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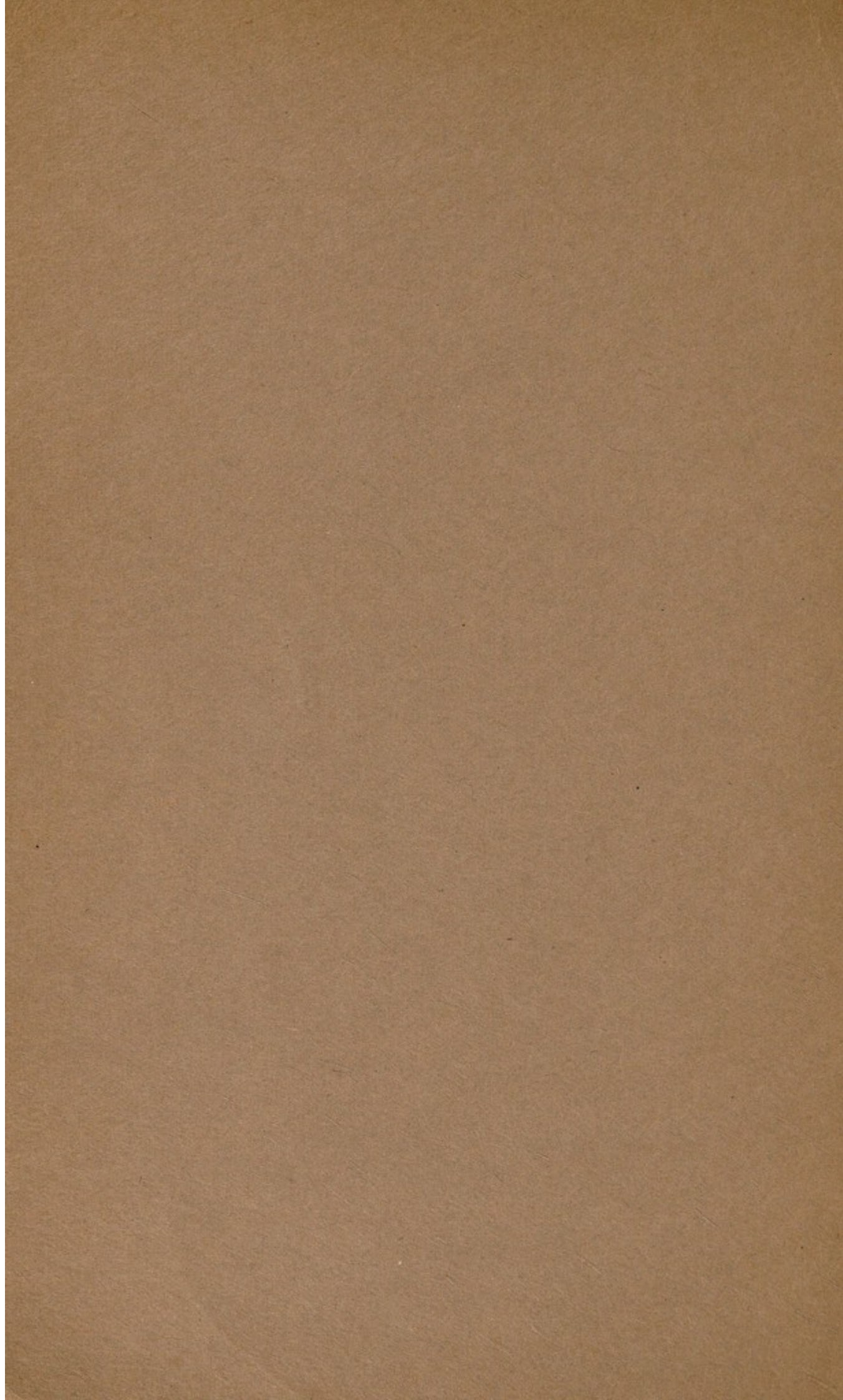
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PILLS AND THEIR HISTORY.

By C. J. S. THOMPSON, M.B.E.
(Curator of the Wellcome Historical
Medical Museum.)



