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Possible sources of therapeutic stone powder from North West Europe

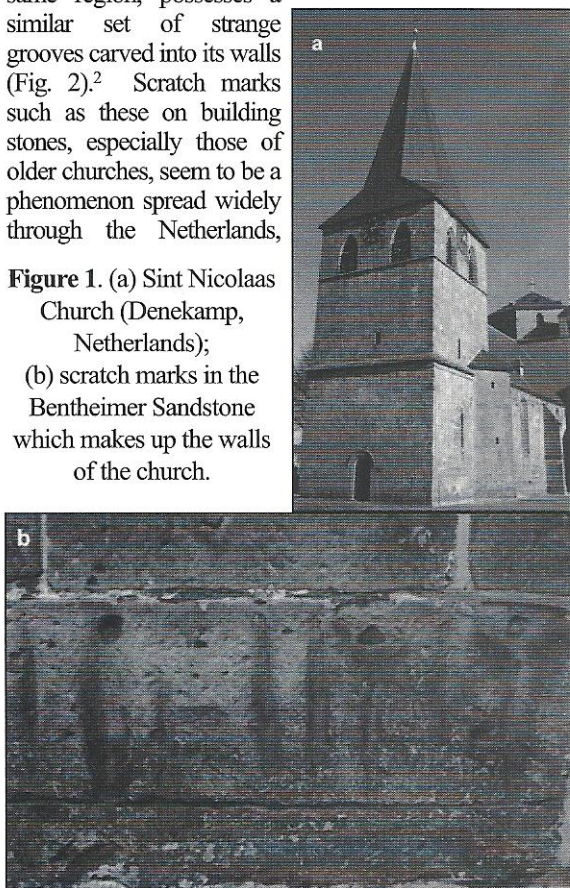
Jan Weertz¹, Els Weertz¹ and CJ Duffin²

¹Ter Schuur, Netherlands, ²Sutton, Surrey

Scratch marks on building stones: nature and distribution

The church of Sint Nicolaas, parts of which date back to the 13th century, in the Dutch village of Denekamp (situated in Twente, near the German/Dutch border), like many others in the region, is made of Bentheimer Sandstone. A number of deep, parallel vertical grooves cut in the shape of a boat have been scratched into the walls of the church (Fig. 1). The Plechelmuskerk in Oldenzaal,¹ which dates back to the 12th century, in the same region, possesses a similar set of strange grooves carved into its walls (Fig. 2).² Scratch marks such as these on building stones, especially those of older churches, seem to be a phenomenon spread widely through the Netherlands,

Figure 1. (a) Sint Nicolaas Church (Denekamp, Netherlands); (b) scratch marks in the Bentheimer Sandstone which makes up the walls of the church.



Germany and Belgium, with further examples also known from France and Britain. The background survey completed for the preparation of this paper has so far documented over 210 sites displaying such scratch marks.³

The marks themselves (Fig. 3) can be divided into three rough groups: (1) long (15 cm to 30 cm), narrow and shallow (circa 3 mm) grooves; (2) shorter (10 cm to 20 cm long), deeper (up to 5 cm deep) grooves scratched in a boat-like shape; (3) spherical hollows (cups or wells) measuring up to 10 cm in diameter and 7 cm deep.



Figure 2. (a) Plechelmuskerk (Oldenzaal, Netherlands). Parts of the church belong to the 12th century; (b) scratch marks in the Bentheimer Sandstone which makes up the walls of the church.

Churches and other buildings are usually constructed of local building stones which vary in type according to the underlying geology, ease of accessibility and extraction, and physical characteristics. In the area under consideration, scratches are particularly common in a wide variety of Triassic, Cretaceous and Tertiary sandstones, and soft 'marl' from Limburg and its environs. Harder lithologies such as Lower Carboniferous limestones have received limited attention, the scratch marks being nearly always small, narrow and shallow. In a few rare cases, marks have been made in igneous rocks: tuffs are consolidated, water-lain volcanic ashes and, being soft, have been worked to give long, deep marks as in various sandstones and 'marl'. Basalt is a hard intrusive rock displaying scratch marks similar to those in Lower Carboniferous limestones.

Most scratch marks have been produced on the external walls of churches. The internal walls have also been worked in this way, with scratches found on the inner surfaces of structural walls, on pillars, near the confessional box and beside the font. Outside the church, scratch marks have been found on a limited number of gravestones and roadside crosses.⁴ In a few locations they are present on smooth natural rock surfaces. At several localities, some scratch marks (though, interestingly, not usually all of them) have been filled with cement, possibly by church authorities seeking to protect the walls.

