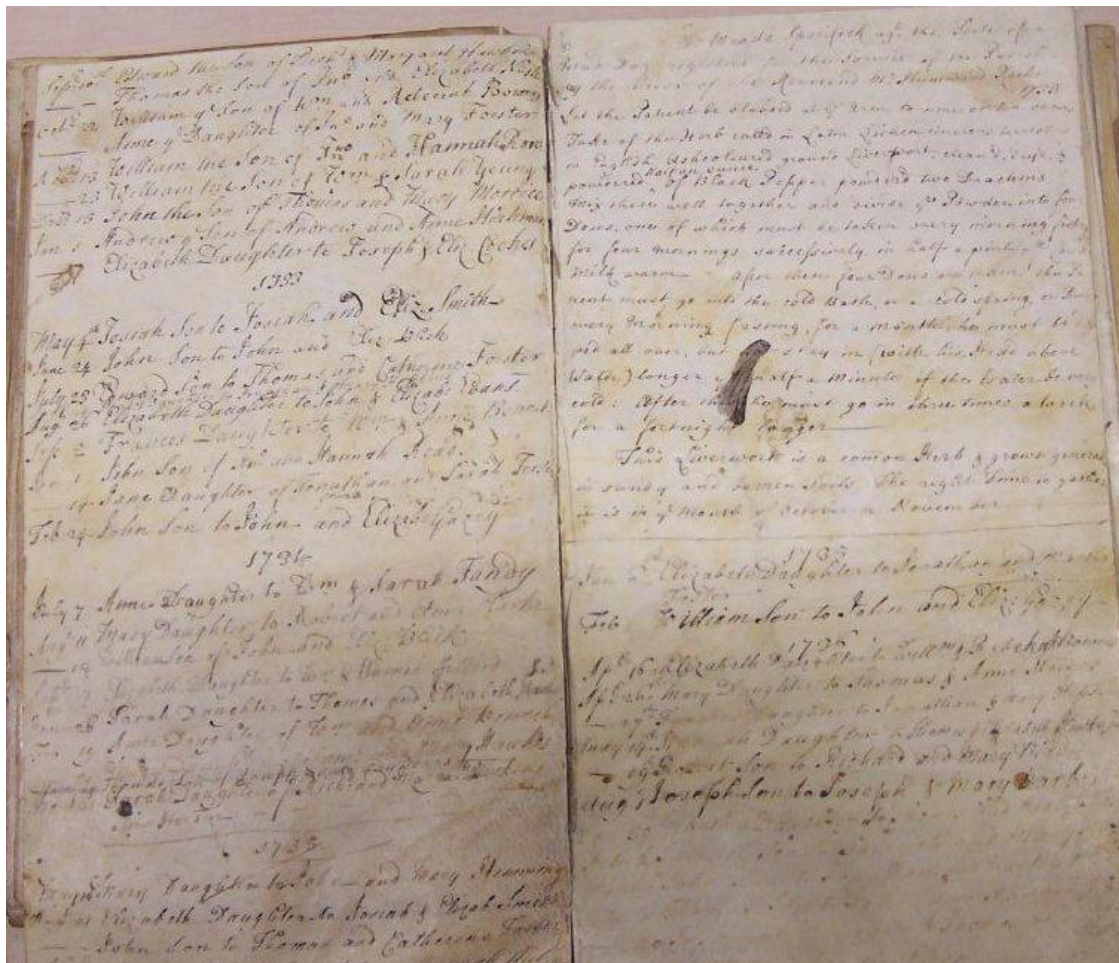


## Document of the Month - September 2012

### A Cure For The Bite Of A Mad Dog (DR 25/1)



It is not uncommon to find that parish registers, most notably those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, contain entries other than those recording baptisms, marriages and burials. More usually, these entries refer to current political events, albeit, these became rare after 1800. However, this particular entry in the composite register for St. Peter ad Vincula, Hampton Lucy in the year 1735 is exceptional, not just in the matter of the subject and its improbability as a treatment but also in the questions it raises. An obvious question was why was this treatment entered in the register, but others relate to the incidence of rabies in England and more particularly Warwickshire, and the proliferation of bizarre remedies in a society where medical knowledge was so limited.

#### **Dr Richard Mead and Folk Remedies**

Dr Richard Mead (1673-1754) was an English doctor who enjoyed great eminence during the opening and middle decades of the eighteenth century. His treatment for bites from mad dogs was apparently widely used not only in England but in the United States of America. Certainly it was included in a very famous cookery book by Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery* published in 1747 (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries recipes for food and medicine were frequently found together).

Much later in 1792 the treatment was denounced. A period of credibility lasting at least six decades, if not longer, clearly looks impressive but one factor among several bearing on this must have been because it was used on bites from dogs that were not rabid – after all, not all mad dogs were or are rabid. Herbalists then and indeed, now may have been convinced of the medicinal properties of the herb liverwort, but the robustness of the constitutions of so many victims of dog bites cannot be overlooked.

Mead's remedy was only one of many used to treat bites. Others included the use of ashes of seahorses or burnt hair from the tail of a rabid dog or bleeding with leeches. Many victims drowned following their submersion in a lake or river in the belief that the ensuing shock to their system would expel the disease. Often there was little to choose between the treatment proposed by doctors and those hawked about by charlatans. Notwithstanding this similarity, the vicar of St Peter's felt it was worthwhile having such information available in his register.

## **Rabies**

There is nothing in this register to suggest that there was a particular problem with vicious dogs in Hampton Lucy, or perhaps it was so commonplace it was not worth comment. Reference to the churchwardens' accounts offer no further explanation. Nevertheless, rabies has long excited great fear among communities everywhere in the world: the victims always died and always died horribly. The vast majority of rabies cases are contracted through the bite of a dog. Symptoms included acute pain, delirium, seizures, foaming at the mouth and a growing inability to swallow, thereby giving rise to the term hydrophobia. The turning point in the treatment of the disease came with Louis Pasteur's development of a vaccine in 1885. Even so, some 55,000 people in the world die this terrible death, and while we may marvel at Mead's treatment, rabies should still be regarded with the same dread as felt by our ancestors.