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OF the many and varied forms of medication that have been used throughout the centuries, the pill has probably been the most popular, and remains to-day a very common medium for administering solid medicine. Although not the most ancient form of medication known, it is of considerable antiquity, and can be traced back over a period of 1,500 years before the Christian era.



FIG. I.

"AN APOTHECARY MAKING PILLS:" FROM A XVTH
CENTURY DRAWING. (*Copyright*).

Pills appear to have had their origin in the electuary, a mixture of certain drugs in powder, combined with honey and brought to the consistence of a soft paste.

The Papyrus Ebers, which is believed to date from about 1552 B.C., contains several formulæ for electuaries, usually directed to be taken in small pieces, the size of a lentil. It is quite probable that such fragments may have been rolled between the fingers into a spherical form to aid deglutition.

Electuaries appear to have been a favourite form of medication also with the early Greeks. As these preparations were so nauseous to take, it apparently became the custom to roll a small quantity into a little ball which was swallowed whole, and the instructions generally given were to take a piece the size of a bean.

A form of medication called Catapotia by the Romans, and described by Celsus (A.D. 50) was of the same consistence as an electuary, and directions given for the administration of the formulæ he records are as follows:— "The size of a lentil is sufficient to be taken." "Take a piece the size of an Egyptian bean." "The dose is as much as may be taken up upon the point of the finger."

The Egyptian bean seems to have been taken as a standard, although later on Galen alludes to a dose being taken "the size of a dried pea," and other writers record the "size of an almond, an Egyptian bean and coccus, or lentil bean."

By this time a name had been given to the fragments which represented a dose of the medicament, and we find the names Globulus and Glomeramus, taking the place of Catapotia. Pliny (ca A.D. 50) was probably the first to use the word Pilula, which he refers to in the passage "*Pharmaca illa globulos conformata vulgo pilulae meminamus.*"

In the Syriac Book of Medicines, a collection of medical treatises written about the 12th century, a number of formulæ for pills are included, and the directions for making some of them are interesting.

Some pills prescribed for shortness of breath and asthma, which contained sulphur, absinthe, incense and other substances, are directed to be "pounded and worked up with vinegar and made into pills the size of beans." Another direction is to make the mass into pills about the size of peppercorns, while in other cases pills the weight of two drachms are ordered.

Among the formulæ for pills, which number twenty, in the Syriac manuscripts, perhaps the most curious are Lambs' Tongue Pills, the ingredients of which were not so innocent as the name would imply. They were composed of burnt pepper, burnt copper, verdigris, smelter's dross, tincture of arsenic, unslaked lime, crocus and opium.

These ingredients are directed to be thoroughly crushed and mixed with extract of lambs' tongue, and made into pills, each containing four drachms.

The name *Pil Cocchia*, which is still applied to pills of colocynth and aloes, was originated by the Greco-Roman physicians.

Another ancient formula is *Pil. Rufi*, which is now known as the pill of myrrh and aloes. It was originally a *Hiera*, that is, a mixture of drugs in powder, usually containing aloes, or colocynth, like the *Hiera Picra*. It is said to have been invented by Rufus of Ephesus, who lived in the reign of Trajan. The *Hiera* of Rufus was first prepared in the form of pills by the Arabs, and was called by Avicenna, *Pilulæ Pestilenciales*.

Writing in the XIIIth century, Actuarius states, "What the Greeks called *Catapotia*, the Romans know as *Pilulæ*."

Only four formulæ for pills are given in the "*Antidotarium*" of Nicolas the Salernitan, written in the XIVth century, but in the "*Dispensarium*" by Nicolas Prepositus, which was first printed in 1491, and was the forerunner of our pharmacopœias, there are sixty-one formulæ for pills, some of which contain a large number of ingredients. Among these are the *Pill Agregator*, for instance, which contains twenty-eight different drugs.