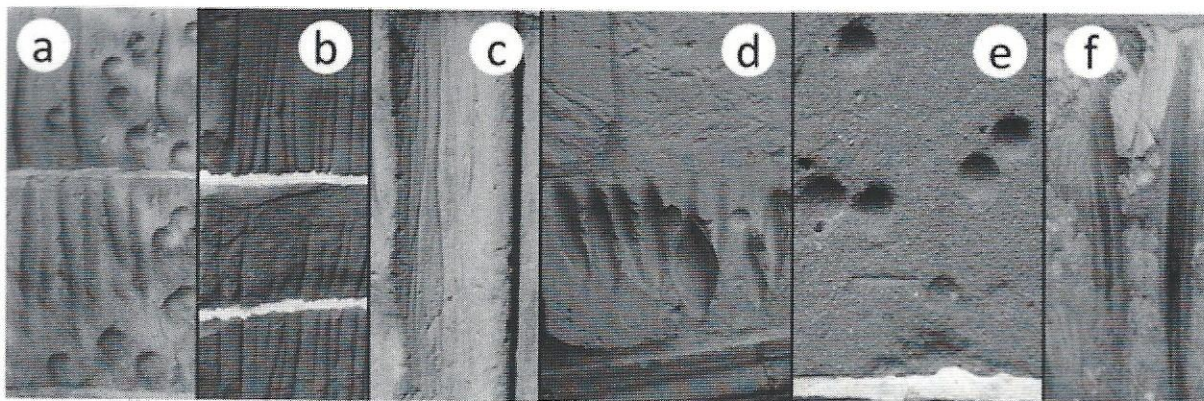


Figure 3. Scratch marks with different morphologies.

- (a) Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche in Veldhausen (Germany): cups and grooves with a boat-like shape;
- (b) Abdij in Averbode (Belgium): long, narrow and shallow grooves;
- (c) Evangelisch-luth. Kirche in Schüttorf (Germany): long, narrow and shallow grooves;
- (d) Sankt Jakobikirche in Goslar (Germany): grooves with a boat-like shape;
- (e) Sint Eustachiuskerk in Zichem (Belgium): cups;
- (f) Martinuskerk in Eijdsden (the Netherlands): grooves.

There are some unusually specific choices for the locations of some groups of scratches. The sandstone castle of Bad Bentheim in Germany has two entrance gates with grooves confined to the inner gate. This particular wall was chosen because it was shared with a small chapel on the other side. Schloßberg Klippen is a sandstone outcrop in the German town of Quedlinburg. The rocks form the foundations of the Schloßkirche St. Servatius. In this case, the rocks of the sandstone outcrop are scratched. Why climb up to the church when you can gather the stone powder from the same rock type at its base?

Some grooves and cups have been produced on the walls of secular buildings, many of which can be shown to have had past associations with the church. They have also been found in a few old town houses and town gates. One interesting secular example is a scratched sandstone porch dated to 1618 and attached to a blacksmith's house. The blacksmith was a high status profession, members of which were considered to be wise men in German paganism.

Scratch mark origins

A number of different explanations have been given in the literature for the origin of the grooves;⁴ most can be refuted, leaving one explanation which we believe to be the most plausible: obtaining stone powder for healing purposes.

1. Grinding blades of weapons

According to this explanation, somewhat loosely rejected by some previous authors, knights and other warriors ground their weapons on the stones (such as walls) of religious buildings so that they and their weapons would be

blessed with success in battle and a safe return home. This idea is rejected because the depth, boat-like pattern and short length of the grooves would have been impossible to produce with the blade or edge of a sword, large knife, spear, halberd or other similar weapon. Long, narrow and shallow grooves would have been difficult to produce in this way. Accessibility is also a problem: most grooves are located in places where it would have been uncomfortable to grind a weapon - the edges of porches, near buttresses or just above the ground where grinding a weapon here would cause injuries such as grazes or back pain. Furthermore, the sharpening of knives and scythes on grindstones produces marks which are completely different to the grooves described above.

