

A Brief History of the King's Evil

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A DISTRESSING CONDITION, scrofula was common amongst the medieval populace. It was also known as 'the King's Evil'.

Medically, it is a tuberculous infection of lymph nodes, resulting in swelling of the side of the neck and induration of the skin. This was said to resemble the cheek pouches of a sow, scrofa being the Latinisation of the Greek for that animal.¹ As late as the last century some textbooks of medicine referred to tuberculosis as 'Scrofulosis'. Painful and disfiguring, the condition was frequently also lethal, not only because of the tubercle bacillus itself, but also due to the size of the mass, which might become large enough to compress such vital structures as the trachea or the major arteries to the brain.

Why 'the King's Evil'? There is a long tradition of a variety of diseases, including epilepsy, having been cured by such notable personages as Roman emperors, Popes, other prelates and saints. Indeed, scrofula is known in some manuscripts as St. Marcoult's Disease, after the shrine at Corbigny where cures were effected. There is however, a fairly consistent record of scrofula having been treated by the touch of a royal hand, usually that of a reigning monarch. Consequently, it is known as 'the King's Evil', and its cure as 'the royal touch'.

The earliest recorded English king to show this ability to cure was Edward the Confessor, though the French insist on an earlier claim with Clovis in the fifth century. The saintly Edward was presented with a woman complaining of a foul mass in the neck. In compassion, he reached out to her to touch it, signing it with a cross. With that, the scab fell away and 'worms and bloody matter' were extruded.² A week later, the woman had 'a perfect appearance', the king having paid for her upkeep in the meantime. William of Malmesbury records that though previously barren, she gave birth to twins a year after.³ From the available manuscripts, it would seem that this case was unique, the Confessor never attempting such a cure again.

There are no records for the Norman kings, and those for Henry II and Henry III are sparse.⁴ The first two Plantagenet Edwards are better served, their household books having been preserved. Edward III touched about 500 people annually, as can be seen from the Exchequer Treasury Receipts, for he gave them each a penny.⁵

Thereafter, from Edward III to Henry VII, no direct references to 'the touch' are to be found, but it can be inferred that this power was exercised from sources such as Sir John Fortescue. In Scotland with the exiled Henry VI after Towton, he wrote two tracts of propaganda for dissemination in England, refuting the claim of the House of York to the crown. He implied that there was no break in the use of the prerogative of the 'royal touch' between Henry IV and Henry VI, and being a Yorkist, Edward IV could not possibly have any such miraculous gifts.⁶ He recanted all, however, on realising that Edward was firmly on the throne.

There are no extant records for Edward IV, but it is likely that he continued to touch, as a seal of approval on his kingship.

The one available report that suggests that Richard III treated the 'King's Evil' comes from the accounts of the miracles performed at the tomb of Henry VI, collected during the reign of Henry VII. Agnes Freman was afflicted with the disease in 1484, but her parents refused to take her to Richard, saying they would ask no favours of a usurper! Indeed, they vowed a pilgrimage to the tomb of the late king, still at Chertsey.⁷

Henry VII made much of the ceremonial attached to the 'touch', expanding it and using it as a means of asserting his right to the throne. To someone as miserly as this king, the giving of an angel (6s 8d) to his suppliants, presumably continuing the practise of his Yorkist predecessors, must have hurt, but that he did so gives some idea of the importance he attached to the proceedings.

His descendants continued the practise of touching, further elaborating the ritual, though there are no records available for the reign of Edward VI. A letter in the Venetian Archives records that Mary Tudor instructed her recipients never to part with their gold angel, 'save in case of extreme need'.⁸ As for Elizabeth, she would touch the poor without restriction, but the wealthy only when all else had failed. James I and VI tried to stop the tradition as superstition, but was persuaded otherwise, and thereafter it began a slow decline, except for Charles II. The last English monarchs to touch for the 'King's Evil' were Queen Anne and George I.

The French tradition adds little to the story, though a notable incident occurred in August, 1589, at St. Cloud, when Henri III was murdered by a monk, disguised as a patient, and with a knife concealed in his sleeve.⁹ Even after this, applicants were not searched before being admitted to the sovereign's presence until twenty years later, when security around the king became more rigorous after the assassination of Henri IV.¹⁰ The last French ceremony was a revival in 1824 for the coronation of Charles X.¹¹ Present on this occasion was the famous surgeon, Dupuytren, commemorated these days by a type of muscle contracture of the palm of the hand.

In his *Rosa Anglica*, John of Gaddesden writes that a surgeon should only be sought in the last resort if the king failed. This was not to suggest that the surgeon was superior, but that surgery was so very hazardous.¹² He was writing in about 1314!

None of the reports offer any explanation for this ability of the monarch to effect the cure of this awful disease, other than the obvious one of a 'miracle', the power being transferred at the crowning by the anointing with the holy chrism, and thus belonging to the royal house. Sir John Fortescue even went so far as to

state that the power was a 'kingly gift', since queens consort were not anointed on the hands.¹³ Such reasoning was quite understandable in an age when medicine was but poorly understood, if at all. Only a proportion of the sick recovered their health, and sometimes only incompletely and temporarily. Also, the cure might not have occurred until some time after the rite. A modern explanation does exist for some of the cures. Tuberculous lymph nodes often become sterile, and a form of immunity develops. The contents then shrink and healing is by fibrosis, the formation of fibrous scar tissue, which then contracts.¹⁴ Sometimes, however, the abscess formed in the lymph tissue erupts onto the surface of the skin, spontaneously discharging its contents. Healing again takes place by fibrosis. This does not however, account for that earliest of the English traditions, where Edward the Confessor's patient was 'perfect' after only a week.

Of necessity, this account of the history of 'the King's Evil' has been brief, even though extending beyond fifteenth century England. If the reader wishes more, he is recommended the excellent books by Crawford and Bloch, both of which have been extensively drawn upon for this paper. Sadly, both are now out of print, but can be obtained through specialist libraries. I am indebted to the Royal Society of Medicine for their assistance.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Stanley Rubin. *Medieval English Medicine* (David and Charles 1974), p.87.
4. Crawford *op. cit.*, p.24.
5. Crawford *op. cit.*, p.40.
6. Marc Bloch. *The Royal Touch* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973), p.65.
7. P. Grosjean (ed.). *Henrici VI Angliae Regis Miracula Postuma ex Codice Musei Britannici Regio 13, C VIII*, no. 6. as quoted in Brian Spencer, King Henry of Windsor and the London Pilgrim. *Collectanea Londiniensia*, Special Paper No. 2, London and Middlesex Archaeological Society 1978, p.241.
8. Crawford *op. cit.*, p.67.
9. Ambroise Paré. *Apologie and Treatise* (Dover Publications, Inc., New York 1968), p.xx.
10. Plantagenet Somerset Fry. *History of the World* (Hamlyn 1972), p.343.
11. Crawford *op. cit.*, p.161.
12. Bloch *op. cit.*, p.69.
13. Crawford *op. cit.*, p.45.
14. A. D. Thomson and R. E. Cotton, *Lecture Notes on Pathology* (Blackwell 1968), pp.58-64.