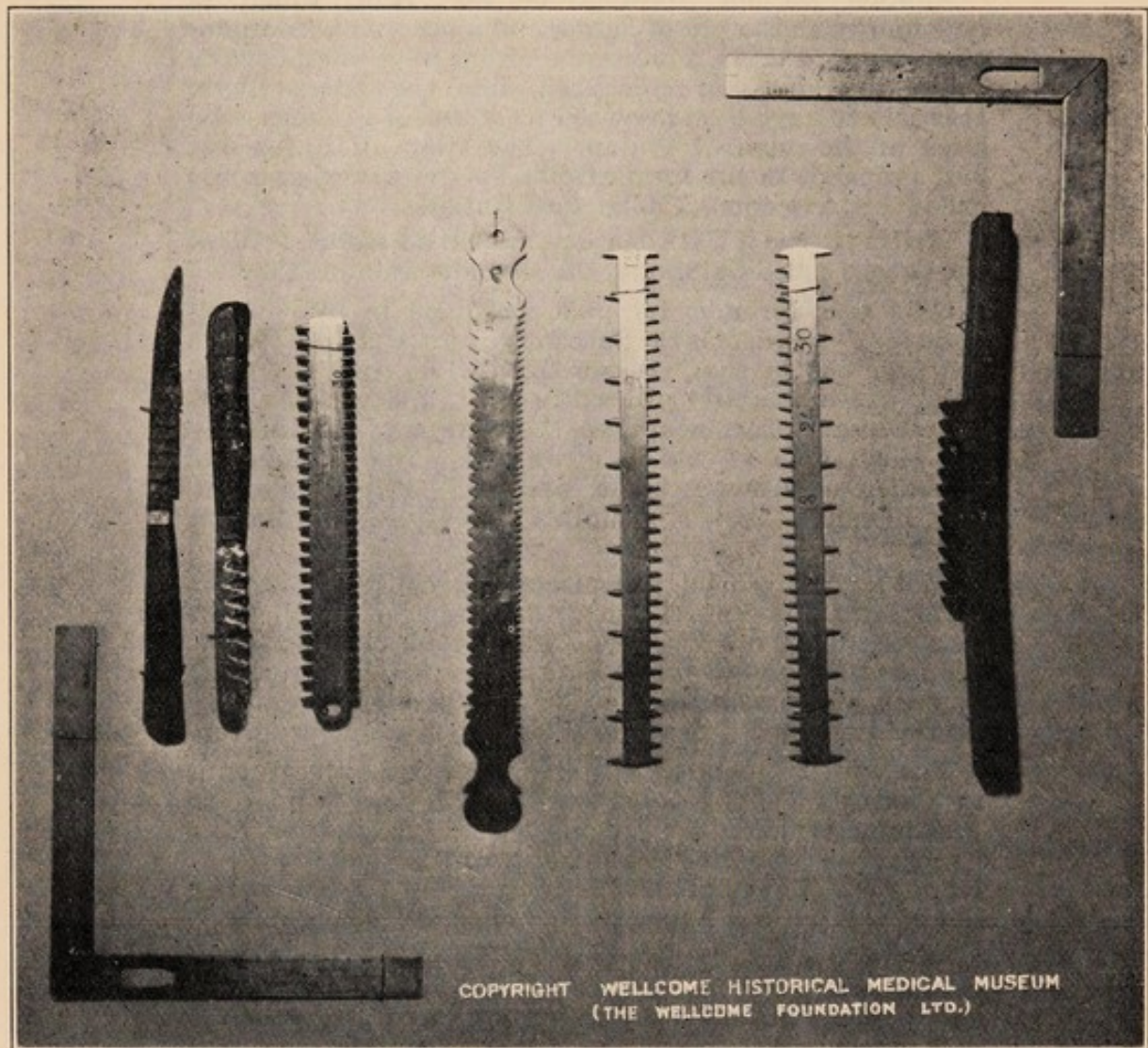
In the first official pharmacopœia, called the *Nuovo Receptario Compostum*, which was published in Florence in 1498, there are fifty-one different formulæ for pills. As time went on the pill appears to have become still more popular, until we find in the "*Pharmacopœia Universalis*," printed in 1833, no less than 234 different formulæ are given.

The earliest mention of pills in English literature is in Caxton's "*Fable of Poge*," which was printed at Westminster in 1484. In this work he alludes to a "*phisycyen* who had a seruaunt whiche made pylles." During the XVth and XVIth centuries in English works, the word is variously spelt *pylle*, *pille*, *pyll*, *pil* and *piele*.

