

A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Opium Go Down: Two Centuries of the Quaker's Black Drop

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Abstract

In 1801 the Lancaster surgeon and Quaker, John Ayrey Brathwaite, placed a newspaper advertisement for 'The Genuine Black Drop', a sugared opium preparation that he claimed to be free from side-effects. He established a wide network of suppliers but provoked a counter-claim from Ann Todd, a Kendal Quakeress, who announced that her recipe was the original one and had been made locally for many years.

In the nineteenth century, Black Drop was made almost exclusively by Quakers, mainly in Kendal, Westmorland. It was claimed that the original recipe was invented by Dr Edward Tonstall in Bishop Auckland in 1678 and passed down through Quaker families, but in fact Robert Boyle in 1674 had published a very similar, though unsweetened, recipe given to him by the Flemish physician Franciscus van Helmont. The Black Drop, manufactured and distributed by Quakers, became a popular opium preparation, both in the north of England and further afield, and the mercantile experience, family links and social networking of the Quaker community were important factors in its continued success. It was produced for 200 years, from 1678 to 1878, until opium preparations came under legal control in the late nineteenth century.

Ironically the Quakers, led by Edward Pease of Darlington, were at the forefront of the campaign against the China Trade in opium, a trade so profitable for the British Empire but so debilitating for China. The history of Black Drop demonstrates a microcosm of unregulated druggist and apothecary practice but also illustrates features characteristic of quackery, including secret recipes and hyperbolic claims of potency.

Keywords

Quaker, Opium, Black Drop, Laudanum, John Ayrey Brathwaite

Introduction

Established during the turbulent years following the English Civil Wars (1642-51), Quakers, also known as the Society of Friends, practiced a non-conformist Christian religion inspired by the teaching and beliefs of the charismatic preacher George Fox (1624-91). Though originally from the Midlands, Fox considered that the natural home of the Quakers was in the north of England.¹

Quaker practices, such as the refusal to pay Church of England tithes or having unauthorised meetings, led to significant persecution during the second half of the seventeenth century. Even after the Toleration Act of 1689 was passed, permitting freedom of worship to Protestant dissenters, Quakers were unable to attend English universities, restricting entry to many professions. In addition, the Test and Corporation Acts of the 1660s and 1670s effectively prevented Quakers from holding public office until 1829.

Excluded from military service by their peace testimony, Quakers were able to exploit opportunities to develop careers in banking, business, mercantile trades and various industries. The Quaker reputation for trustworthiness and fixed-price trading meant that many Quakers were able to become successful and wealthy entrepreneurs.

The Quaker facility to exploit business opportunities extended to Quaker apothecaries and medicinal drugs. Joseph Clutton (c1695-1743), a London apothecary and his apprentice Thomas Corbyn (1711-91) were both committed Quakers who became wealthy through the drug trade, both in manufacturing and distribution.² Corbyn developed a large domestic and transatlantic business which survived until 1927 and some of his business records and correspondence are held at the Wellcome Institute archives.³

This article aims to provide the first comprehensive account of a previously little studied opium-containing potion produced almost exclusively by Quakers in the north of England.

John Ayrey Brathwaite MRCS, Quaker surgeon, and the Lancaster Black Drop

The Braithwaites had been a Westmorland family for centuries. John (c1721-92) and Margaret Braithwaite (née Backhouse, 1731-1817) lived and farmed at the hamlet of Misset, to the east of Windermere.⁴ They had lived in the Quaker tradition in Westmorland, a stronghold for those dissenters to the west of the Pennines, and John's father had built a small meeting house for the Society of Friends on his farm in 1703. Their son John Ayrey was born in 1758 and trained for a surgical career, serving his

¹ Freeman, M. Quakers, Business, and Philanthropy. In: Angell SW, Dandelion P (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2013. p.420-433.

² Duffin CJ. Joseph Clutton, c.1695-1743: A Georgian apothecary. *Pharmaceutical Historian*. 2018; 48(4): 85-99.

³ Palmer R. Illustrations from the Wellcome Library: Thomas Corbyn, Quaker merchant. *Medical History*. 1989; 33: 371-376.

⁴ Martin JD. Misset, the Braithwaites and the Black Drop. *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*. 2002; 3: 201-208.

apprenticeship with Joseph Sibson, another Quaker, in Lancaster. By 1779 he was recorded in the Rolls of the Freemen of the Borough of Lancaster as 'surgeon and apothecary',⁵ and in 1785 obtained the diploma of the Company of Surgeons by examination in London. Later that year he became Honorary Surgeon to the Lancaster Dispensary and in 1800, after the formation of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, was elected MRCS.⁶ At some stage he and his siblings decided to lose the 'i' in their surname and become Brathwaite.



Figure 1. A phial of Genuine Black Drop as made by JA Brathwaite, Lancaster c1802. Courtesy of the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere. Reproduced with permission.

In June 1801 an advertisement appeared in Edinburgh for what was called 'The Genuine Black Drop' (Figure 1),⁷ made by JA Brathwaite and to be sold by the druggist and apothecary Robert Scott (Figure 2), followed by another in Chester in September that year,⁸ at which time he advertised a network of suppliers in Chester, Preston, Wigan, Warrington, Liverpool and York.

Subsequent advertisements spread more widely and, crucially for business, included distribution by several druggists in London, including the Quaker Frederick Smith in Haymarket. By this time Brathwaite had been a qualified surgeon for over fifteen years but his parent's farm at Misset had accrued significant debts and his widowed mother was in charge of managing the farm. The somewhat limited income derived from small-town practice, and the early local success of his product may have driven his decision to market Black Drop more widely.

⁵ Cann Hughes T (ed). *The Rolls of the Freemen of the Borough of Lancaster, 1688 to 1840*. London: The Record Society; 1935.

⁶ Personal communication with the archivist of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, London.

⁷ Advertisement for 'The Genuine Black Drop'. *The Caledonian Mercury*. 11 Jun 1801. Issue 12441.

⁸ Braithwaite JA. Advertisement: Genuine Black Drop. *Chester Chronicle*. 18 Sep 1801. p.1.

TO THE FACULTY,
And those who take Opium, and its Preparations,
Is recommended,
THE GENUINE BLACK DROP,
WHICH many of the most eminent Physicians and
Surgeons in the United Kingdom of Great
Britain and Ireland employ and prescribe in preference
to any other preparation of Opium.
It is well known that in many constitutions the ef-
fects of common Opium or Laudanum are extremely
distressing, and that in all habits it produces some in-
convenience, often creating restlessness and delirium,
instead of producing sleep, and its use being generally
succeeded by head-achs sicknesses, and debility, of these
deleterious effects the BLACK DROP is wholly de-
prived, whilst it retains, in the fullest degree, all
the desirable powers of Opium in relieving pain, sooth-
ing irritation, and procuring repose.
This preparation, which is highly concentrated, one
drop being nearly equal to four of common Laudanum,
is applicable to all the cases in which Opium or its
preparations are employed.
It is prepared by J. A. Braithwaite, Member of the
Royal College of Surgeons in London, and surgeon in
Lancaster; and by his appointment sold by
Mr R. SCOTT, Druggist, South Bridge,
Edinburgh;
Mr M'Donald, Glasgow; and Mrs Hodson, Newcastle;
in bottles at 2s. 6d. and 4s. each.

Figure 2. The first advertisement by John Ayrey Braithwaite for the Black Drop, 1801. Advertisement for 'The Genuine Black Drop', 1801 (Note 7). Public Domain, accessed from the British Newspapers Archive.

Brathwaite was clearly not the only practitioner to have been producing Black Drop in the north of England, and Charles Whittell (1777-1828), a Quaker druggist in Chester, in response to Brathwaite advertised from November 1801 that he had prepared the genuine product 'under the appellation of the Quaker's Black Drop ... Opium freed from its Deleterious Qualities ... well-known and appreciated in the Northern parts of England' and that his preparation was already available in London from Frederick Smith and others.⁹

In fact neither Brathwaite nor Whittell were the first to advertise the medicine. That distinction, and the first known newspaper use of the term 'Black Drop', falls to Richard Shuttleworth Cruttwell (1775-1843), not an apothecary or druggist but a printer, a bookseller and, following the death of his father earlier that year, the proprietor of the *Bath Chronicle* in which the advertisement appeared in 1799.¹⁰ The Black Drop was

⁹ Whittell C. Advertisement: The Genuine Black Drop. *Chester Courant*. 19 Jan 1802. p.3.

¹⁰ Cruttwell R. Advertisement: The Genuine Black Drop. *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette*. 22 Aug 1799. p.1.

described by Cruttwell Jnr as 'long known and esteemed in the North of England'. It is not known from whom his supplies were originally sourced but by 1802 Cruttwell would be selling 'Mr Brathwaite's Black Drop' and it seems likely from this, and from the wording of advertisements, that Brathwaite had been his original supplier from 1799.

