while Benjamin's son Joseph saw seven of his ten children die before the age of five. Benjamin himself, however, raised seven of his eight into adulthood. Death struck unevenly not only

¹ The manuscript has been edited and published: A.G. Crosby (ed.), *The Family Records of Benjamin Shaw, mechanic of Dent, Dolphinholme and Preston 1772-1841* (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, vol.130, 1991). Unless otherwise stated, references in this paper are from the published volume. In the introduction to the text I discuss in greater detail some of the issues which are raised by the evidence, including the question of contemporary working-class attitudes to death.

² *Family Records*, p. 4: spellings in this and other quotations are as in the original text.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

between the classes but also within the same social group. The attitudes to death, including the harrowing accounts which are given of the lingering consumption of two members of the family, show that the often-expressed dismissive view that 'it didn't matter as much to them because it happened so often' is quite untenable.

The deaths of Benjamin's four siblings illustrate themes which are familiar from any social history of the times. When the family moved from Dent in 1791 they were lured by the employment opportunities offered, especially for the children, at the recently-opened water-powered textile mill at Dolphinholme. Child labour proved, as it often did, to be a disaster:

some time after this my little Brother Joseph got caught in the wheels in the factory ... (this was very common here) ... and got his hand ill crushed, & cut, one finger taken off, & the other Broken and Sadly mangled ... my father took him to the doctor at Lancaster.

This terrible injury was swiftly followed by further calamity: Joseph, who was ten years old, had 'Scarce got well untill he took a fever, which raged there at that time, & died in the Summer of the year 1792'.⁶

The same fever claimed the life of his younger sister Bella, whose death Benjamin describes in moving words which leave us in no doubt that, whatever the conventional view might be, the experience of death was as harsh and bitter to those accustomed to its frequency as it is to us today.⁷

this was a very [fine] Strong Sharp & healthy Child, when her Parents came to dolphinholme she was about 2 years old, this was a lovely child, & greatly valued ... but this could not Sheild her from disease.

Bella and Joseph were buried three days apart, in April 1792; the fever is unidentified, but 'mill fever' (which, like 'gaol fever', owed its ferocity to the fact that people were being packed together to work in overcrowded and unhealthy factory environments) was a widely recognised if unspecific phenomenon of the time. An alternative explanation is consumption, which certainly killed another member of the family (sixteen year old George) at Dolphinholme a year later, but the slow progress of consumption contrasts with the apparent speed of the 1792 fever, which was therefore probably an unrelated epidemic.

The cause of death of a fourth child, Peggy, in June 1793 is less clearly explained. She is described in terms which suggest that she was always in poor health — 'a Small & Blue looking child'. Benjamin says that⁸

when her mother lade inn of this child, the nurse that she had ... gave us the Itch, this went hard with the child, & it Scaree ever recovered from it... [she] was very difequilt to sute with her meat, and was after poorly (a neighbour of ours used to call her Small hopes) frequently complaining.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7, 26-27, 82.

⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

Her death may thus perhaps have been the result of a low state and congenital ill-health.

Benjamin himself appears to have enjoyed good health in his youth and worked long and hard at Dolphinholme where he was apprenticed as a mechanic at the age of 19, but he records an incident which was to alter irrevocably his own fitness and to lead to a series of personal and family misfortunes. In the winter of 1792, as a prank, a thoughtless lad threw a heavy stick which hit the back of Benjamin's leg. This injury was exacerbated by his having to work up to his waist in the icy waters of the river Wyre, mending the mill-dam which on three occasions in the winter of 1792-1793 was damaged by flooding.

I found it began to be very Painful, I went to Lancaster to the doctor. and he gave me something to rub it with, & Salts to take ... this did it a little good, but it was still a hard lump or knott deep in the flesh, & put me in some pain in walking.

Two years later, out of work and with a wife and tiny baby to support Benjamin walked to Preston in the bitter winter and⁹

suffered a great deal in one of my feet ... I got the skin off by blisters, & the wether being very frosty ... the frost got into it, and having to stand to work constantly made it worse, so that it was nearly may before it got well, & at the same time the hard knot in the back side of my leg ... was still worse & more painfull.

