

ACCIDENTAL POISONING

16TH SEPTEMBER 1883

This story describing the death of 7-year old Joseph Henry Curry, appeared in The Newcastle Courant on Friday 21st September 1883.

HEXHAM.

SAD CASE OF ACCIDENTAL POISONING. — On Sunday, a boy named Joseph Curry, between seven and eight years of age, living with his uncle, Mr Curry, of Middle Farm, near Chollerton, died from being accidentally poisoned. It seems that the boy has been ill several weeks, and during that period has been attended by four or five different medical gentlemen. Last week the child was attended by Mr Grant of Hamshaugh, and under his treatment he appeared to be making satisfactory progress. He made up two bottles for the child, one to be used as a lotion, and the other to be taken as medicine. On Sunday, Mr Curry's sister, who lives with him, gave the child a dose from the lotion instead of the medicine bottle, and it was not until some few hours later, on the child getting rapidly worse, that the mistake was discovered. The services of Mr Grant and Dr Farmer of Hexham were called in, and every effort was made to counteract the effects of the poison, but all to no purpose, and the child died on Sunday afternoon.—Mr Brewis Elsdon, deputy-coroner, held an inquest at the house of Mr J. Robson, Middle Farm, Chollerton, on Tuesday, touching the death of Joseph Henry Curry.—The jury returned a verdict that the deceased was poisoned by a liniment containing belladonna, inadvertently administered to him by his mother instead of medicine.—The Coroner, on behalf of the jury, recommended that all bottles containing poison should be labelled accordingly.

The event took place at Middle Farm, just off the A6079 between Chollerton and the A68. In 1881, the farm was worked by Joseph Robson and the Curry family had a cottage there. The uncle in the above report was Robert Curry, who was a stationary engine driver on the farm. Young Joseph Henry was the illegitimate son of Robert's sister, Eleanor Curry, who also lived in the house.

Doctor Grant

The 'doctor', who had attended Joseph Curry and prescribed the medicine and lotion, is named as Dr Grant of Humshaugh. The census shows this to be 26-year old Duncan Grant, a Scotsman, who lived in the village with his wife and young daughter, at the house of his mother-in-law, Jane Turnbull. Despite his title, he is described on the census as a medical assistant. In 1881, two years prior to the event, Duncan Grant was living on Battle Hill in Hexham. His near neighbours were George Bell and William R Riddle, who had founded the famous local chemist's business.

Thirty years later, Duncan Grant appeared on the 1911 census in Ferryhill, County Durham. By this time, he was 55 years old and is described as a Registered Medical Student, implying that he was never fully qualified. One must question his suitability, therefore, to attend a child, whose condition had already puzzled four or five other doctors.

Doctor Farmer

Like Duncan Grant in 1881, Doctor Cottenham Farmer lived, with his family, on Battle Hill in Hexham. Unlike Duncan Grant, however, Doctor Cottenham is described as a surgeon and this is followed by his qualifications. They were M.R.C.S England and L.R.C.P. Edinburgh, showing that he was a well-qualified medical practitioner.

On Tuesday 18th September, three days after Joseph Curry's death, the deputy coroner, Brewis Elsdon, held the inquest at the house of the farmer, Joseph Robson. The inquest papers do not seem to have survived, but the newspaper article tells us that the jury returned the verdict of accidental death, that the bottle containing the poison, belladonna, had been administered accidentally by the boy's mother. On behalf of the jury, the coroner recommended that bottles containing poison should be labelled accordingly.

As early as the 1850's, glass manufacturers were making special bottles to contain poison. For the benefit of the illiterate masses, who could not read labels, bottles were made with ridged surfaces and were also green or blue. Some even had a skull and crossbones embossed in the glass. It makes one wonder, therefore, how, in 1883, belladonna could be dispensed in a bottle that could be confused with one containing an oral medication.

The Curry Family

In 1891, the widower, Robert Curry, was still a stationary engine driver, living with his sister Eleanor. He still seems to have been working at Middle Farm, although they were living in Chollerton village. In 1896, Robert remarried, his bride being Isabella Davison from Brunton Bank. This is where the couple were living in 1911 with two daughters. Robert was still a stationary engine driver, but the extra detail on this census document tells us that he now worked for Northumberland County Council. Robert Curry died in 1923, at the age of 76.

Eleanor Curry, known as Ellen, never married, but did a variety of domestic jobs. In 1901, she was living at High Brunton and is described as a housekeeper. In 1911, the 67-year old was still at High Brunton, but was no longer working. She made her living by renting a room to two boarders. She died at the age of 79, in 1922, the year before her brother. One cannot fail to wonder how this woman coped with the knowledge that she had caused the death, albeit accidentally, of her little boy. Perhaps this is why she never married and had more children.

Jen Ogle 2013