Brathwaite of Lancaster and Whittell of Chester were, however, clearly in competition in 1801. Brathwaite immediately followed Whittell's intervention by advertising in the *Lancaster Gazette* in February 1802 addressed 'To the Faculty' (meaning the doctors and apothecaries) 'and those who take OPIUM'.¹¹ He claimed that what he now called the

Lancaster Black Drop ... has been long known and esteemed in the North of England, by the name of THE QUAKERS GENUINE BLACK DROP, where it was first discovered by J.A.BRATHWAITE, in consequence of a laborious and attentive experimental investigation of the nature and properties of that invaluable drug.

After essentially claiming the removal of all side-effects of opium, he described its usage:

... particularly eligible in Nervous and Spasmodic Affections; in Pains of the Head and Stomach; Depression of Mind, Anxiety and Irritability; in the Gout; in Wounds, Inflammation, and Mortification; in the Chronic Rheumatism, especially when affecting the Teeth and Face; in Coughs, Asthma, Consumptions, and other Complaints of the Chest, and in the numerous Diseases which produce Pain and Deprivation of Sleep.

In short, the advertisement was a panegyric to a panacea, and allegedly all his own invention. He asserted that 'none is genuine, except that prepared by J.A.BRATHWAITE, Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, London'. His distributors included William Minshull, the proprietor of that newspaper and yet another printer with a side business as a druggist. A stream of further advertisements followed around Britain over several years. Whittell did not advertise again. What was this opium preparation called 'Quaker's Black Drop'?

From opium and laudanum to Godfrey's cordial: the gradual sweetening of addiction

The history of opium is limited only by the history of writing. The Sumerians of Mesopotamia, the first to create written language in 3400 BCE, called it Hul Gil, 'the joy plant', and the drug has been widely used for medication or entertainment in every succeeding civilisation.¹² Prior to the introduction of opium from *Papaver somniferum*

¹¹ Brathwaite JA. Advertisement: The Genuine Lancaster Black Drop. *Lancaster Gazette*. 20 Feb 1802. p.3.

¹² Crocq M-A. Historical and cultural aspects of man's relationship with addictive drugs. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*. 2007; 9: 355-361.

to England, the juice of the native red poppy *Papaver rhoeas* was well known to be mildly sedative and a sugared syrup of it was termed diacodium. The narcotic known as Dwale was probably in use in England from the thirteenth century,¹³ and constituted (from the recipes of Jane Jackson, 1642):

Take 3 spoonfull of the gall of a barrow swine ... and 3 spoonefull of hemlocke the iuyce and 3 spoonefull of henbane and 3 spoonefull of the wilde nep and 3 spoonefull of lettice and 3 spoonefull of popy and 3 spoonefull of eysell and medle them all together and boyle them a little and cloe them in a glasse well stoped and put therein 3 spoonefull to a pottle of good wine and medle it well together till it bee used.

It was designed as a prelude to kitchen surgery.

The complex medicine Theriac, described as London Treacle in the 1618 London Pharmacopeia and used infrequently as an antidote to poisons or snake bites and as an internal medicine during the plague in 1665, included both opium and honey alongside many other ingredients.¹⁴

The herbalist Nicholas Culpeper (1616-54) in 1649 was unimpressed by those who sold opium: 'only for lucre of money they cheat you, and tell you it is a kind of tear, or some such like thing, that drops from poppies when they weep, and that is somewhere beyond the seas, I know not where beyond the moon'.¹⁵

The alchemist Angelus Sala (1576-1637) was, like most of his contemporaries, convinced that the presence of sulphur in opium made it dangerous. To remove it he recommended mixing with the juice of quinces, with vinegar, or with liquor.¹⁶ Another, anonymous, English recipe book from the seventeenth century recommended infusing opium with saffron, cinnamon and powdered cloves in a glass bottle, and heating it for 'dayes upon soe much fire as may keep ye water in a temperate & constant heat'.¹⁷

Raw opium is extremely bitter, strongly emetic and poorly soluble in water. Producing a medicine that was both dosable and palatable was challenging. In the fifteenth century opium was considered a dangerous narcotic and poison to be used extremely cautiously as a sedative. Theophrastus von Hohenheim (c1493-1541), the Swiss chymist, surgeon and philosopher more commonly known as Paracelsus, believed that opium had more potential as a medicine and created what he called laudanum, but its claimed composition, including gold leaf and pearl, suggested alchemy more than science.¹⁸

Although the word laudanum became synonymous in later centuries with a liquid tincture, or alcohol-containing solution, solid versions appear to have predominated

¹³ Hunter EK. 'To Cause Sleepe Safe and Shure': Dangerous substances, sleep medicine and poison theories in early modern England. *Social History of Medicine*. 2021; 35: 473–493.

¹⁴ Griffin JP. Venetian treacle and the foundation of medicines regulation. *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*. 2004; 58(3): 317-325.

¹⁵ Culpeper N. *Culpeper's complete herbal* (1649). London: Milner & Sowerby; 1852.

¹⁶ Hunter. 'To cause Sleepe', 2021 (Note 13).

¹⁷ Hunter. 'To cause Sleepe', 2021 (Note 13).

¹⁸ Sigerist HE. Laudanum in the works of Paracelsus. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 1941; 9: 530-544.

initially. A pill of laudanum appeared in the *Pharmacopoea Londinensis* in 1618, comprising opium, spirit of wine as solvent, saffron, ambergris for perfume, musk and oil of nutmeg as aids to palatability. When annotated by Nicholas Culpeper in 1653 he warned of the danger of opium: 'Take a care how you be too busie with such medicines, lest you make a man sleep till Dooms day'.¹⁹ From this point saffron is a common accompaniment to opium in mixed preparations, as a perceived anti-melancholic, alongside some combination of cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon for spice.

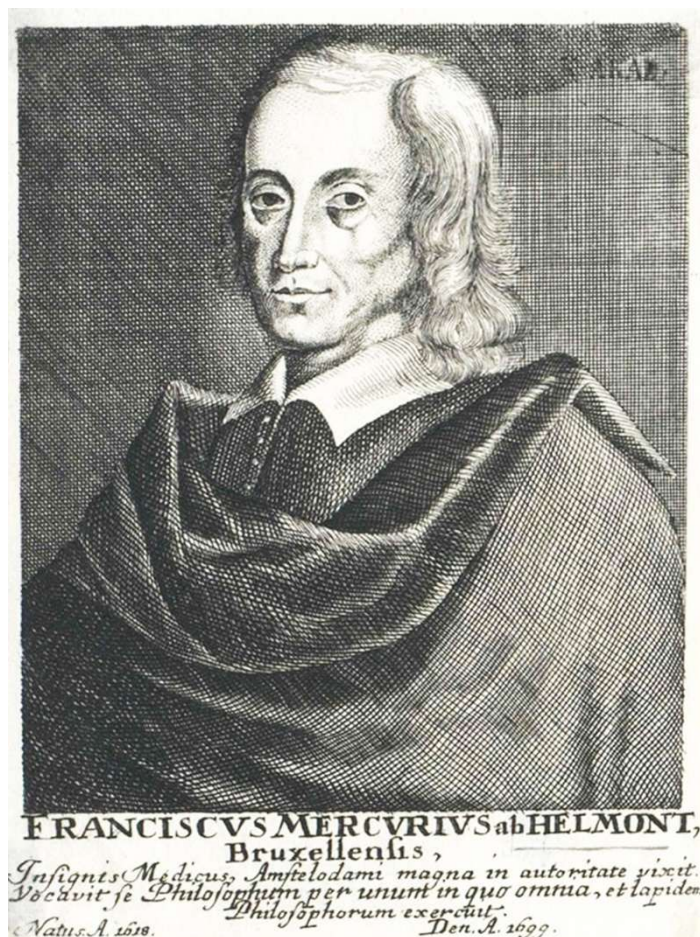


Figure 3. Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont. Anon, portrait engraved 1699. Austrian National Library, Austria. Public Domain.

https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/92062/BibliographicResource_1000126167994

Jan Baptiste Van Helmont (1580-1644), chymist, physiologist and philosopher of Brussels, was a follower of Paracelsus. He had, it is said, created a complex formula for laudanum which remains unpublished, but his son Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-98), who toured Europe as an itinerant and unqualified physician before coming to England in 1670, had adapted it. See Figure 3. He became personal physician to Viscountess Conway (1631-79), an Enlightenment philosopher who took him to Quaker

¹⁹ Culpeper N. *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*. London: Henchman; 1720.

