

## Billy Brewer: the Wizard of the West

William Brewer was born at Lyng, a hamlet some five miles east of Taunton, in the year 1818. The parish register records that he was baptised on the 1 November, and that he was the son of a shoemaker named Abraham and his wife Mary. Billy's first employment was as a ploughboy but in his teens he learnt the craft of making clay pipes, which he subsequently sold door-to-door around the villages of Somerset, east Devon and north Dorset. It was this activity that first made him a well-known figure in the region, and earned him the popular nickname of "Billy the Piper". Around 1840 Billy decided to settle in Taunton, and opened a small grocery shop in Alfred Street. To mark his arrival in town Billy planted a chestnut tree outside his premises, which was described as still flourishing some fifty years later, though, sadly, it no longer stands. We do not know precisely when Billy began practising as a cunning-man. It is quite possible that he first started offering his services as a fortune-teller and witch-doctor during the time he spent wandering the roads and paths of the region peddling his pipes, but it was only in the years following his arrival in Taunton that his fame as a master of magic really took off, earning himself the grand title of "Wizard of the West". By basing himself in the county town he not only made it easier for his clients to contact him but also enabled him to exploit the urban population on his doorstep. The shop also provided a respectable front for his legally dubious activities, and Brewer appears in trade directories of the 1860s and 1870s as a modest "marine store dealer".<sup>1</sup> Who was to know how many of those who came through his door were there to buy some sugar or something more? Servant girls anxious to know their fortunes provided a constant flow of customers through his doors, but he also received members of the middle classes who came to have their "planets ruled," and it was not uncommon for carriages to stop outside the unassuming grocery shop in Alfred Street.

One of the reasons for Billy's popularity was that he was willing to visit and even stay with his clients if need be. He would sometimes spend several weeks at a time travelling around the villages of the levels visiting patients. He was made welcome wherever he went and the best bed in the house was usually given over to him. It was even considered lucky to sleep in the same room. Brewer enjoyed the royal treatment he received and was not averse to taking advantage of people's hospitality. On one occasion he was called out to a place not far from Taunton to investigate the mysterious deaths occurring amongst a farmer's herd. Billy confirmed that it was a case of witchcraft and said it would take him a week to effect a cure. The farmer and his wife gave him a room and plied him with good food and drink, and Brewer enjoyed himself pottering about the place. So pleasant was his stay that it was only after ten days that Brewer finally declared that he had been successful, and that no more cattle would die. The farmer was overjoyed at the news, and Billy returned to Taunton with five pounds in his pocket and probably with five pounds around his waist as well.

We know less about Brewer's character and private life than we do about his magical activities. He never married, but apparently enjoyed the companionship of cats. He exhibited a certain eccentric vanity, and cut a distinctive figure in the streets of Taunton garbed in a long Inverness cloak and sombrero hat, numerous gold and silver rings glittering on his fingers. Later in life he became even more noticeable by the fact that he wore a rather ridiculous dishevelled brown wig, which contrasted quite obviously with his grey whiskers (see back cover).

According to an obituary published a few days after his death on the 28 December 1890, Brewer "had none of that grasping, sordid greed for lucre which is so grave a defect in the character of your average sorcerer ... Billy was never exorbitant in his demands, as so gifted a person might reasonably be expected to be. Moreover, he was not so wholly wrapped up in his weird searchings in the spiritual world as to despise the value of creature comforts."<sup>2</sup> This would seem to be a sound appraisal of Brewer, and partly accounts for his great popularity. The evidence suggests that Brewer was careful not to over-charge his clients, and was happy to take at least some of his payment in kind. Of course, he did not turn down large sums when offered by satisfied customers, but made no such demands himself. One of the reasons why some cunning-folk were taken to court was because their dissatisfied clients were particularly aggrieved by the amount of money they had paid out for poor service. The sense of injustice was proportionate to the amount paid.