Scratch marks on British churches, such as those at St Dunstan's Church, Mayfield, East Sussex have sometimes been ascribed to military men sharpening their arrows against the wall. It has been asserted that, following the Black Death, a law was passed requiring men of military age to practice archery on a Sunday afternoon. This is rather an overstatement; it is certainly true that in the *Statutes at Large and of the Chronological Index to the Statutes*, an Act was passed on 4th February 1512 requiring that 'All Sorts of Men under the Age of Forty Years shall have Bows and Arrows, and use Shooting', a law made perpetual in 1514 and restated in 1541, but large sections were later repealed by Queen Elizabeth I. The use of a Sunday for practising does not seem to have been stipulated.

2. Resting weapons against the walls of the church

This hypothesis suggests that, because weapons were not allowed to be taken into church during worship services, resting them against the church wall produced scratch marks in (long) horizontal rows. This suggests that weapons must all have been of the same length and kind (i.e. only swords, only spears, only halberds and so on) and that the weapons were placed on exactly the same spot each time. The trajectories, height and depth of the grooves all argue against this explanation.

3. Playing children

It has been suggested that children made the grooves whilst at play. Children certainly make scratches in the soft limestones of Limburg, usually recording graffiti like names, figures and sentiments. Children generally lack the strength and persistence to produce grooves of the type

found on church walls, being distracted by far more interesting pursuits than scratching rather nondescript lines.

4. Weathering

The results of weathering on rocks are completely different to the grooves and cusps described above, which are certainly man-made.

5. Making 'new' fire at Easter by striking or friction

Certain authors think that the grooves have a religious origin; they were created by striking 'new fire' at Easter. In Germany this practice is known as '*Samstagsweihe*' because it took place on the Saturday (Samstag) before Easter, probably as a Christianised form of the heathen fire-setting in Spring, associated with the beginning of the new growing season. In the Easter tradition, certain regulations had to be followed: the fire had to be struck outside of the church with a stone.

Sandstone and similar building stones are unsuitable for fire-setting in this way. Normally, a steel struck against a flint was used to produce sparks (small glowing steel fragments) which ignited easily combustible tinder (such as dried fungus or carbonized linen) to which was then added a fuel such as wood shavings. Blowing on the smouldering material encouraged full burning. Tinderboxes containing the essential ingredients of this process are effectively the predecessors of matchboxes and matches. Experiments seeking to replicate this effect were unsuccessful as a sufficiently hot and durable spark could not be produced against sandstone. The depth of the grooves also argues against this interpretation - fingers and knuckles would be grazed in no time; a fresh surface would have been much more suitable.

It has been suggested that the cups were created by frictional means of generating Easter 'new fire'. This process requires a fire drill (short stick), one end of which is placed in a rough cup-like hollow (usually in a small branch) while the other end is placed vertically against a small wooden board, firmly hand-held or braced against the chest. A fire bow rapidly rotated the drill in both directions, producing a glowing carbonised dust which, when sufficient, could be used to smoulder the tinder. The rough cup-like hollow produced evolves through the process to form a diameter of 1-1½ cm.

Applying this scenario to church walls requires holding the drill horizontally so that the carbonized dust falls to the ground before sufficient is generated to which the tinder can be applied. Furthermore, most cups on church walls have a diameter greater than 1-1½ cm; some are fist-sized.

6. Projectile impact marks

On impact, bullets and other projectiles produce (small) craters on wall surfaces. Older buildings may show bullet impacts from WWII or earlier battles. Projectile impact craters are hollows with uneven internal surfaces and crumbled edges. Cups that originate from scratching, by contrast, have smooth internal surfaces and entire edges.

7. Scratching healing powder from the stones

This, the most plausible suggestion, states that people created the grooves and cups by scratching the stones in order to gather a stone powder⁶ used for therapeutic

purposes⁷ against diseases such as the plague and typhoid fever. They won the powder not only from church walls but also from grave stones and icons. Because the powder was won from an ecclesiastical building stone as part of a consecrated place of worship its therapeutic qualities were deemed, in popular belief, to be fortified by its holy association.⁵

Therapeutic stone powders

The production of supposedly therapeutic powders by pulverising a variety of geological materials has been practised since classical times. The first century Greek physician, pharmacologist and botanist, Pedanius Dioscorides (circa 40-90AD), recorded a number of fossils, minerals, stones and earths which were used for healing purposes in his *Materia Medica*, written around 65 AD.⁸ A wide range of such materials was summarised in Sir John Hill's compendious compilation for his *History of the Materia Medica* in 1751, including such lithologies as jade, pumice, Irish slate, gypsum, clays, chalk, marls, and Fuller's earth.⁹ Powders produced from fossil echinoid (sea urchin) spines and belemnites were used to treat a wide range of diseases including kidney and bladder stones, whilst prehistoric stone axes¹⁰ yielded a powder that was used to treat epilepsy and to restore domesticated animals to full health.¹¹