meetings, and he became enamoured enough to become a Quaker himself.²⁰ He met Robert Boyle FRS (1627-91) in the year of his arrival. Boyle had already been experimenting with liquid laudanum preparations before meeting FM van Helmont, including a famous experiment on a live dog in 1656, considered to be the first successful demonstration of general anaesthesia.²¹ Van Helmont gave Boyle his own laudanum recipe which Boyle, after preparing and testing it himself, presented to the Royal Society as Laudanum Helmontii Junioris and published in 1674 (Figure 4).²²

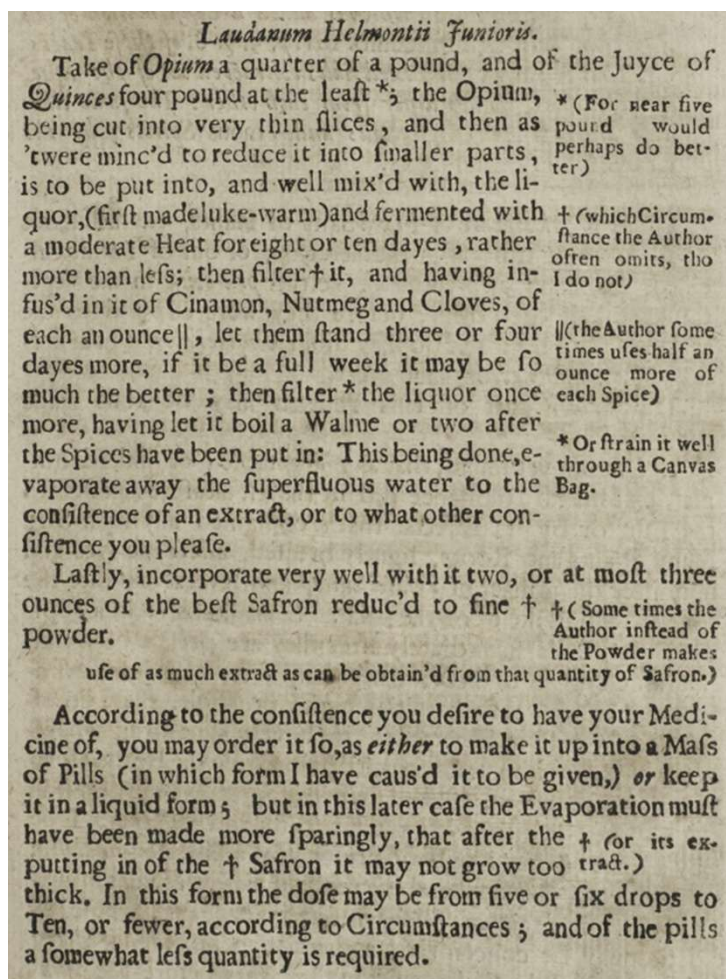


Figure 4. A recipe for Laudanum published by Robert Boyle FRS in 1674, received from Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont in 1670. Boyle. An account, 1674 (Note 22). p.149.

²⁰ Sherrer GB. New evidence of Francis Mercury Van Helmont's relations with the Quakers. *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*. 1957; 48: 157-162.

²¹ Dorrington KL, Poole W. The first intravenous anaesthetic: how well was it managed and its potential realized? *British Journal of Anaesthesia*. 2013; 110: 7-12.

²² Boyle R. An account of the two sorts of the Helmontian Laudanum, communicated to the publisher by the Honourable Robert Boyle, together with the way of the Noble Baron F. M. van Helmont (son to the famous Johannes Baptista,) of preparing his Laudanum. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*. 1674; 9: 147-149.

The list of drugs produced in the new chemical laboratory of the Society of Apothecaries, as recorded in their Court Minute Book of 1672, included just one opium-containing preparation, Laudanum Paracel. & Helmontii.²³ It was Thomas Sydenham (1624-89), London physician and also an acquaintance of Robert Boyle, who invented a somewhat simpler and more reliably dosable recipe. His popular liquid laudanum of 1676, although rather more cocktail than drug, was: two ounces of opium in a pint of strong red wine or port, with saffron, cloves and cinnamon.

Van Helmont's and Sydenham's recipes contained common ingredients in the form of opium, saffron, cinnamon and cloves but were not sugared. The addition of sugar, a product which by the second half of the seventeenth century was being imported in large quantities from the British colonies, was the final step in making liquid laudanum more palatable and popular. Thomas Godfrey (died 1721), Quaker apothecary of Hunsdon, mixed opium with ginger, spirits, sassafras, caraway, and importantly, Venice treacle (a variety of theriac containing up to 60 ingredients, exported from that city), to sweeten his 'cordial' enough to be taken by troublesome children. Similar preparations were also known as 'anodyne tincture'.

In 1810 the Plough Court Pharmacy in London, created by the Quaker Silvanus Bevan stocked sixteen different opium preparations. By the time of Gray's Pharmacopoeia supplement in 1821 there were at least 40 different variants of opium cocktail, including as examples: Ludolph's magistery, Extractum opii Wurtemberg, Dalby's carminative, Abbé Rosseau's drops, Tinctura thebaica and Battley's liquor opii sedativus.²⁴ The Quaker's Black drop, a variety of liquid laudanum which probably originated in the 1670s, appears to have been the first sugared opium mixture to be produced in England.

The origins of Quaker's Black Drop: Tonstall, Armstrong and the Bishop Auckland connection

Because of the secrecy attached to competing products and recipes, discovering the origins of Quaker's Black Drop has been challenging. However, some information was divulged in 1816 in a book on the management of typhus, published by John Armstrong MD (1784-1829), physician to the Sunderland Dispensary (Figure 5).²⁵ He alluded to the use of Black Drop in treatment, and expatiated:

The Black Drop was originally prepared, upwards of a hundred years ago by Edward Tonstall, a medical practitioner of Bishop's [sic] Auckland, in the county of Durham, and one of the society of Friends. The recipe, passing into the possession of a near relative, John Walton of Shildon, who also prepared that medicine, was found amongst the papers of his brother, the late Edward Walton of Sunderland ... Take half a pound of opium slices; three pints of good

²³ Anon. List of drugs. In: Court Minute Book, Society of Apothecaries, London, 1672.

²⁴ Gray SF. *A supplement to the Pharmacopoeia, being a treatise on pharmacology in general*. London: Thomas & George Underwood; 1821.

²⁵ Armstrong J. *Practical Illustrations of Typhus and other Febrile Diseases*. London: Longman & Co; 1816.

verjuice; one and a half ounces of nutmegs; half an ounce of saffron. Boil them to a proper thickness, then add a quarter of a pound of sugar, and two spoonfuls of yeast. Set the whole in a warm place near the fire for six or eight weeks, then place it in the open air, until it becomes a syrup. Lastly, decant, filter and bottle it up, adding a little sugar to each bottle.

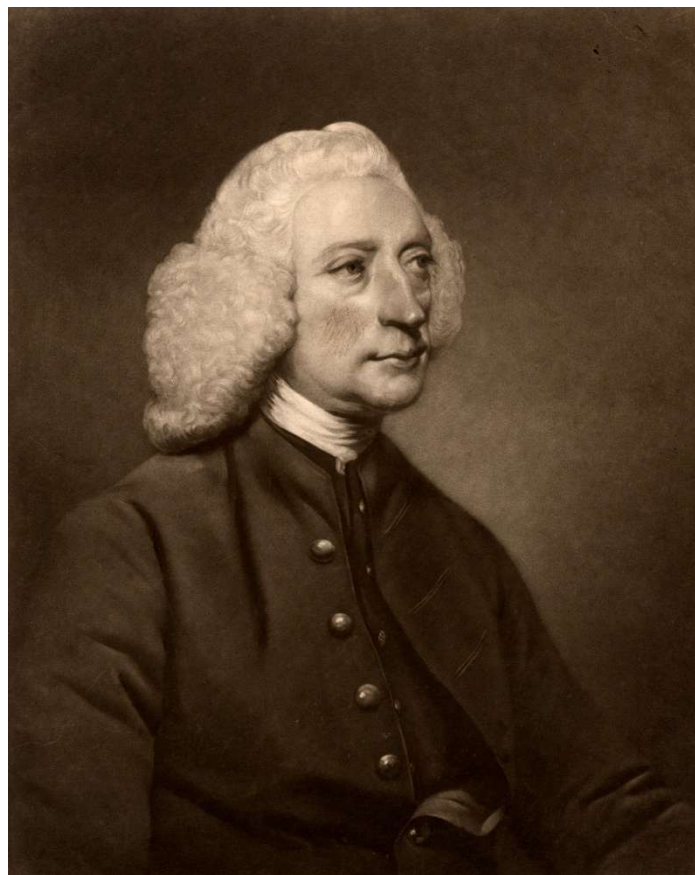


Figure 5. John Armstrong by Edward Fisher, after Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1767. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reference: NPG D551. Reproduced under licence.