Of the dosage of pills Francesco Manetti says:—"It has been observed by physicians in the XVth centuries and earlier, that uneven numbers such as 5 or 7, given in pills or potions are more efficacious than even numbers, in the treatment of their patients." This ancient tradition concerning the number 7, which was regarded as sacred, can be traced back to the early incantations used in connection with the treatment of disease over a thousand years before the Christian era.

In the XVth and XVIth centuries the method of working drugs into a pill mass was probably by manipulation with a spatula on a slab or piece of marble.

The mass was then rolled and cut into pieces and moulded in the fingers according to the size required, as depicted in figure 1, which represents an apothecary of the XVth century making pills. We know that in the XVIIth century, the London apothecaries used a pill tile or slab for this purpose, which was either square, octagonal



COLLECTION OF PILL DIVIDERS AND PILL KNIVES, XVIIIth CENTURY, IN THE WELLCOME HISTORICAL MEDICAL MUSEUM.

or heart-shaped. These tiles, of which there are several specimens in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, were made of London delft, and bore the arms of the Apothecaries' Society in blue and sometimes other colours. They were known as apothecaries' pill tiles.

The pill tile survived until the middle of the 19th century, some having a scale graduated on the surface indicating the divisions for cutting the piped mass into six or twelve 5-grain pills.

As drugs of a more powerful nature came to be employed in medicine, it became necessary to secure greater accuracy in dividing, than by mere guessing with the eye. Pills were made smaller and from the size of a bean were reduced to five or six grains in weight.

The graduated pill divider came into use at the end of the XVIIIth century, and was made of a flat piece of brass or steel with a dentated edge on both sides, by means of which the rolled mass could be marked for cutting into pills of the required size. The earliest of these in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum is a French divider dated 1712, which is 7ins. long and 1in. wide. Both edges are dentated, with divisions for making twenty-four and forty-eight pills.

Another divider of brass is 10ins. long by 1in. wide. This is also dentated, one edge having divisions for thirty-six pills and the other for making twelve. About the middle of the XVIIIth century a combined pill cutter and divider was introduced. This had a blade about 7ins. long, the upper part being slightly curved and sharp on one side for cutting, while the lower part of the blade was divided into grooves for marking the divisions of the piped mass before cutting. This implement had a wooden handle. A later type of pill cutter consisted of a piece of wood about 9ins. long, in the centre of which twelve brass blades were fixed, and placed at equal distances for cutting the rolled mass.

The pill machine now employed was originally made entirely of wood, and appears to have come into use in the early part of the XVIIIth century, and with slight improvements has survived to the present day.

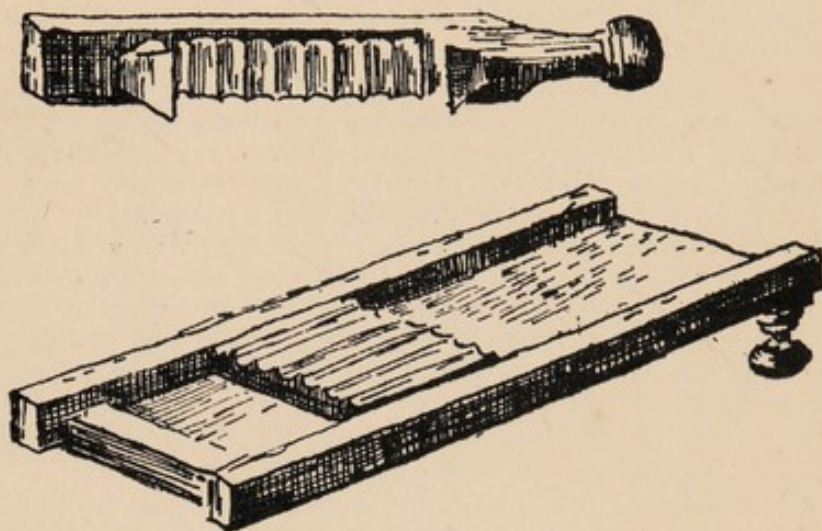
Some curious names are given to certain pills included in the Pharmacopœias of the 16th and 17th centuries. Among these may be mentioned the " Angelic Pill," which contained aloes, chicory, endive, fumatory, damask roses, rhubarb, agaric and cinnamon.

