

# Ginger wine and the Band of Hope

Pennant Roberts recalls an era when consumers used to ask pharmacists to make their own extemporaneous preparations

In the weeks before Christmas many of my customers would bring their recipes for me to make up. The preparations I was most often asked to produce were embrocations, hand creams and cough mixtures. Frequently, I would be presented with little more than a scribbled list of ingredients, the quantities expressed in forms of everyday currency. For example, "olive oil, threepenn' orth, benzoic acid, sufficient to cover a sixpence, ipecacuanha (usually written as ipec) — a small wineglassful." And every year, I would look out for the neatly penned formulations of the local Methodist minister's wife; let's call her Hilda.

As autumn surrendered to winter, Hilda's first envelope would arrive on the dispensary bench. It was for her personally formulated hand lotion. The notepaper was probably Basildon Bond. It bore her address and her copperplate signature at the bottom. Actually, the recipe was unremarkable, consisting of, as I remember it, six drams of glycerin, six drams of rose water and distilled water to four fluid ounces.

Usually when collecting the preparation, the devout lady would announce to all within earshot what a wonderful safeguard it was against chapped skin. Displaying her lily white hands for brief inspection, she would add how much better — and cheaper — it was than any of the advertised products on the market.

In the corner of her transcript, near my rubber stamp, was the coded price I had calculated for making up the product some six or seven years previously, ie, "b/s c/v", which according to our Bishopgate and Latin conventions, represented 1/3d (bottle included — cum vial). By then, the practice of making up such recipes had long ceased to provide any profit. They were mostly a gesture of goodwill.

## Tussi Nost

Hilda would bring me her second envelope towards the end of November. This was for her standby cough mixture, which she called Tussi Nost. All the ingredients could be legally supplied at the time. Chlorodyne and paregoric (tinctures of chloroform and morphine, and camphorated opium, respectively) were not restricted sale items. A dram of each of these, together with tincture of ipecacuanha, were added to a fluid ounce of liquid extract of glycyrrhiza (liquorice) and supplied in an eight ounce container made to volume with water.

Some 30 years ago there were fewer rules and regulations to worry about. At all levels



within the medical professions naivety was commonplace. It was as though addiction to opiates was an acceptable part of life, even in the most respectable circles.

Oddly enough, it was Hilda's third envelope that eventually started the difficulties. At the beginning of December she would come to the counter and pass to me her recipe for homemade ginger wine essence. In common with several other regular customers, her blend of ingredients enjoyed the status of a family heirloom. The constituents and quantities varied from one household to another but the foundation of the traditional Christmas drink could be summarised as follows:

Strong tincture of ginger	240 minims
Tincture of capsicum	180 minims
Tartaric acid	360 grains
Solution of burnt sugar	2 fluid ounces
Water to	4 fluid ounces

My customers would convey this — or a similar essence — home for the final process. In the above formulation four pounds of sugar was boiled up in about six and a quarter pints of water to dissolve. This was strained and, when cold, the ginger concentrate would be added. After shaking well, the mixture was bottled. This could provide, perhaps, the equivalent of five and a half cordial bottles of the warming brew for consumption over the festive season. As I remember it,

Hilda's particular recipe catered for close to a dozen flagons.

## No more ginger wine

I cannot recall when the directive came through the post that the officers of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise had drawn attention to the stipulation that only alcoholic tinctures used to dispense medicinal preparations were exempt from duty. The formulating of ginger wine essences, it stated, was an evasion of the payment of spirit tax. So the practice of making up such recipes had to stop.

Hilda seemed puzzled when I confronted her with the news. She didn't understand what I meant by spirit duty. As the truth dawned on her, I became aware that standing before me was a daughter of The Band of Hope, a staunch member of the temperance movement. "Y-you m-mean," she stammered, "we've been drinking an alcoholic beverage all these years?"

She almost snatched the offending paper from my hand and departed. Would she ever forgive me? I considered it pointless to mention that her Christmas tipple probably contained less than 0.5 per cent alcohol.

Another year would elapse before I needed to explain to Hilda that supplying medicines containing chlorodyne and paregoric without a prescription was now regarded as undesirable because they contained ingredients that were classed as drugs of addiction.

**Pennant Roberts, MRPharmS**, is a locum community pharmacist who lives in Altrincham, Cheshire