Also in 1816, in its inaugural year, London's *Gazette of Health* published a short report including two different recipes of Black Drop, apparently originating from correspondence with Dr James Cassels of Lancaster.²⁶ A recipe was then also published verbatim in the *St James's Chronicle* in London in 1818.²⁷ A Black Drop recipe was now very much in the public domain. The preparation was thenceforth occasionally referred to as 'Armstrong's Black Drop' or 'Tonstall's Black Drop'.

In 2008, at an auction house in the North East of England, a collection of seven handwritten recipe books from the eighteenth century, belonging to the Pease family of Darlington, Quakers, was sold at auction. The recipe is known to have been in the

²⁶ Anon. Proprietary medicines: The Lancashire Black Drop. *Monthly Gazette of Health*. 1; 1816: 125-126.

²⁷ Anon. Original recipe of the black drop. *St James's Chronicle*. 28 Feb 1818. p.2.

possession of Mary Pease née Richardson (1736-1821).²⁸ It contained the above recipe, identical except for doubled quantities, and was dated 1678.²⁹ The anonymous author (possibly Mary Pease herself) stated that it was:

... the celebrated recipe of the late Dr Edward Tunstall of Bishop Auckland for preparing the Black Drop, formerly called the Quakers Black Drop, from his being one of the People called Quakers ... After Dr Tunstall's death, the Black Drop was prepared and sold by his nephew, Jonathan Walton of Shildon, in very small bottles at one shilling each.

Very little is known of Edward Tonstall or Tunstall. The first Quaker meetings in County Durham began in 1652. An Edward Tunstall of Bishop Auckland, gentleman, refused to take the oath of allegiance to the King, then Charles II, and was committed to the Assizes. For holding Quaker meetings, 'Edward Tonstall had taken from him, for the Meeting being at his House, one Horse, one Cow, twelve Pewter dishes, and other Pewter, twelve Rushy Leather Chairs and one Chest of Drawers, worth £18 10 s'.³⁰ Records of the Raby Quaker meetings indicate that he was an active and senior Friend.³¹ He also represented Durham at the Quaker Northern Counties yearly meetings. An Edwardus Tonstall graduated MA from the University of Edinburgh in 1668,³² but these authors have found no record of his medical qualifications or practice. An Edward Tonstall from Bishop Auckland (or Markett Auckland as the Quakers called it) died in 1693. Sir Charles Pease Bt, in his extensive studies into Quaker families, including his own,³³ includes the following comments by his predecessor Sir Joseph Gurney Pease:

After Doctor Tunstall's decease, the black drop was prepared and sold by his Relation, John Walton of Shildon near Bishop Auckland, who was the Drs nephew, and sold by him in very small bottles at 1s each, they were not half the size of those sold by Dr JA Braithwaite at 2s 6d, but the liquor, much thicker, and from the small quantity prescribed might contain more Opium. JA Braithwaite married into a family who were relations & near neighbours to J Walton that he perhaps procured the Recipe through that channel.

²⁸ Pease CEG. Descendants of Backhouse. <http://www.pennyghael.org.uk/Backhouse.pdf> (accessed 12 Oct 2024).

²⁹ Tennants Auctioneers of Leyburn. Auction: Books, postcards & ephemera, 24 Sep 2008. Lot 232: Seven 18th century manuscript recipe books belonging to the Pease family. Tennants, Leyburn 2008.

³⁰ Whitehead G. *A brief account of some of the late and present sufferings of the people called Quakers for meeting together to worship God* ... London: Printed by Andrew Sowle; 1680.

³¹ Longstaff GB. *The Langstaffs of Teasdale and Weardale: materials for a history of a yeoman family gathered together by George Blundell Longstaff MA MD Oxon FSA*. London: Mitchell, Hughes & Clarke; 1906.

³² Anon. *A Catalogue of the Graduates in the Faculties of Arts, Divinity and Law of the University of Edinburgh since its Foundation*. Edinburgh: Neill & Co; 1858.

³³ Pease. Descendants of Backhouse (Note 28).

The brothers John Walton (1687-1780) and Edward Walton (1697-1771), Quakers of Shildon, just south of Bishop Auckland, were mentioned by Matthew Richley in his history of that town.³⁴ It had been noted that:

Thos Richardson Senr of Sunderland, being one of the Trustees of the late Edwd Walton of Sunderland, in looking over his papers &c found the above Recipe, and also by his books of Acct, that he had been in the practice for many years of ordering, 2, 3, or 4 pounds of Opium frequently, from Thos Corbyn of London for the use of his Bro J Walton in making the Black Drop, being at that time in much request.

Thomas Corbyn (1711-91), according to Roy Porter, 'had a reputation as a stern, no-nonsense Quaker ... traded from premises at 300 Holborn ... He had a separate laboratory, and a vast warehouse in Cold Bath Fields ... What is clear beyond doubt is that no small part of Corbyn's trade was stimulated and sustained by the Quaker grapevine.'³⁵ Corbyn's trade was international. After Edward Tonstall passed on the recipe, John Walton was clearly the manufacturer and Edward Walton the procurer of this business. The latter died wealthy and childless, bequeathing a large sum towards the creation of Quaker schools which still bear his name. Tonstall's original Quaker's Black drop recipe and all subsequent variants contained four essential ingredients: opium, verjuice/fruitjuice, selected spices, and sugar. Sometimes yeast and fermentation were also part of the manufacturing process.

Quaker's Black Drop: competition, succession and Kendal Black Drop

JA Brathwaite claimed that the Lancaster Black Drop was his own invention. However, a counterclaim arose, this time not from a surgeon, a druggist or a newspaper proprietor. Ann Todd (1748-1820) was a simple Quakeress from nearby Kendal where she lived in an old house behind the Commercial Inn. She may have been making her own Black Drop for years, for use locally. She did not seek national publication or distribution, but advertised only on Brathwaite's doorstep: the *Lancaster Gazette* in February 1802 (Figure 6) announced that she 'has long been in possession of the ORIGINAL RECIPE for preparing THE CELEBRATED BLACK DROP' which she 'continues to prepare and sell', not only significantly cheaper, but 'superior in quality to an article advertised, as the Black Drop, by a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons'.³⁶ It was a message to Mr Brathwaite, pure and simple: get ready for competition.

³⁴ Richley M. *History and Characteristics of Bishop Auckland*. Bishop Auckland: Cummins WJ; 1872.

³⁵ Porter R, Porter D. The rise of the English drugs industry: the role of Thomas Corbyn. *Medical History*. 1989; 33: 277-295.

³⁶ Todd A. Advertisement: The celebrated Black Drop. *Lancaster Gazette*. 26 Feb 1802. Vol. 1, Issue 37.

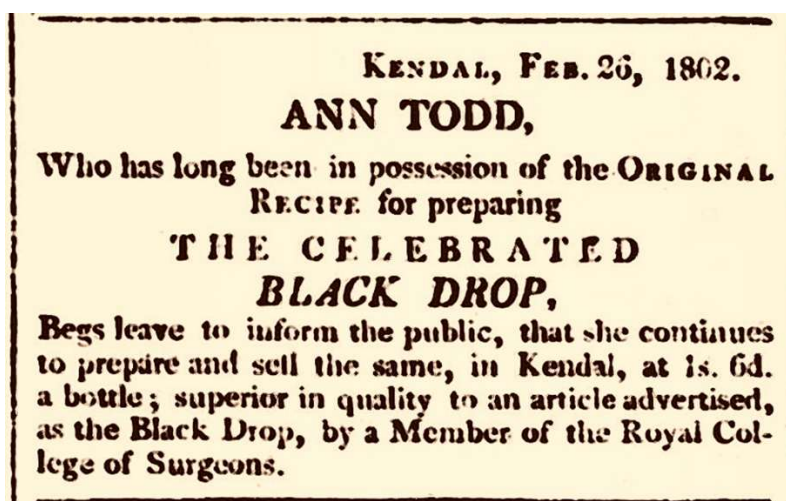


Figure 6. An advertisement by Ann Todd in a *Lancaster Gazette* of 1802, in response to that of JA Brathwaite. Todd. Advertisement, 1802 (Note 36).

Brathwaite was unperturbed: his advertisement in the same month referred disparagingly to ‘a nauseous and inefficacious composition, not possessing any of the salutary properties of the true medicine, is advertised, with pirated directions, for sale’.³⁷ He continued to advertise in this vein, not infrequently and nationwide, having the social status and network to arrange druggist suppliers in towns and cities around Britain. However, at the age of 50 he became ill. In 1809 he dissolved his partnership with fellow surgeon Thomas Howitt, resigned from the Lancaster Dispensary in February 1810, and died within a month. Nevertheless, plans for succession had been made. John Ayrey’s sister Margaret had been living and working with her brothers James and Thomas at their ironmongery at No. 45, Soutergate, Kendal and by his local soubriquet ‘Jimmy Blackdrop’ it appears that James was selling his brother’s Black Drop at their shop.³⁸ James had died in 1806 but manufacture and sales continued after John Ayrey’s death. The first advertisement bearing Margaret’s name appearing in May 1811,³⁹ the phials of Black Drop subsequently bearing her own name (Figure 7).