There were also the " Golden Pills," which did not contain the precious metal as one might suppose, but were composed of aloes, scammony, rose petals, smallage, fennel, anise, mastic, saffron, Alhandel lozenges and spirit. These pills were celebrated for their reputed property of preserving the eyesight.

" Amber pills " was the name given to another famous formula consisting of amber, birthwort, mastic, ambergris and aloes.

Perhaps the most curious of all was the "Everlasting Pill," which is mentioned in Gray's Supplement to the Pharmacopœia as late as 1848. It consisted of a small globule of metallic antimony, which was believed to have the property of purging as often as it was swallowed. Paris says, "We have heard of a lady who having swallowed one of these pills became seriously alarmed at its non-recovery. "Madam," said her physician, "Fear not. It has already passed through a hundred patients without any difficulty."

Probably the largest amount ever paid for a prescription for pills was that given to Joanna Stephens in 1739 for the formula for her remedy for the stone. This prescription was purchased from her by the Government by Act of Parliament passed in 1739.



A WOODEN PILL MACHINE OF THE EARLY XVIIIth CENTURY

She stated she had received the prescription from her late husband, and as the remedy became very popular among fashionable people of the time, a movement was started in 1738 to buy the recipe from her, by voluntary subscription, for the benefit of the public. She expressed her willingness to sell it for £5,000. The subscription list, however, only totalled £1,356 3s. od. so influence was brought to bear on the Government and early in the following year a special Act of Parliament was passed by which Mrs. Stephens received £5,000 for her so-called discovery, particulars of which were published in the London Gazette on June 19th, 1739.

Her preparation chiefly consisted of lime obtained by calcining egg and snail shells, which were made into pills

with soap. These were to be taken with a decoction composed of camomile flowers, parsley, burdock and sweet fennel.

A mysterious pill was mentioned in the *North China Herald* some years ago. The account stated that rumours were being circulated that the Emperor of China was ill, and it was said that his illness was due to a certain Red Pill, which had been given to him by one of his ministers. It further stated that this Red Pill was invented in the Ming dynasty, and whoever swallowed it became subservient to the will of the giver.

The greatest pill taker on record appears to have been one Jessup, a worthy grazier of Hickington, who died in Lincoln in 1814 at the age of 65. For 21 years he took pills at the rate of 29 a day, which number he increased to 78 towards the latter part of his life. In 21 years he is stated to have swallowed 226,934 pills and drank 40,000 bottles of mixture, which were all supplied by an apothecary of Bottesford, who sued Jessup for the bill at the Lincoln Assizes shortly before he died.

The fashion of taking Dinner Pills became common in the late XVIIIth and XIXth centuries. Dinner Pills were generally composed of aloes, mastic, extract of wormwood and other ingredients. Many of the fashionable physicians of the period had their special formulæ for these pills, which they prescribed for their lady patients. The latter were apparently so pleased with their action and efficacy, that they recommended them broadcast to their friends, and so the pills became associated with the name of the ladies for whom they were originally prescribed. Thus we have the pills of Lady Webster, Lady Hesketh, Lady Crespigny and many others. Lady Crespigny's pills had the addition of red rose leaves.

Other formulæ for pills of a similar kind became associated with the names of their prescribers, and some of these are well known to dispensers in the West End of London to-day.

The coating of pills with gold or silver leaf is said to have been originated by the Arabs in the time of Avicenna, and is thought by some to have been done not so much to render them tasteless, as for the medicinal properties of these precious metals. Pill coating with sugar does not appear to have been originated until the latter half of the XIXth century, and this was followed by coating with gelatine and French chalk. From that time pill coating has developed into quite an art in itself, which has practically grown into an industry.

Many fortunes have been made out of pills, and it is only necessary to mention the names of Lockyer, Morrison, Cockle, Holloway and Beecham to show what has been achieved with a very simple formula and unlimited advertising.

The following lines are inscribed on the tomb of Lionel Lockyer, of pill fame in St. Saviour's Church, Southwark. He flourished in the time of Charles II :—

“ His virtues and his pills are so well known,
That envy can't confine them under stone.”

He thus found a means of advertising his wares even on his tombstone.