Being prosecuted by disappointed clients was one of the hazards of being a cunning-person,

and many were familiar with the four walls of a prison cell. However, in his long career, Brewer rarely found himself before the courts, and never experienced a spell in prison. As a newspaper correspondent observed just after his death, Brewer “was always careful, in his pretence at fortune-telling and his charms and counter-charms, to keep outside the pale of the law.” The same writer remembered Brewer being brought before the Wiveliscombe magistrates for obtaining money from a woman by pretending to cast her horoscope. He was discharged, however, when it was found that he had cautioned her not to give him any money unless she did so of her own free will. I have uncovered another case which similarly went his way. The charge was one of “obtaining money by false pretences”, and was also heard before the magistrates at Wiveliscombe, on the 18th of January 1881.<sup>3</sup> A woman named Sarah Smith, the wife of a marine store dealer residing at Golden Hill had been ill for some time, and confined to her bed. Her local doctor had been unable to cure her, and suspecting witchcraft she sent for Billy, who duly arrived by train on St Thomas’s day. Smith’s husband apparently had little faith in the cunning-man’s abilities but his wife insisted. Brewer said he usually charged eleven shillings, but that on prompt payment he was in the habit of returning a shilling. He insisted, however, that he must receive the money from the patient otherwise his magic would not work. So Smith handed the money to his wife who then gave it to Brewer, and he returned one shilling. Brewer began his treatment by tapping Mrs Smith several times on the palm of her hand with his finger, telling her that every tap was a stab on the witch’s heart. This was followed by an incantation. He then gave her a parcel of herbs, which consisted of dried bay leaves and peppermint which she was to steep and drink. He next instructed her to send to a blacksmith’s to get a donkey’s shoe made, and nail it on her front door. Brewer then returned home. When Smith found that his wife’s condition did not improve after carrying out Brewer’s instructions, he obtained a summons against him. After hearing all the evidence, the magistrates decided they had no option but to dismiss the case as Smith acknowledged that he had no faith in Brewer when he handed over the money, so technically no fraud had been committed.

During the last years of his life Billy seems to have scaled down his activities a little, and also took in a lodger. Nevertheless, Billy was no recluse, and continued to enjoy meeting his public. He made a point of attending the club feasts and walks held in villages surrounding Taunton and would turn up in his finest, wearing a distinctive pair of lavender gloves.<sup>4</sup> We gain a brief snapshot of him at this time from the recollections of an elderly man who wrote to the *Somerset County Herald* in 1954.<sup>5</sup> As a boy the old man’s family had moved to Alfred Street sometime during the 1880s: “I was warned to have nothing to do with him as he could harm me. I have often seen people enquiring for Billy, they were chiefly women - the men would come on Sunday. I remember one particular Sunday morning, a farmer came in, in great distress, as he had three horses died and he wanted Billy to tell him the cause of it.” An unusual incident involving Billy that stuck in the correspondent’s mind, and which is satisfyingly corroborated by another source, concerned Billy’s lodger: “At one time Billy had a lodger, a tall awkward man we used to call ‘Wax Candles.’ One night whilst sitting at home by the fire I heard a hullabaloo out in the street, and on going out to investigate I found that Billy had driven his lodger out of doors and was chasing him down the street with his sweeping brush.” This was undoubtedly the same incident as that considered by the Taunton magistrates on Christmas Eve 1889, and reported as follows by the *Taunton Courier*:

An old man named Brewer, who was described as “a wizard,” it being stated that he gained a livelihood by “reading the planets,” was summoned for having assaulted his lodger, a man named Cox. Brewer was wearing a tattered old brown wig, beneath which his white hair could be seen. In the course of a quarrel Brewer had broken Cox’s head with a brush and Cox had been treated at the Hospital for his injury. Mr Durham said he could not get Cox to appear, and the case therefore fell through.<sup>6</sup>

One wonders if Cox, or “Wax Candles”, declined to appear for fear of magical reprisals. Just over a year after this event Brewer passed away, but a life so full of incident was destined not to end in quiet anonymity.

At Brewer’s inquest, held in the Somerset Inn, Alfred Street, on Tuesday 30 December 1890, it was revealed that he had been ill for some time before his death, and that an elderly man named Thomas Holly had stayed with him and attended to his needs for the previous month-and-a-half. For the last three weeks of his life Billy had been confined to bed. He died around half-past eight on

Sunday morning. Responding to the coroner's questioning, Holly stated that Brewer drank only moderately. Mrs Sarah Ann Durman, of 18 Alfred Street, said that she saw Billy's body after death, and found that his left shoulder and upper arm appeared diseased. He also seemed to have suffered from bedsores, for which Durman had given the incapacitated Brewer some ointment. The coroner finally commented that Brewer "was always a very inoffensive man", and returned a verdict of "Death from natural causes". The funeral was fixed for half-past two the following Thursday. Some surprise was expressed that it was arranged by the parish authorities since Brewer was insured for £13 with the Prudential Assurance Company, and the sale of his household possession would have amply covered the funeral costs.