In response Ann Todd advertised once more, claiming that ‘she only is in possession of the original receipt’, and that Black Drop had been in Westmorland for nearly one hundred years.⁴⁰ By this time she had diversified; she had her own London agent: the Fosters, Quakers trading near to the British headquarters of the Society of Friends in Bishopsgate. Margaret had her own connections, including Savory & Moore, ‘Chemists to the Royal Family’ in New Bond Street. Her selling agents advertised widely throughout Britain and Ireland.

³⁷ Brathwaite JA. Advertisement: The genuine Lancaster Black Drop. *Lancaster Gazette*. 13 Feb 1802. Vol. 1, Issue 35.

³⁸ Curwen JF. *Kirkbie-Kendall: Fragments collected relating to its ancient streets and yards, church and castle, houses and inns*. Kendal: T Wilson; 1900.

³⁹ Brathwaite M. Advertisement: The Lancaster Genuine Black Drop. *Stamford Mercury*. 10 May 1811. Vol. 10, Issue 515.

⁴⁰ Todd A. Advertisement: Black drop. *Westmorland Advertiser*. 10 Aug 1810. p.2.



Figure 7. A phial of Genuine Black Drop, sold by Margaret Brathwaite of Kendal. © Amgueddfa Cymru/Museum of Wales. Ref: MGNW No. F70.109.6. Reproduced with permission.


Competition between the Todd and Brathwaite versions of Black Drop continued for several more years, punctuated in 1818 by a newspaper spat between Margaret and Mr SB Anderton, a previous apprentice to her brother, in practice since 1810 and succeeding him in his practice in Lancaster. Anderton advertised himself, in Lancaster, and his Black Drop as ‘successor to late Mr Brathwaite, the original proprietor’.⁴¹ Margaret became aware of this and asserted rapidly in the same newspaper that ‘It seems due to the public to state that SB Anderton has had no means of knowing the composition of the BLACK DROP as prepared by the late JA Brathwaite’ and so on.⁴² In response Anderton ‘feels it a duty incumbent upon him to contradict a very fallacious insinuation ... in which Margaret Brathwaite, of Kendal, has had the temerity...’ and that he ‘has had every opportunity of being fully acquainted with all the component parts of this valuable medicine’. This was followed by: ‘the late Mr Brathwaite, his predecessor, was neither the inventor nor sole proprietor of the Black Drop. The celebrated Van Helmont was the original inventor of this medicine, nearly two centuries ago’.

Ann Todd died suddenly in 1820. In her will she had instructed that ‘All my medical receipts and stock thereof to be given to Hannah Backhouse’. Hannah (née Cumming 1768-1842) was the wife of George Backhouse, Kendal ironmonger, shopkeeper and distributor of stamps. George was a second cousin of Margaret, mother of John Ayrey Brathwaite and his sister Margaret. They were now competitors. Hannah lost no time in placing her first advertisement in the *Westmorland Gazette* in that same year where it was proudly displayed beneath a picture of Kendal Castle, claiming that the recipe ‘has been in the family of the present proprietor for upwards of 60 years’ (Figure 8).⁴³

⁴¹ Anderton SB. Advertisement: Opium freed from its deleterious qualities. *Lancaster Gazette*. 14 Feb 1818. Vol.17, Issue 871.

⁴² Brathwaite M. Advertisement: Black Drop. *Lancaster Gazette*. 14 Mar 1818. Vol. 17, Issue 872.

⁴³ Backhouse H. Advertisement: Original black drop. *Westmorland Gazette*. 18 Nov 1820. p.1.



VIEW OF KENDAL CASTLE.

Those who are in the practice of taking Opium or its preparations,
ARE REQUESTED TO MAKE TRIAL OF THE
Original Black Drop,
Prepared according to the recipe of a medical practitioner, one of the Society of Friends, who resided at Bishop's Auckland, in the county of Durham, upwards of a hundred years ago, and has been in the family of the present proprietor upwards of 60 years.

THE BLACK DROP, as has been proved and acknowledged by several physicians of the first eminence, possesses great advantages over Laudanum, which in many temperaments instead of producing sleep and composure, creates inquietude, delirium, and, a few hours after its exhibition, headache, sickness, and numerous unpleasant consequences; now this preparation, by its peculiarity of composition, is entirely deprived of those noxious effects, and can be administered in all cases where Opium or Laudanum is required. It allays uneasy sensations depending upon nervous irritability, or great anxiety. It acts as an excellent antispasmodic, in asthma, acute pains of the stomach and bowels, (unattended with fever,) and is invaluable in chest complaints, chronic-rheumatism, gout, tooth-ache, and many other diseases, where pain and want of sleep are so distressing. As an external application to wounds and bruises, it will also be found of service.

Observe that none is the Original Black Drop, but what is prepared by H. BACKHOUSE, Kendal, and sealed with the initials "H. B." with red sealing wax, on each bottle.

Sold in bottles (by most of the Medicine Venders in the kingdom, with proper directions how to use it.) Duty included at 2s. 9d., 4s. 6d., and 8s. 6d.

Figure 8. An advertisement by Hannah Backhouse in a Westmorland Gazette of 1820. Backhouse. Advertisement, 1820 (Note 43).



Figure 9. Original poster from shop window of Hannah Backhouse in Kendal. Cumbria Archive Centre, Kendal. Reference: WCDU/1/1/53. Reproduced with permission.

Hannah Backhouse sold her Black Drop from their shop at 25, Stramongate in Kendal, where a poster was prominently displayed in her window (Figure 9). Phials bearing her labels are in the Lancaster City Museum (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Pair of bottles that previously contained Black Drop made by Hannah Backhouse c1820. Lancaster City Museum. Reference: LM 611.5. Reproduced with permission.

In addition, her business ledger from 1820-1825 has survived. It shows the ingredients for Hannah's preparation of Black Drop batches (Figure 11) and lists of the local customers purchasing her product. After advertising for only two years, Hannah fell silent. It is not known for how long she continued to produce and sell her Black Drop, but it is known that after her husband's death in 1830 she became postmistress and stamp distributor for Kendal, and in that role she corresponded with William Wordsworth, Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland. She died in 1842.⁴⁴

Ingredient	Quantity	Cost
Black Drop Prepared	Apr. 12 th 1821	
2 lb Opium	44/-	4. 8. 0
6 lb Nutmegs	72/-	3. 9
2 lb Saffron	28/-	3. 6
6 lb Bergamot	74/-	2. 11
3/4 lb Treacle		3
1/2 lb Sugar Candy	16/-	8
2 lb Gum Arabic	1/-	0
Boiled 172 Flour		£ 4. 11. 18. 2

Figure 11. An extract from the ledger book of Hannah Backhouse, 1821, showing the ingredients and preparation of a batch of Black Drop. Lancaster City Museum. Reference: LM 611.3. Reproduced with permission.

On the death of Margaret Brathwaite in 1825 the recipe for Lancaster Black Drop was kept in the family, passing to her sister-in-law Jane Brathwaite, and Jane's daughter Hannah. They prepared the drug firstly at their ironmongers in Kirkgate, later moving to Stramongate. In 1827 old stock bearing the stamp of Margaret Brathwaite was still being sold, but in 1829 Jane publicly claimed the succession.⁴⁵ It was rumoured that Jane and Hannah worked at night to avoid disturbances from servants or visitors. Wearing masks apparently to protect their faces from the acidic fumes, they flitted about the shadows in their grimy gowns, hubble-bubbling their potion in a way that evoked Shakespearian analogies.⁴⁶ It is believed that they continued to produce Lancaster Black Drop until the 1860s,⁴⁷ but although advertisements for either Lancaster or Brathwaite's Black Drop continued to appear on druggists lists, Jane's name as producer ceased after only a few years, and her daughter Hannah was never publicly attached to the drug.

⁴⁴ See: Curwen JF, *Kirbie-Kendall. Fragments collected relating to its ancient streets and yards; church and castle; houses and inns.* Kendal: T. Wilson; 1900.

⁴⁵ Brathwaite J. Advertisement: To the Faculty, and those who take opium. *London Morning Herald.* 16 Apr 1829. p.3.

⁴⁶ Campbell JS. *The Brathwaite will cause and history of the black drop.* Kendal: Rawdon Briggs Lee; 1872.

⁴⁷ Savory J. *A companion to the medicine chest.* London: John Churchill; 1836.