Amongst the most popular fine-grained sediments were a huge variety of medicinal earths excavated from many European and Mediterranean countries and often stamped with seals of authenticity: the so-called *terra sigillata*.¹² Several types of *terra sigillata* have a magico-medicinal component to their efficacy because of their religious connotations. The extraction of *terra lemnia*, a widely used and extremely popular medicinal earth from Lemnos in the northern Aegean, was highly regulated; mining was restricted to a single day throughout the year (August 6th) originally a feast day for Diana, later syncretised with St Saviour's Day. The whole process from extraction to stamping was carried out under the watchful eye of the priestess or clergy, as appropriate.¹³

An even closer link with Christianity is represented by *Terra Sigillata Melitensis*, Maltese sealed earth. According to Maltese tradition, St Paul spent 3 months in a cave at Rabat, having been shipwrecked in AD 60 while being taken to Rome for trial. In an incident recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, St Paul was bitten by a viper hiding in a woodpile. The locals expected him to die, but when he survived with no ill effects they surmised he might be a god. The saint brought Christianity to the island and it was believed that the rock of the grotto in which he resided and preached was imbued with great and holy power. Rock was hewn from the walls, reduced to powder, formed into cakes, sealed and exported as a powerful medicine used to combat a wide range of diseases.¹⁴

Up until the 1990s the people of Heerle (Wouw municipality, Dutch province of Noord-Brabant), obtained a white sand ('*Gertrudiszand*'), which was sprinkled in the home to discourage vermin such as mice or rats. In a closely related application, believers from Prinsenbeek village, also in Noord-Brabant, obtained sand from the

church called Onze Lieve Vrouw Tenhemelopneming. According to local legend, Saint Gertrude of Nivelles (circa 621-659 AD) helped rid the village of rodents which were eating the corn. This so-called '*muizenzand*' (mice sand) was used to protect the harvest against mice and rats and Gertrude is worshipped as a patroness against these animals. On March 17, the feast-day of the saint,¹⁵ consecrated sand from a tub at the back of the church could be taken to chase away mice and rats. According to legend, a thorn bush grew next to the church at Meldert (Belgium) where the staff of the Saint Ermelindis (a 6th century Belgian hermitess) was planted. Farmers removed earth from the spot and applied it to their fields to ensure fertility.

Gertrudis was also revered in the Belgian village of Vorst. She was asked for assistance not only against rats and mice, but also to heal wounds on the nose and lips, eczema, skin conditions, plague, mental illness and for strength when the devil tried to seduce them. Earth from the churchyard was used at home as a remedy against anything and everything; it is a small step from this practice to scratching sand from church walls.

In the Belgian village of Lembeek, the local Saint Veronus (also known as Saint Froom, a grandson of Charlemagne who died in 863)¹⁶ was said to be able to help against conditions such as headaches, meningitis and fever. Past pilgrims crept into a pit under the grave of the saint where they collected earth in small bags which were placed under the head at night in order to ease symptoms. The pit was later closed, but pilgrims could still obtain bags with earth from the church itself.

Saint Evermarus (a pilgrim martyred by robbers at Rutten in Belgium in 700 AD) is worshipped¹⁷ if people want to eliminate their headaches. On May 1st (Evermarus's Feast Day) earth removed from the Evermarus chapel in the Belgian village of Rutten is mixed with food and eaten. The chapel itself has flint and limestone walls, the latter bearing a number of scratch marks.

Stone dust is still used for magical and medical purposes today. A chapel in the Dutch Limburg village of Sint Gerlach is dedicated to the 12th century knight who became a Christian hermit and friend of Hildegard von Bingen. After his death in around 1170, a number of small miracles occurred at his grave. Local people and pilgrims began removing soil samples from his grave, believing them to possess a special potency. This escalated to a desire to possess direct relics, such as bone fragments of the saint. The church authorities have since formalised a replacement custom in which in a pile of consecrated limestone powder (locally called marl) is stored in a hollow beneath the tomb of the saint. A small shovel and plastic bags are provided for anyone who wants to remove some of the stone dust in order to cure sick animals, to mix with corn to deter rats and mice, to sprinkle in stables for the well-being of the cattle, or even to add to soil to improve crop growth. In another example, consecrated earth can still be obtained from the cemetery at Hakendover, a Belgian site of medieval pilgrimage. Also, the Camillian monastery at Vaals (Dutch province of Limburg), now lost, used to sell stone powder as a medicine.¹⁸

Parishioners at Sint Catharinakerk in Montfort (Dutch province of Limburg) have special reverence for Saint Anthony the Great (circa 251-356). A long-held tradition involves large bins of consecrated sand being stood in the church next to a statue of the Saint and made available to believers who wanted to sprinkle it in their stables and on their fields. The practice is still undertaken today: the sand is obtained from local building suppliers and blessed by the priest ready for use!