At half-past two on Thursday afternoon a hearse and a carriage were to be seen waiting outside 39 Alfred Street. The sole carriage in the procession had been hired by the husband of Sarah Durman. The couple were apparently good friends of Brewer's, and their relations would seem to have been long standing, for Durman's mother had been to school with the wizard. The procession could not begin, though, because the police and an officer of the Guardians, whose presence were required, were nowhere to be seen. Ten minutes later Police Sergeant Hayes and Police Constable Bourne eventually turned up to officiate over the handling of the corpse, but proceedings were still held up by the continued absence of the relieving officer. They waited for another half-an-hour but he still failed to show. Meantime a large crowd had gathered to see Brewer off. Disgruntled by the delay they began to converse in loud terms, and not in "the choicest of language". The police then decided they could wait no longer and called for the body to be handed over to the driver of the hearse. There followed some debate as to who would carry the elm coffin down, leading one woman to exclaim, "Why, s'elp me God, I'll bring the old man down meself for a French 'un," whilst an Irishman remarked of those officials present and absent, "Why, if they was in Paddyland they'd a' been poleaxed long ago." Several men eventually volunteered and the procession got under way.

The hearse driver was unaware that a grave was waiting for Brewer in St James's cemetery, and so when he came to the end of the Parade he proceeded through Castle Green arch thinking that Brewer was to be buried at St Mary's. Durman managed to convey to him that he was going the wrong way, and the procession made its way to St James without further incident. On arrival, though, there was another hitch. The officiating clergyman, Rev. French, asked for the burial certificate, which the relieving officer should have brought had he been there. French, therefore, refused to allow the burial to go ahead. After an embarrassing pause in which no one knew what to do next, the clergyman relented, remarking that he would be lodging a complaint with the authorities. Another difficulty now arose. There was no one to carry Billy's coffin; so the gravedigger went off and found a couple of rough looking individuals, who were nearly shoeless and in rags, to act as bearers. And so one of the most famous men in Somerset was "buried with less ceremony and less care than would have been bestowed on a favourite dog". His grave can no longer be found today, but that of his mother, and other family members, next to whom he once expressed his wish to be buried, still lies in Lyng churchyard. Brewer left no will, and had no close relatives. His nearest kin was thought to be a widowed cousin named Mary Ann Farrell, who formerly kept a public house at Bridgwater.

This is not quite the end of the Brewer story, for shortly after his death some of his papers and correspondence were handed over to the local newspapers who duly published some of what they called the more "amusing specimens". These provide us with a unique insight into Brewer's world and the mentality of some of his many clients. Most of the letters were described as being penned by "uneducated persons", and contained "defective writing and spelling", though, there were also a number from educated clients as well. They came from all over the country, and one suspects that many of the more far flung examples were written by young Somerset servant women who were in service around the country - as is evident from the following letter:

I used to live in Taunton, and I left there and came to service in Wales. Are you doing the same trade as you use to? If you are let me know, for I want for you to tell me something about a young man, and I will pay you whatever is the price if you can do it. There is no one her can tell fortunes like you.

Letters like this on affairs of the heart seem to have made up the bulk of Billy's correspondence. Here is another from a young woman of Wellington, who seems to have had several amatory irons in the

fire so to speak:

I want some one to help me out of my trouble and I believe you can do it if you like. Sir, I was holding correspondence with a young man, a soldier. Sir, for a long time, and last March he deserted, and I have not heard anything of him since nor any of his friends, and I should like to hear of him if I could ... And would you show me the man that will be my husband, or would you draw out my nativity for me. Sir, their is another young man that will not speak to me. He has walked with me twice and I have drank with him. Could you make him speak to me and be my husband if I wished? I believe you can do any of these things if you chose.

Most such letter were from young women, but young men also had their problems attracting the opposite sex, as is evident from the following letter written by an exasperated farmer:

I cannot make that girl out. She just speaks and that's all. She is more shy than ever. I fancy you must bring her to mind that. I cannot get an opportunity of talking with her. Shall I write her a note, I want to know? And will she keep it a secret if I write? Do tell me. Send me a line, if it's only five words about it, will you?