The London pharmacy of Savory & Moore had been highly successful since its beginnings in 1794, and by the mid-nineteenth century were 'By Appointment to Her Majesty', selling not only medicines at their Bond Street premises, but elegant mahogany medicine chests containing all that the well-to-do household might need. One example from about 1810, now at the Science Museum, includes Braithwaite's Black Drop (Object No. A196350) which they began to sell from 1802, later becoming Margaret Braithwaite's favoured London outlet. That connection continued, and in 1836 the written Companion to the Medicine Chest by John Savory included Black Drop as a standard constituent.⁴⁸ By the 1840s Savory & Moore were selling the Lancaster Black Drop without any reference to the Braithwaites in Kendal.

It is not known for how long they were supplied from Westmorland, but it seems that at some stage Jane and Hannah must have sold the recipe to the pharmacy. They were both financially secure, owning a number of properties and substantial investments. In 1861 Savory & Moore advertised that 'THE LANCASTER GENUINE BLACK DROP is now prepared only by Savory & Moore, and sold in the newly invented, ingenious bottles which regulate and check the dose'.⁴⁹ There is also evidence that Black Drop was sold abroad. In 1851, M Monneret wrote in the Medical and Surgical Bulletin of Paris that 'black drops ... had a more certain action when I used those which come from English pharmacies, and constitute a secret remedy of which some speculators have reserved the monopoly'.⁵⁰

Later in the 1860s a further attempt was made to revive the Black Drop trade, in Ireland. The Quaker firm of chemists and apothecaries, Bewley and Evans, had existed in Dublin since the 1820s. The Bewleys had originally emigrated from Cumberland to Ireland in the seventeenth century. However, in 1861 John Evans advertised that his 'Evans' Black Drop' was free from narcotina (that component which had been identified as causing the severe nausea of opium). It is not known whether this led directly to the dissolving of the partnership in 1864, but Henry Bewley (1804-76) began practice with another chemist and John Evans began to practice alone as 'State Apothecary and Chemist' at 49 Dawson Street, Dublin. In 1866 a stream of advertisements of his own preparations appeared. It was Evans' claim that:

The preparation so long known as Braithwaite's or the Quaker's Black Drop, having become extinct by the death of the maker, and no other preparation now obtaining the confidence of the Profession to the same extent, J Evans begs to submit to their notice his Drops, by the name of 'Guttae Nigrae, Evans' for which he solicits a trial, and their judgement,

which he followed by several testimonials.⁵¹ How this recipe had been acquired remains unknown. JA Braithwaite had married Sarah Bewley, and although the Irish Bewleys

⁴⁸ Savory. *A companion*, 1836 (Note 47).

⁴⁹ Savory & Moore, pharmacists. Lancaster genuine black drop. *Lancaster Guardian*. 12 Oct 1861. p.7.

⁵⁰ Monneret M. De l'emploi des gouttes noires Anglaises (Black Drops). *Bulletin Général de Thérapeutique Médicale et Chirurgicale*, 30 Jan 1851. Bibliothèques d'Université Paris Cité. <https://numerabilis.u-paris.fr/medica/bibliotheque-numerique/>.

⁵¹ Evans J. Advertisement: Evans' Black Drop. *Dublin Medical Press*. 13 Feb 1867. p.2.

were only distant relations, the family connection may have been a route of transmission. Evans' advertisements ended in 1868, and the project seems to have been unsuccessful as subsequently his business limited itself to the sale of mineral waters, 'extract of meat for making beef tea' and the like. No newspaper advertisements for Quaker Black Drop appeared in Great Britain or Ireland after 1868, signaling the end of 200 years of Quaker Black Drop manufacture.

Coleridge, De Quincey and the romantic addiction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Figure 12, had been a sickly child, probably affected by rheumatic fever. He began to use laudanum as a teenager for his 'supposed rheumatic affection, attended with swellings in my knees and palpitation of the heart and pains all over me, by which I had been bed-ridden for nearly six months'. His illness was debilitating and he gradually became addicted to opium.



Figure 12. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, by Robert Hancock, 1796. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reference: NPG 452. Reproduced under licence. At this time, Coleridge was in the early stages of his opium addiction.

Coleridge had met William Wordsworth in 1795 and they had become close friends. He moved to Westmorland in 1800 and stayed with the Wordsworths, but his fastidiousness, noisy hallucinatory nightmares and depression strained their friendship. He had moved into the heart of Quaker Black Drop territory and later regretted his choice of remedy:

I had always a fondness ... for dabbling in medical writings; and in one of these reviews I met a case which I fancied very like my own, in which a cure had been effected by the Kendal Black Drop. In an evil hour I procured it: it worked miracles, the swellings disappeared, the pains vanished. I was all alive, and all around me being as ignorant as myself, nothing could exceed my triumph. ... Alas! it is with a bitter smile, a laugh of gall and bitterness, that I recall this period of unsuspecting delusion, and how I first became aware of the Maelstrom, the fatal whirlpool to which I was drawing, just when the current was beyond my strength to stem.⁵²

Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), Figure 13, was a precocious aesthete from Manchester who followed Wordsworth to Grasmere in 1809 and later moved into Dove Cottage, recently vacated by the poet. He had begun using opium some years earlier and was appointed Coleridge's secretary in 1808.



Figure 13. Thomas de Quincey. Anon, engraving after a portrait by James Archer. In: Simons WE (ed). *De Quincey's Revolt of the Tartars*, Boston USA: Ginn & Co; 1898. Frontispiece.

⁵² Day H. *The Opium Habit, with suggestions as to the remedy*. New York: Harper & Brothers; 1868. p.165-166.

His descent into addiction culminated in the publication of *Confessions of an English Opium-eater* in 1821, a public admission of the non-medical use of opium which, in ascribing some good to its hallucinogenic effects, caused a minor scandal. Coleridge was mortified:

Oh! With what unutterable sorrow did I read the “Confessions of an Opium Eater”, in which the writer, with morbid vanity, makes a boast of what was my misfortune, for he had been faithfully and with an agony of zeal warned of the gulf, and yet wilfully struck into the current! Heaven be merciful to him!⁵³

Coleridge and De Quincey were by no means alone. There were many other opium users amongst well-known literary, society and establishment figures. Byron referred to it in his satirical epic poem ‘Don Juan’: ‘... for Cupid's cup, / With the first draught intoxicates apace, / A quintessential laudanum or 'black drop', / Which makes one drunk at once ...’. De Quincey had revealed the dark underside of opium elixirs, including Black Drop; their use for mental stimulation or creativity, rather than the control of pain, had in many instances become mainstream.

Science, suspicion, overdose and the gradual evolution of control

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, science began to illuminate the centuries of eponymous opium mixtures. In 1803 Jean-François Derosne (1774-1855), a Parisian chemist, identified narcotine, a constituent of opium which strongly induced vomiting, closely followed in 1805 by Friedrich Sertürner (1783-1841), a German chemist who crystallised Morphium, and tested it upon himself and others.⁵⁴ It was later renamed ‘morphine’.⁵⁵

These and other plant-derived substances were collectively named ‘alkaloids’ in 1819 by Carl Meissner (1792-1853) and codeine, another opiate alkaloid, was identified in 1832 by Pierre Robiquet (1780-1840). However, as so often happens when new science is revealed, tradition was stubborn. Despite its provincial beginnings and its association with non-conformism and the aesthetes, variations on the Black Drop had come to be well established.

A handwritten nineteenth-century book of medicines in the West Yorkshire Archives contains an anonymous entry of 1820-1840:

Batley's solution of Opium or the Black Drop are far preferable to laudanum or any of the common preparations of opium for procuring sleep and alleviating

⁵³ Gillman J. *Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. London: W. Pickering; 1838. p.247-248.

⁵⁴ Matthiessen A, Foster GC. Researches into the Chemical Constitution of Narcotine, and of its products of decomposition – Part 1. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. 1863; 153(1863): 345-367.