At Birkheim über Kastelaun (Germany) there is an altar, the stone powder from which is reputedly beneficial for rapid growth in farm animals. Extraction of stone powder from the altar became so extensive that its very survival was threatened. On being informed that 'normal' gypsum could be used for the same purpose, the farmers agreed to obtain their powder from other sources.¹⁹

The use of stone chips and powders was sometimes reinforced by the recitation of secular or religious charms. Two such German examples are as follows:

When a spell has been cast on somebody he should go to a conciliation cross (a memorial to somebody who has been killed) in the field. There he should walk around the cross three times beginning from the left side. While doing this he must say the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. After this he must strike a piece of stone from the cross and throw it in running water whilst saying: I throw you in this stream so that all sorcery and misfortune stream away and I can resist the one who did this to me.

At the stroke of midnight you should go with a white tablecloth to a boundary stone that separates three parcels of land. There you should hit three pieces of the stone onto the table cloth while saying the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and then you must go to running water. You also need the urine of a sick person. Make stone powder of the three pieces of stone. Put the urine, the powder and some of the water from the stream in a glass and let the sick person drink of this. As long as the sick person is drinking you should say: As certain as Jesus Christ died on the cross, it is just as certain that you will not die.²⁰

It is obvious from the discussion above that stones with ecclesiastical and saintly associations have enjoyed a long history of popularity as therapeutic materials. The consecrated powder worked from church buildings by the scratching action of blades along the stone surface falls into the same category, but is more the subject of an oral folklore tradition than a written one, making details rather sparse.

Powder from church walls

The use of stone powder from churches was certainly already established by the 6th century when Gregory, Bishop of Tours (538-594) stated that a little powder from the church of Saint Martin was more powerful than all the fortune tellers with their senseless tricks;²¹ even scrapings from the gravestones of saints were esteemed superior to other medicines.

Stone dust was used frequently to combat kidney stones (urolithiasis) and renal colic, and was mixed with cattle fodder.²² Supposedly effective as medicine against many diseases, the powder contains mineral nutrients including phosphorus, potassium, lime, magnesium and sodium. In

certain regions (such as the Odenwald in Germany) people not only scratched stone dust to heal toothaches, headaches and diseases of the neck but also to expel warts.²³ When applied to warts they are reported as disappearing from the hands of young girls at night when it was full moon. The stone powder could also give relief during teething.

In Hessen (Germany) and the Grafschaft Bentheim (County Bentheim) stone powder was mixed with water and then drunk as a healing draught against the plague. This practice is the origin of the terms 'Pestschaben' and 'Pestrillen' (plague grooves) for scratch marks on churches in these particular areas.

According to folklore, after scratching powder from grooves and cups the collectors ritually blew into the hollows to banish the disease. A similar practice presently, with some variation, still persists in popular belief. At Overasselt (Dutch province of Gelderland), for example, people bring small strips of cloth worn by patients suffering from fevers and tie them to an oak tree next to a ruin of an old chapel. The people believe that the tree takes over the fever so ridding the patient of the disease.

Various farmers healed their animals with sand which they had scratched from holy places, as well as spreading it on their fields to ensure fertility. Their belief in this medicine was absolute; if the animals died or the crops failed, they reasoned that the sand has probably been applied too late, or that the saints had not been praised sufficiently during the process.²⁴

Sandstone powder was credited with many miraculous properties; in order to ensure full potency the powder was to be scratched from the walls during the Twelve Holy Nights (Christmastide: December 25th to January 6th). Absolute silence was required during the scratching process, otherwise the magic powder was rendered inactive.²⁵

In light of the foregoing discussion, one interesting possibility is posed by some scratch marks on the face of a Sheela Na-gig (a semi-erotic stone carving or corbel on the pillars of some Romanesque Norman churches) at the Church of St Helena in the village of Austerfield in