While young men and women sought magical aid in order to identify and attract the right partner, those who were already married also brought their relationship problems to Billy. One of his more regular correspondents, a woman apparently more educated than most of the other letter writers, unburdened her spite against a female acquaintance she called "Jezebel", with whom she suspected her husband of having an affair. In one missive she writes:

Just a line to wish you a happy New Year, and to let you know we are settled in our new home, and doing pretty well. And Jezebel and her daughter are come to \_\_\_\_ to spend their Christmas. They are stopping at her brothers, down by the \_\_\_\_ road cemetery. And I hope things will go wrong with her, and that Bad Luck will befall her before she goes back. It is time that the Lord put on her what she wished to happen to us.

In another letter she asks Brewer to somehow magically influence "Jezebel":

I have not heard another sentence of old Jezebel. Keep her down, for God's sake. She ought to be made confess ... Get a drop of gin for yourself this Christmas.

In a final letter we hear that the problem with her husband seems to have been resolved, but she cannot help vent her spleen at Jezebel's apparent good fortune:

Dear friend.- I am happy to say we are all well, and that he has not been to see old Jezebel. But I heard from a wayfaring person that old Jezebel boasts terribly to her neighbours, and tells them that she is rich in house property, and shall be worth her thousands soon, for her old mistress is dead, and Jezebel is going to marry her old master, and he is going to make over all his money to her. Don't she get good luck! She will marry the dear old soul for his money, and I hope she will die before him and never have it. We are getting on considering the times. God bless you. - FROM YOU KNOW WHO.

Further female friction is evident in a letter from a woman of Tiverton, Devon:

There is a person coming to the house that I live in to work. She is a great enemy of mine. She is coming on Wednesday. Could you manage to prevent her coming? I should feel very grateful if you could manage to keep her away altogether. I have also a woman enemy in the house. If you could manage to prevent them reigning over me I should get on well. Do please try and keep that woman away on Wednesday.

Billy was also called upon to detect lost property. One man who had lost half-a-crown asked him to compel the finder to return it. A woman from Weston-super-Mare wrote:

You told me if I lost any thing again and would send the day of the Month you would try what you could do. Know I lost a shall on the 16th of November and a silk hankerchif about 8 A'clock in the morning as I passed the st. and if you can get it again I will give you 2s.

As these letters suggest, the value of the lost money or goods was hardly great, but the fact that people thought it worth contacting Brewer about such losses shows the worth people placed on their meagre possessions. A cause of greater distress, however, concerned missing people. Thus a worried widow residing near Bristol sent the following letter:

Having heard of you by a friend I write to ask you if you could tell me about my son. He is abroad. I am a widow and I feel very anxious about him, not having heard of him for some time. He his in Ammerica.

Counteracting witchcraft was, of course, an essential part of Brewer's business, and so it is not surprising that this is reflected in his correspondence. What is interesting, though, is that people seem to have been coy about specifically mentioning witchcraft in their letters. It is likely that this was due to the formal nature of letter writing, with people expressing themselves in more discreet terms than they naturally would in verbal discourse. There was probably a certain popular fear of letters being opened by others - as is suggested in one of the above letters where the Jezebel-hater signs herself "You Know Who". Instead the talk is of "bad luck", of "enemies", or of someone "doing wrong", as in the following note from a depressed widow residing in Devon:

Will you be kind enough to write and tell me if there is not something wrong with me and my cattle, for I get nothing but bad luck, for everything I take in hand goes wrong. I have lost three big bullocks, besides other things. There seems always something bad. I am left a widdow with a family.

Another woman, this time of North Petherton, had, on Billy's advice, tried to magically cast some affliction upon her enemy:

I have carried out you instructions, but I find it don't infect the parties yet. I still get the fits and faceache. Now, do you think you could recomend any other thing to find them out has I fancy I want to know who it is that is doing wrong.

One distressed person simply wrote: "Father is very poorly indeed. He is not any better than when I was at your house. Due try and pull him up a bit."