⁵⁵ Schmitz R. Friedrich Wilhelm Sertürner and the discovery of morphine. *Pharmacy in History*. 1985; 27: 61-74.

pain since they accomplish these objects without occasioning subsequent headache, fever, sickness, or any other unpleasant symptom.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, problems were gradually revealed. The widespread use of opium to control children had its consequences. It was common knowledge that itinerant day-nurses would reduce their prices if mothers provided a 'quietening mixture' and in 1839 opiates caused 72 known childhood deaths.⁵⁷ In 1841 an inquest in Reading concerned the death of an infant given too much Brathwaite's Black Drop.⁵⁸ This was soon followed in 1842 by another death in Sussex, this time from an overdose of Black Drop after confusion with the Black Draught, a common laxative used in much higher volume,⁵⁹ and in 1845 a similar death in Taunton from the same cause.⁶⁰

Concerns mounted yet opium usage rose inexorably: in 1830, 22,000 pounds were imported to Britain from Turkey or India; by 1852 this had risen to 114,000 pounds.⁶¹ In the first year of its publication in 1857, the *British Medical Journal* published the views of Thomas Radford, eminent gynaecologist of Manchester, who made it clear that Black Drop had been well-accepted in society:

... a medicine which at one time was highly appreciated by those who had taken it; and I have good authority for saying, from documents in my possession, that it was formerly very extensively used, and by the leading statesmen of the day', and he gave a recipe 'from a highly respectable medical family.'⁶²

However, later that same year, with ill-advised opiate usage reaching alarming levels, a parliamentary bill was put forward which classified opium and its derivatives as poisons. This was intended to restrict the sale of such compounds, but it failed to pass through parliament after intensive lobbying by chemists who had made large profits from such trade. Although the Pharmacy Act eventually became law in 1868, limiting the sale of opium to registered chemists and legally qualified apothecaries, the bill had been much diluted, permitting the continued use of patent medicines for many years thereafter.⁶³

The last death reported from Black Drop, of the London bonesetter Robert H Hutton, was in 1887,⁶⁴ but it was not until the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920 that opiates became available only on prescription. The era of opium home-brewing in England was finally over.

⁵⁶ Anon. Anodyne and sleeping draught No.22. In: *Yorkshire Pharmacist's Book of Remedies and Medical Notes*. Wakefield Archive Service. Reference: C696. p.8.

⁵⁷ Lomax E. The uses and abuses of opiates in nineteenth century England. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 1973; 47: 167-176.

⁵⁸ Anon. Inquest holden before Joseph Bunny Esq. *Reading Mercury*. 17 Jul 1841. p.2.

⁵⁹ Anon. Mr Henry Moore, surgeon, deposed. *Sussex Advertiser*. 20 Dec 1842. p.5.

⁶⁰ Anon. Melancholy accident. *Taunton Courier*. 3 Dec 1845. p.6.

⁶¹ Hodgson B. *In the arms of Morpheus*. Buffalo NY: Firefly Books; 2001.

⁶² Radford T. Black drop or anodyne tincture. *British Medical Journal*. 1857; 1: 15.

⁶³ The Pharmacy Act 1868. UK Public General Acts 1868 c. 121 (Regnal. 31_and_32_Vict). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/31-32/121/enacted> (accessed 14 Aug 2025).

⁶⁴ Anon. Death of a famous 'bone-setter'. *St James' Chronicle*. 18 Aug 1887. p.3.

Quakers versus the China Trade: the final irony

The East India Company massively increased opium production in eastern India in the early 1800s, specifically for the 'China Trade', essentially the smuggling of opium into China, where addiction became a major social problem. Border confrontation led to the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60, both of which weakened China enormously, leading to the legalisation of opium in China and enhancing British overseas trade.

However, at home in Britain, disquiet grew. A number of missionaries, predominantly non-conformist, had spoken and written about the misery that opium was creating in China. Moral indignation, stoked by a degree of anti-capitalist sentiment, was rising. Following its 1858 Meeting for Sufferings, the Society of Friends wrote to Prime Minister Palmerston that 'We cannot reflect without deep sorrow on the part our countrymen have taken in originating and carrying on this immoral traffic'.⁶⁵

The Anglo-Oriental Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade came into being in 1874. A group of Quakers, increasingly concerned about the immoral opium trade, awarded a prize of £200 for an essay on the subject. The winner was Revd Frederick Storrs Turner (1834-1916), a nonconformist preacher who had been a missionary in China and whose strong views on the topic became increasingly well-known in a series of publications which included scathing attacks on the ethics of companies conducting the trade.⁶⁶ He became the secretary of the newly-formed Society, whose main funder was Edward Pease (1834-80), a Darlington Quaker. Its main principle was to prohibit the sale of opium except for medical use.

Joseph Whitwell Pease (1828-1903), brother of Edward and Liberal MP, became the Society's president and inexorable pressure was placed upon successive governments, primarily led by and financed by prominent Quakers including the Peases, Joseph Rowntree and Edward Fry. Following a large protest meeting in 1881, the Archbishop of Canterbury declared 'that in the opinion of this meeting the opium traffic ... is opposed alike to Christian morality and the commercial interests of the country'.⁶⁷

If Gladstone thought that the award of a baronetcy to Joseph Pease in 1882 would quieten him, he was mistaken. Pease was resolute. In 1891 his motion in parliament 'That this House is of the opinion that the system by which the Indian Opium Revenue is raised is morally indefensible' was defeated,⁶⁸ but only after vigorous debate and considerable support. Joseph Pease did not live to see the fruits of his labours; it took the combined Liberal-Labour forces of the Campbell-Bannerman Government from 1905 to overturn decades of trade abuse. In 1907 the Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, a young Winston Churchill, set in motion the treaty signed later that year to discontinue the trade,⁶⁹ which finally petered out in 1913. There is no doubt that the ethical values, the strong financial backing and the willingness to speak truth to power,

⁶⁵ Crangle JV. Joseph Whitwell Pease and the Quaker role in the campaign to suppress the opium trade in the British Empire. *Quaker History*. 1979; 68: 63-74.

⁶⁶ Turner FS. *British opium policy and its results to India and China*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington; 1876.

⁶⁷ Crangle. Joseph Whitwell Pease, 1979 (Note 65). p.65.

⁶⁸ Anon. Hansard III 352. 10 Apr 1891. p.304.

⁶⁹ Crangle. Joseph Whitwell Pease, 1979 (Note 65). p.73.

of the Quaker community during fifty years of tenacity, were fundamental to the eventual success of their campaign.

A timeline of events is described in Table 1, and a summary of the proposed Black Drop 'family tree' is shown in Figure 14.

- 1520s Theophrastus von Hohenheim (Paracelsus) becomes the first European physician to regularly include opium in his medicines, and coins the term laudanum
- 1618 Laudanum, an opium pill, is first listed in the *London Pharmacopoeia*
- 1637 Opium becomes Britain's principal trade commodity with China
- 1670 Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont comes to Britain and meets Robert Boyle FRS
- 1672 The Society of Apothecaries founds a chemical laboratory at Blackfriars, the Court Minute Book containing a list of drugs including 'Laudanum Paracel and Helmontii'
- 1674 Boyle publishes van Helmont Junior's laudanum recipe at the Royal Society
- 1676 Thomas Sydenham describes 'Sydenham's Laudanum', a liquid opium compound
- 1678 Edward Tonstall of Bishop Auckland is said to have invented 'Quaker's Black Drop'
- 1693 Death of Edward Tonstall of Bishop Auckland

- 1771 John Walton dies and Tonstall's recipe passes to executor Thomas Richardson
- 1785 John Ayrey Brathwaite becomes honorary surgeon to the Lancaster Dispensary
- 1799 Richard Cruttwell is the first to advertise the Black Drop, in the Bath Chronicle

- 1801 JA Brathwaite first advertises what he subsequently names 'Lancaster Black Drop'
- 1802 Ann Todd of Kendal first advertises her Black Drop in a newspaper
- 1803 Samuel Taylor Coleridge first uses Kendal Black Drop, in Dove Cottage, Grasmere
- 1804 Friedrich Sertürner isolates 'Principium somniferum', or morphine, from opium
- 1808 Thomas de Quincey moves into Dove Cottage and becomes Coleridge's secretary
- 1816 Dr John Armstrong publishes the Tonstall Black Drop recipe
- 1816 Two recipes for 'Lancashire Black Drop' revealed by Dr James Cassels
- 1818 Armstrong's recipe is published in a newspaper
- 1820 Ann Todd of Kendal dies, bequeaths Black Drop recipe to Hannah Backhouse
- 1822 Thomas de Quincey publishes 'Confessions of an Opium Eater'
- 1825 Margaret Brathwaite dies, bequeaths her recipe to Jane and Hannah Brathwaite
- 1841 Quakers Wm Allen, John & Jacob Bell lead the creation of the Pharmaceutical Society
- 1842 Death of Hannah Backhouse, manufacturer of Kendal Black Drop
- 1861 Savory & Moore, pharmacists, announce that they are the sole makers of Lancaster Genuine Black Drop
- 1862 Death of Jane Brathwaite of Kendal, manufacturer of Black Drop
- 1868 The Pharmacy Act restricts sales of opiates, but patented tinctures still permitted
- 1874 CR Alder Wright synthesises diacetylmorphine (heroin)
- 1874 Edward Pease, Quaker, funds the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade

- 1906 The China Trade in opium is ended
- 1920 The Dangerous Drugs Act makes illegal the sale of opiates without prescription

- 2008 The original recipe book of Mary Pease née Richardson, containing a handwritten copy of Tonstall's 1678 recipe, acquired by her relative Thomas Richardson, is sold at auction, current whereabouts unknown

Table 1. Quaker's Black Drop timeline.