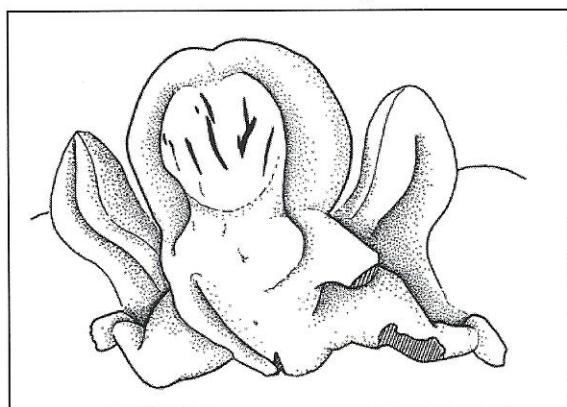


Figure 4. A Sheela Na-gig at the top of a pillar in the Church of St Helena (Austerfield, Yorkshire, UK). Line drawing made from a photograph. Note the scratch marks in the facial area.

Yorkshire (Fig. 4). Considering the erotic nature of Sheela Na-gig carvings, and the suggestion by some authorities that they might be fertility icons,²⁶ maybe the scratches provided a powder for use in reproductive conditions – perhaps to counter infertility, amenorrhoea, sexually transmitted diseases, pre-partum and post-partum difficulties as well as problems during childbirth.

Conclusions

The therapeutic use of powders derived from a wide range of geological materials has a pedigree that extends back to classical times. One potential source of such powders has received very little attention to date: certain building stones used both in secular and especially ecclesiastical settings in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands. A superficial examination of churches in Britain and France suggests that scratch marks might be equally widespread in those countries too. Such buildings have systematically scratched surfaces which probably provided a supply of therapeutic powders. Stone powder extracted from church buildings was deemed to have its potential healing properties reinforced by its consecrated origins. Powders from church building stones represent one extreme of a continuum of sources of 'holy' materials, ranging from earth obtained from sites of pilgrimage to the graves and dwelling places of saints.

Scratching stone powder from church walls still takes place today. We have discovered fresh scratch marks²⁷ alongside older examples, for instance on a church in the German village of Schadeleben. Their presence might be related to the local landslip disaster of July 18th 2009, in which part of the nearby village of Nachterstedt moved downslope into the Concordiassee, a lake developed following the cessation of lignite mining in the region.

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Authors' addresses: Jan and Els Weertz, Eendrachtstraat 13, 3784 KA Terschuur, Netherlands; Email: debelemniet@gmail.com

Dr Christopher J Duffin, Scientific Associate, Department of Palaeontology, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, UK, and 146, Church Hill Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM3 8NF, England. Email: cduffin@blueyonder.co.uk

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Auxiliary Trades: added income for the pharmacy

Peter G Homan, FRPharmS
Epsom, Surrey

This article was inspired by an article in the 1882 edition of the *Chemist and Druggist Diary*. It was headed 'Auxiliary Trades for the Chemist and Druggist'.

Then, as now, competition for sales was very keen. Chemists' stock in trade was being crippled by co-operative stores and general traders. The goods that were traditionally sold by the chemist were being sold elsewhere, such items as culinary herbs, proprietary medicines and even the selling of poisons and the dispensing of medicines. The Pharmacy and Poisons Act of 1868 regulated the sale of poisons. It also stated that:

from and after 31st December 1868 it shall be unlawful for any person to sell or keep open shop for retailing, dispensing or compounding medicines, or to assume or use the title chemist and druggist, or chemist, or druggist, or pharmacist, or dispensing chemist in any part of Great Britain unless such person shall be registered under this Act.

The judgement in a watershed court case, namely the *Pharmaceutical Society v. the London and Provincial Supply Association Ltd*, had decreed that the act did not apply to a company and they could, therefore, carry out trading as a pharmacy.

The chemist had a dilemma. Many pharmacists had wanted to separate themselves from the less attractive adjuncts of their business such as the sale of oil and paints, in order to promote a more professional image. Now, with the Companies selling poisons and the dispensing of medicines it was necessary to find other ways of making money. The *Chemist and Druggist Diary* suggested ways in which trade could be increased and gave suggestions how these could be professionally promoted. The trades suggested in the *Diary* were not necessarily new to the chemist but were offered as a consideration for the expansion of business if not already installed.

The Spectacle Trade

Many pharmacists had additionally taken up the role of optician. It was a fruitful business but required training. The *Diary* suggested that an alternative might be to sell ready-made spectacles.