A man from Cullumpton, a regular correspondent it would seem, requests Brewer to interpret the strange events occurring in a friend's house:

On Thursday last I went to see a friend of mine and while with him he told me off a very strange afair of his family. His father were taken ill some time ago, and since he's got parlised and talkes of all kindes of thinges. And a brother of him were taken with a fit a few nightes ago, and talked of all sortes of thinges. And he knowed nothings about it after he got over it. And strange to say, the night before or after the same man's wife saw a lot of thinges like cats running all about the bedroom. He forgot which it were, the night before or after. And since that another brother has been very near the same way. If you could kindly let me know what you think is the cause of it I will make it alright with you.

Surely a case of bewitchment if ever there was one, and no doubt Brewer intimated as such.

The sheer diversity of tasks that Brewer was asked to influence is particularly evident from his postbag. One man from Tiverton wrote simply:

just a line to tell you that my best clothes as being dreadfully yellow again this week. Please cause them to come right again.

A rather more garbled missive was sent by a village postman who grumbled about people troubling him by not affixing stamps to their letters, and seems to have suspected a sinister controlling hand behind this petty annoyance:

I was betrayed up to that feald to spend my money through taking 2d for a bottle of medicine I had to carry to my village, and to-night the enemie caused a Farmer handy the village to send a letter to-night without the stamp. I took the 1d to-night. Thought would tell you of it so as to stop them if they are on with any more of their difficulitys. I had to pay 3 ½ d tax again to-night.

As the tone of the above letter suggests, people not only wrote to Brewer with their specific requests to procure love, find lost property, and stop witchcraft, they also considered him as a sort of nineteenth-century “agony uncle”, a folk therapist to whom they could tell all the problems and frustrations in their lives. Thus a farmer’s wife unburdened herself:

We bought some calves twelve months ago, and bought the milk of this man next dower. One of them is not a bit larger know than it ware when we bought it ... The keeper and farmer did not like it because John told them to mind their selves. And the beast is not a penny better. They loose instead of gain, and that is how they and the farmer and keeper been on ever since we been year. I think John trusted them to much when we come year first. I think he talks to much to people. I wish he could not be so excitable, for then he spoiles himself. I am always tilling him about it not to trust anyone. They aggrate him, and then he say what he did not ought to. They till him he will lose every shilling he got just to make him truble, and he cannot sleep at night.

Another woman confided in Brewer about some obscure threat to her faith. She wrote to him on 25 December 1890, and so it must have been one of the last letters Billy received before he died.

Dear frind - Just a few lines hoping it will find you well as it leaves me not so will my heart is so weak i no some one hurt me are else i should never feel as i do o my enimes are so bad they want to take the church from me and wont give me nothing becose i ceep my daughter home what can i do without her dont let them take the church from me i could not ceep her if they did o what shall i do do rit and till me if i can do anything i wish you a merry christmas and a hapey new year many long years to in joy and may god bless you for the sake of me and others as will and i only which i was able to come and see you but i cant and i must big you to do your best for me and i have sind 2 glass for you and i which i was there to have a one with your which you would rit do so may god bless you from your ever loving frind \_\_\_\_ i no you will do you best for me.

William Brewer was by no means the only cunning-person operating in the region at the time, so why was it that he rather than some other practitioner attracted such popular renown? The answer to this question lies in circumstance, character and intelligence. To begin with, Brewer arrived on the scene when there was something of a vacuum at the top of the profession in west Somerset. The Bakers of Westleigh had ceased practising during the 1820s, and John Perry of Chard had died in 1850, so the opportunity was there to build up a reputation without facing any major competition. Crucial to consolidating and expanding his customer base was residential permanence. Brewer lived in Alfred Street for fifty years. People travelling from afar could be confident in finding him. Nearly everyone in Taunton could point the traveller in the right direction. Similarly, letters could easily find their way to Brewer’s door. Even if people only gave the address “Brewer, Taunton” someone at the Post Office would know for whom it was meant. But there must also have been something about Brewer the man that contributed to his success. He was popularly perceived to have a good character as well as great powers. Unlike some cunning-folk he had no apparent vices like drunkenness to tarnish his reputation. He was no recluse, but the lack of mourners at his funeral suggests that he had few if any close friends. Perhaps it was important to maintain this social distance in order to preserve a sense of mystery. Most crucial of all, though, was his success at evading imprisonment despite several court appearances. A conviction would have interrupted his career and perhaps even made a removal necessary, which in turn would have affected his reputation. This ability to avoid successful prosecution was shared by other celebrated cunning-folk I have studied from around the country. Put simply, to stay on top it was necessary to stay out of prison.