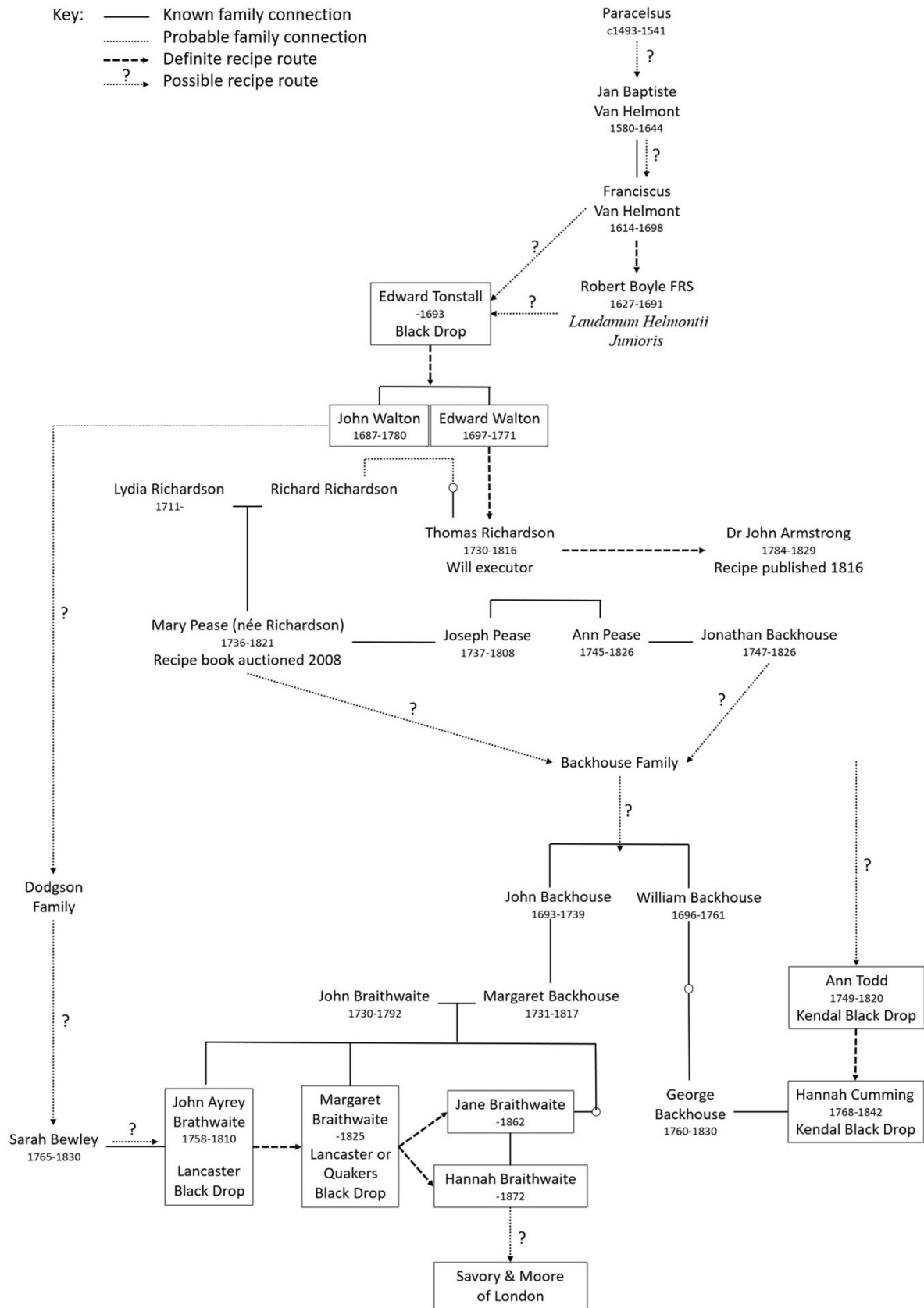


Figure 14. Known and surmised links in the development of Quaker's Black Drop.

Discussion: opium recipes and the influence of The Society of Friends

Over centuries the adaptation of raw opium into scores if not hundreds of liquid laudanum products, many little different from each other but staunchly defended by individual producers and their allies, was based partly on strong local traditions of herbalism and partly on long-held misconceptions of disease processes. Quaker's Black Drop is of particular interest for three reasons.

Firstly, its very name gave it an aura of mystique, even of sorcery, perhaps exacerbated by stories of its punctilious manufacture in secret, sometimes at night. Its tarry consistency compared to laudanum and several other cocktails and cordials, sold in small phials and accompanied by claims of potency and portent, was almost certainly part of the explanation of its success in a morass of competing preparations.

Secondly, unlike almost all other opiate mixtures, the Black Drop was always strongly associated with Quakers, the Society of Friends. Amongst the proliferation of dissenters from the seventeenth century, the Quakers rapidly developed a (usually much-deserved) reputation for probity, austerity and trustworthiness in business. Despite this attracting much custom and making many Quakers wealthy, they retained a demeanour and dress which demonstrated their personal frugality; unlike many successful businessmen of the period, very few portraits of Quakers were to be found.

The Black Drop was probably made and sold with benevolent intent, notwithstanding much bickering over originality. The Quakers valued their Society and this meant that both business and marriage would be conducted preferentially between Friends. This, together with a strong tradition of creating and passing on recipes for both foods and medicines, meant that the Black Drop recipe was passed primarily amongst Quakers, probably beginning with Edward Tonstall. Via the Waltons, Richardsons, Backhouses, Dodgsons and Brathwaites, the recipe was guarded but varied, until its first publication in 1816.

Thirdly, Black Drop appears to have been the first British liquid laudanum recipe to be sweetened with sugar, undoubtedly a key step in making the medicine more palatable and commercially successful.

Conclusion

This history of secrecy, claims, counterclaims and competition therefore hides an unavoidable conclusion: it is highly likely that all competing productions of the Black Drop evolved from the same recipe, and that any subtle claimed differences in composition and manufacture were probably insignificant. The wide variability in the concentration of opiates in raw opium meant that the potency of each batch was impossible to determine accurately. The acidity of the verjuice, vinegar or fruit acids (Ann Todd and Hannah Backhouse preferred crab apple juice) probably affected the solubility of the opium and its composition. Although yeast and a prolonged fermentation were features of Tonstall's original Black Drop recipe, these authors have found no indication that Hannah Backhouse used these in her recipe in the 1820s. Sugar was a constant feature in all the recipes; Backhouse frequently used both ordinary treacle and sugar for added sweetness, as shown above. The product, reduced to a highly

concentrated mixture, was potent and dangerous but probably so variable that dosing instructions were virtually useless.

The final irony, following two centuries of the sale of an opium preparation made, advertised and sold by Quakers, is that the Society of Friends were at the forefront of moral indignation against the China trade. This should not suggest hypocrisy; the original Black Drop was considered to offer true medical benefit, but it had become gradually clear that uncontrolled use of opium was devastating. The financial support, vehement denunciation and tenacity of Quakers in positions of influence were crucial in the final termination of the China Opium Trade.

This paper has elucidated the history of Quaker's Black Drop production as far as these authors have been able to achieve with currently available evidence. It places into historical context an opium-containing medicine, or liquid laudanum, which made claims of enhanced potency and was probably produced initially for local use but, from early in the nineteenth century, became widely available in England and beyond. Several questions remain unanswered.

Was Edward Tonstall, a provincial apothecary, well-read enough to obtain van Helmont's laudanum recipe from the Royal Society paper of Boyle, or did he obtain it directly from van Helmont at a Quaker meeting, or from another source? Why did Tonstall decide to vary that recipe? Did JA Brathwaite use the identical recipe, or modify it further? (No verifiable Brathwaite recipe has been found.) When did JA Brathwaite start to manufacture Black Drop? How potent was Black Drop? These authors suspect that all these questions shall remain unanswered.

Biographical details

Nicholas Jones FRCP FRCOphth is a retired ophthalmologist, previously consultant at Manchester Royal Eye Hospital and currently Honorary Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Manchester. A longstanding interest in medical history, particularly the early history of ophthalmology in England, led to the publication of a bicentenary history of his hospital in 2014. It was research into a planned biography of William Wilson, founder surgeon of the hospital and trained in part by John Ayrey Brathwaite, that led to further discoveries related to the Quaker's Black Drop.

Bryan Rhodes FRCS(Orth) DHMSA is a retired consultant orthopaedic surgeon in Lancaster and formerly sub-editor of the *Morecambe Bay Medical Journal*. He is a Member of the Faculty of History of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Society of Apothecaries and was appointed as an Apothecaries' Lecturer to Lancaster University in 2021. He is the current Chairman of the Lancaster Health and Medical Museum Collection, a charitable organisation dedicated to preserving Lancaster's medical heritage, and Vice-President and President Elect of the British Society for the History of Medicine.

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