

THE KELSEALE WONDER

Allison E. Barker

A letter in LPS 21 by Mary Turner of Manchester refers to Anonimus Crossley, infant of indeterminate sex born in 1619. The following transcript is of an entry in the burial register of Kelsale in Suffolk. It refers to the birth of a two-headed child.

'An[n]o d[omi]ni 1545 an[n]o regis H[en]ricii 8 37 in Juni was borne a wonder a monster whose father was Richard Baldrey of Kelsall Begotten in lawful matrimone which childe from the sholdre upward had growinge ii severall neks w[ith] ii fayre heds standing upo[n] them in lick qwantite eche head having, mothe, nose, eies, eares and windpipe goyng down in[to] the throt unto the brest whose body was lick the forme & shape of all other children whiche was sene to many credable people of Kelsall'

There are several interesting points. First, there was no record of the burial of the mother; she seems to have survived what must have been a very difficult birth. It was almost certainly a breech birth (i.e. feet first) which is not easy even today. There would be little problem as far as the shoulders but two heads to be delivered simultaneously would cause difficulties even for an accomplished physician. Kelsale was a small village with an estimated population of about 300 and unlikely to have an eminent doctor in the village. The family may have been sufficiently wealthy to obtain a physician from Saxmundham or Ipswich; we have no knowledge of the status of the Baldrey family in the community.

Secondly, there is the insistence that the child was 'begotten in lawfull matrimone' — there is no suggestion of punishment by God for some awful sin, nor of witchcraft by the mother or bewitching of mother or child by another person. There is no record of any trial for witchcraft in the area during the appropriate period. However neither are there any further entries relating to the Baldrey family; they may have been hounded out of the village deliberately or just by an excess of publicity.

The child was presumably stillborn since there is no record of baptism, but its burial was not secret or hurried; a very full description of the child was given and it was 'sene to many credable people of Kelsall'.

The child was certainly examined closely since the entry notes that the two heads and the body were completely normal (apart from the obvious abnormality) and that the infant had two necks with two windpipes going into the chest. This argues that someone with skill in scientific observation and some anatomical knowledge was present at or shortly after the birth.

The phenomenon was presumably caused by similar influences to those which result in identical twins, but without sufficient of the appropriate stimulus to cause even partial division of the embryo — this would have caused Siamese twins, which are a greater manifestation of the same situation. As a modern medical phenomenon this is not unknown; a two-headed baby was born in Scotland in 1970.