



Give it a bit of muscle

Huw Jenkins stopped off for a paper and ended up on a journey in to the world of muscle oil. Strange but true...

A small brown jar labelled MUSCLE OIL standing amongst the confectionery of Pike's newsagents in Porthmadog. I had come for a Guardian, but couldn't leave without one of these, oddly priced at £4.08. Unlike the newspaper, the label was very concise:

MUSCLE OIL

Healing and Soothing

Rub well on painful parts

SHAKE THE BOTTLE WELL

RICHARD EVANS

BONESETTER

PWLLHELI

No list of ingredients or statement of volume, none of the usual disclaimers and caveats, no child proof top and, most intriguing of all, it was from a bonesetter! Back home I shook and opened the bottle of double cream colour and consistency and wondered why it hadn't been named muscle cream. Sniffing the unsubtle bouquet, my mind travelled back to schoolboy changing rooms - something a bit

like mothballs and Germolene? Or was it one of those decongestants rubbed onto one's chest?

I tried it out on a thumb joint, sore from splitting logs. Pretty soon the oil had disappeared, maybe it was inside working its magic. The process was comforting and maybe the ache was still there but overall I felt a bit better, more empathetic to the shocks and jars to the thumb as the axe had slammed into knotted rondels of twisted oak.

Intrigued to learn more I googled 'Richard Evans bonesetter' and found an image of a



memorial plaque on a house in Anglesey. Richard was 'the son of Evan Thomas, founder of the famous dynasty of Anglesey bonesetters and, later, world-class orthopaedic surgeons'. (Sir Robert Jones, nephew of the grandson of Richard Evans, went on to found the famous Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Gobowen.)

As to why Richard didn't share his Dad's surname, it was the custom to take the father's first name. Richard had died in 1851 and, antique as it looked, there was no way that this bottle was 160 years old.

I asked the shop where they got their supplies from and was put in touch with the distributor who





gave me contact details for Kelvin – a descendant of Richard Evans. We met in Kelvin's kitchen on the edge of a small village overlooking Caernarfon. On the floor a large clay pot with a gallon or two of the potion, no question of me being allowed to witness the ingredients that make up the secret recipe although I was told there are six.

I watched as Kelvin, sat in front of his Rayburn, with the pot between his legs, put the finishing touches to the batch, stirring with what looked like half a broom handle. 'Hubble, bubble

From start to finish the process takes about four hours to make a batch of 60 labelled bottles and it doesn't always go right. Kelvin's wife Gwenno explained that it had a mind of its own: 'sometimes it splits, like a white sauce, and no amount of mixing will get it back together again'.

Both are frequent users of the Muscle Oil using it to treat all sorts of aches and pains

such as sciatica, rheumatism and sprains. Every household in their extended family will have a bottle or two to hand. Gwenno has found it very effective in the treatment of her horses, so much so that her farrier is now recommending it to others.

Kelvin told me how one day not so long ago he had an officious visit from Trading Standards. The meeting was not going well as the officer referred to endless regulations and Kelvin was worried that he would be closed down. But then his cousin, who also makes the potion and was at the meeting, produced a letter on House of Commons headed paper. The officer studied the letter, handed it back and apologised for the inconvenience. I don't know exactly what the letter said but I suspect the message was something to the effect of 'don't be so silly – give them a break. It's a traditional recipe handed down the generations'.

Apart from my local newsagents it's only available at a few outlets in north Wales including the barber's shop in Cricieth.

Another local brand was Morris Evans' Oils. A young slate worker in Ffestiniog, who'd aspired to be a doctor



but, aged 10 and one of a dozen children, was obliged to work the quarries to contribute to family finances. When there were problems at the quarry, and the men laid off, he used his savings and began his medical career in the 1880s. They say the original recipe came from a 'vagabond' who gave it to Morris in return for some act of kindness.

There were two main product lines – household oils for humans and oils for horses. In his day he was a pioneer in advertising through the medium of Welsh, which made him very popular with the farmers, but he was also quite international. One of his promotional leaflets, targeting military buyers, tells the tale of a young soldier buying the oil at Cape Town on his way to fight the Boers. 'The Riding Master of the Battery'found it a most valuable preparation in war time for the ailments of horses, whether caused by the climate, the hard work, or the work of the enemy'.

It's difficult to imagine the small village of Llan Ffestiniog having a 'manufactory' for the production of medicines but it was there, conveniently for mail order, next to the railway line between Bala and Blaenau, until not so long ago. Morris died of tuberculosis in 1923 and the oils continued to be made up until 1980 when his youngest son Frank died. Members of the family

say they still have the secret recipes but there are no plans to reintroduce them. This is a great shame as there are lots of old people around who swear by it. It worked on anything. 'Sore throat? Suck a sugar lump with a couple of drops of oil!'

Neither Muscle Oil (Olew Gwynnau) nor Morris Evans' Oils (Olew Morris Evans) made it quite as big as Elliman's Embrocation which was manufactured in Slough from 1847 onwards by the James Elliman family. By 1911 the product was on sale in 42 countries. In the 1960s Horlicks took over the product and they in turn were taken over by Beechams in 1970, now part of GSK (GlaxoSmithKline) which employs 99,000 people.

According to the Slough Museum the three ingredients of Elliman's Embrocation are eggs, turps and vinegar! Eggs were imported from Ireland by the million to the extent that the staff would spend 6 weeks just cracking them. As for the addition of turpentine this was especially dangerous and the process overseen by the fire brigade.

Like Morris Evans, James Elliman had two main product lines 'Universal Embrocation' for humans and 'Royal Embrocation' for animals. Apart from the names they were identical but tax was payable only on human medicines. ■