

The Bowsden Curers of Madness!

Eighteenth century Bowsden was fortunate to have within its midst Elenor Bell, a long serving midwife and the owner of a recipe for curing madness! With the help of her son John, a carpenter in Bowsden, she managed to cure people with maniacal symptoms in the village and the surrounding area.

A manuscript dated 26 January 1789, currently for sale for £1,500 by Michael Kemp, Bookseller, provides the details:

The following is a List of persons cured of Maniacal Symptoms by John Bell Carpenter at Bowsden Northumberland & his late mother who was midwife in that village for thirty three years.

1. The Parsons Son of Bamborough	14. Jane Atkinson Holburn	27. W[illia]m Ainsley Yetholm
2. Ann Selby Holy Island	15. Mary Pigdon Glangton	28. Ann Young Crook House
3. Herds Son Scrammerston	16. Robert Hill Anncroft	29. Jane Newall Tweedmouth
4. Mary Hutton Doddington	17. Robert Hill Bowsden	30. Eleanora Rutherford Tweedmouth
5. James Lindsay Alnwick	18. One at Hunting hall	31. Jane Allan, Spittle
6. William Sinclair	19. One at Newham	32. John Sharp Warnsford
7. Mr Dodds Sister Berwick	20. One at Melrose	33. One in Fife shire
8. Collops Barber ditto [Berwick]	21. Mrs Pringle Trowburn	34. Mrs Henderson Charlton
9. Tho[ma]s Logans daughter Wooler	22. James Dixon Bowsden	35. Miss Moscrop
10. Jane Burn, Broomridge	23. John Wake Bowsden	36. Miss Brown
11. Eleonore Pringle Fenton	24. Eliz[abeth] Laing Tweedmouth	37. Mr. McDougall
12. Ann Angus Horncliff	25. Aimy Wallace Yetholm	
13. Mary Pattison Kimmerston	26. Marg[aret] Hall Kirkyetholm	

The above is attested by me John Bell, Berwick 26th Jan[uar]y 1789

On the adjoining page:

This is to certify that John Bell of Bowsden in the County of Northumberland has been employed by me for some years as a carpenter and I consider him to be a sober honest man. He holds a recipe for the curing of madness which sometime ago I understand belonged to a Lady Clinton and I know no reason to doubt of its being a very good one.

Bowsden Febr[uar]y 9th 1789

Tho[ma]s Pinkerton

How much of the above document can be verified? It is presumed that the John Bell who signed the document is the same as the John Bell who lived in Bowsden.

John's mother, Elenor Bell, was indeed a midwife in Bowsden. She died on 20 July 1784, aged 73, having dictated her will the day before her death, in front of witnesses William Bell and William Smith. She left all her personal estate to John, her sole executor, subject to a number of monetary bequests to her daughters and grandchildren. There was no mention of the recipe. She made her mark instead of writing her name, probably due to poor health rather than a lack of education. Despite the bequests to her daughters being due within twelve months of her death, the will was not proved until 15 January 1790. Elenor was buried at Lowick and John erected a headstone in memory of her.



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This stone was erected by JOHN BELL in Bowsdon in memory of his mother ELENOR BELL a midwife in Bowsdon who died July 20th 178?4 aged 73 years.

John's death is not recorded on this headstone but he may be the John Bell, a Joiner in Bowsden, who died in 1807, aged 66, and was buried at Lowick according to the Bishops Transcripts. On the rear of the stone, facing the church, is written

*In memory of JOSEPH BELL who died at Bowsdon 9th March 1852 aged 79 years.
JANE BELL his wife died at Yeavinger 29th Feb. 1872 aged 88 years.*

Joseph was possibly John's son.

Despite Bell being a common surname in Bowsden and Barmoor, by the early 1700s, it has not been possible to find Elenor's marriage nor establish how she was related to the other Bell families.

Thomas Pinkerton of Bowsden, who gave the character reference, was a member of the Pinkerton family of Reedsford, Kirknewton. He leased Bowsden Hall and Bowsden

Moor Farms from Mr Carr of Elyhaugh, near Felton and Hunting Hall Farm from the Haggerston family at Ellingham. In his will dated 1797 and proved in 1802, Thomas left the leases to his sons, James and William. One of his witnesses and executors was James Bell of Woodside.

It is not known how and when Elenor acquired the recipe nor who Lady Clinton was. What did it consist of and what were the symptoms that it aimed to cure? Did the Bells travel to the patients or did the latter send for the remedy? The range of parishes covered is quite striking. Three people were cured in Bowsden but no-one in Lowick, other than one case at Hunting Hall. Did the residents of Lowick have no use for such a cure or did they consult someone else?

Dating the cures is problematic as the surnames in the list are either too common or the entry not detailed enough, but a John Wake of Bowsden was buried at Kyloe in October 1780 and a James Dixon of Bowsden was buried at Ford in August 1786. A Dispensary at Bamburgh Castle opened in 1772, as a charitable institution set up to treat the poor. In 1778, 29 cases of psychological or mental disorders were treated there. Would Elenor have been consulted by the Parson's son, number one on the list, after 1772? We may never know!

Sources

<https://www.michaelkemp.co.uk/products/author/BELL;>

<http://familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/> northeastern inheritance database Elenor Bell, 1784; Thomas Pinkerton, 1792

Newcastle Courant 3 May 1800; Lowick, Ford and Kyloe Burial Bishop's Transcripts; <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

Vickers, Kenneth, *A History of Northumberland v11*, (1922) pp 203 – 204, Pinkerton family tree.

The Bell headstone inscription, survey carried out by Volunteers of the Archives in 2016

Withey, Alun, *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 29, No. 3 pp. 467–489 *Medicine and Charity in Eighteenth-century, Northumberland: The Early Years of the Bamburgh Castle Dispensary and Surgery, c. 1772–1802*

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