The injuries to his leg and foot never had a chance to heal properly for, as he notes, he had to work standing up for up to twelve hours a day. By 1796 he was in agony for long periods and the leg showed what seems to be an ulcerous or similar condition — it 'broke out into holes'. In an extremely interesting episode, Benjamin recounts how he went to see the Whitworth doctors, the Taylor family of Whitworth near Rochdale, who were widely famed as a dynasty of medical practitioners. They had started as horse doctors in the mid-eighteenth century and then turned their skills to human patients. Their specialism, and talents, lay with bone-setting and other mechanical aspects of medicine; the efficacy of their drugs and ointments was very much less.¹⁰ Benjamin records how, although he stayed at Whitworth for seven weeks, there was no irnprovement.¹¹

it continued incureable, & I wrought in misery constantly, could not sleep at night, & in the day no ease, in this way I went on, sometimes a little better, & sometimes worse, & all the means I could use was ineffectual - Some times one hole would heal, but soon it broke out in another place.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 28, 34.

¹⁰ Although a good history of the Whitworth doctors remains to be written, see Anon., *A Biographical Sketch of the Whitworth Doctors* (Rochdale Observer, 1876) and J.L. West, *The Taylors of Lancashire: Bonesetters and Doctors* (H. Duffy, Walkden, 1977).

¹¹ Family Records, p. 35.

The crisis came in the summer of 1809, when he had been forced to leave work and had spent almost a year as a pauper. He does not use the term, but it is clear from his recollection, written 17 years later, that he felt suicidal with the pain. Salvation came in the form of a group of Preston gentlemen who in October 1809 formed a committee to open a charitable medical dispensary for the poor of the town. The subscribing gentlemen could recommend deserving cases for treatment at the dispensary and in February 1810 John Howard, an attorney who was known to Benjamin, put his name forward. Benjamin was visited by Dr William St Clare, later one of the most illustrious and best-loved figures in the town but at this time a new and very junior doctor who, as Benjamin noted, was prepared to visit the sick in their own houses. St Clare tried to treat the leg with drugs, but they failed to work and in early April he¹²

came to me, he asked me if I would consent to have it taken off, for he ... Sade, it could not be cured & it would be better to be cut off - So I considered about it, & was in the same mind that it was incurable, & taking it off was the only chance there was for life, & I was quite weary of living in this misery, so I consented & a day was fixed, the doctors came, & it was taken of, this was on the 21 april 1810 there was 6 or Seven doctors, & physicians, the operation was 40 minits work ... I never Slept for near a week, with the constant pain, & twiching in the limb - the fever run high (for their is allways a fever follows amputation) & it was very hot wether - about the 7th day it was dressed the first time ...I now began to mend, & in less than 3 weeks I went out of the house...& in the June I went to Black-pool, & stoped 5 weeks.

Although it was to be another five years before Benjamin was able to return to full-time work his health was transformed by the success of the amputation — the great gamble of life or death had paid off. He refers to a crutch, and there is no indication that he ever had an artificial limb, but in view of the nature of his work at the machine shops of Preston mills it seems very likely that in fact a wooden leg was made. That remains speculation, but what is quite certain is that, as a result of this perilous and agonising operation, Benjamin was able to live until 1841, dying aged 69 from old age and natural decline rather than in his forties from the state of the leg. He lived to see the deaths of many of those around him: as he wrote his *Family Records* his wife was dying of consumption in the room where he worked, as his daughter Hannah had died two years before. His son William died of a chest complaint — perhaps bronchitis — in his mid-30s, and his daughter Agnes succumbed to the after-effects of childbirth in her early twenties. He saw a long procession of grandchildren dying in infancy or early childhood, so many that by the 1830s, as he updated his record of the family, he ceased to note their deaths except in the most casual and laconic fashion. Death had become not just a frequent visitor to the Shaw household but for long periods was a resident. At no time could Benjamin, or any other member of his family, escape that shadowy figure — but for the man himself death came surprisingly late. He was able, between 1826 and 1836, to produce a quite remarkable record of the lives and times of one unremarkable working class family in a booming milltown of the Industrial Revolution, and that achievement,

¹² Ibid., pp. 49-50.

with all that it tells us about the health and ill-health of the members of the family, is his monument.