

'The fortunate and indefatigable apothecary of Pitt-street'. J. Tawell Apothecary, Druggist, and Spice-Dealer

July 2024

Since first encountering them I have been fascinated by apothecaries in the early years of the colonies and the part they played in the foodways. This advertisement of 21 October 1820 taken out by J. Tawell in the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* suggests why:

TAWELL, APOTHECARY, &c. No. 18, Pitt-street, Sydney.—Medicines generally, of the best qualities.—Captains of Ships supplied.—Medicine Chests fitted.—Prescriptions accurately prepared. And, as above, may be had in any quantities, best Epsom, Cheltenham, and Glauber Salts, fine Castor Oil, Senna, Bark, Sulphur, Goulard's Extract of Lead, Oil and Spirits of Vitriol, Spanish Liquorice, English Caraway Seeds, Allspice, Cinnamon, Cloves, Ginger, fine Arrow Root, Sago, Oatmeal, English Starch, &c. &c. &c. An elegant Medicine Chest for Sale.¹

It's selling spices that caught my attention. Tawell wasn't unique in this. His apothecary contemporaries also sold spices.² I wanted to know more about these apothecaries and how they fitted in the foodways of the early colonies.³

Tawell's apothecary business

In the 1820 advertisement of the commencement of his business Tawell described it as 'compounding, dispensing, and retailing of Medicines'. Of compounding he said that 'Physicians' and Family Prescriptions (would be) accurately prepared.' He put forward no qualifications, instead seems to have tried to forestall any questions: 'The Advertiser feels a conviction of the present need and utility of so important a branch of science in this Colony; and he takes this opportunity to state, that his qualifications are neither unprofessional nor irregular.'⁴ This seems not to have worked and by 1821 he seems to have sought and got a certificate to practice from 'a Board of Medical Gentlemen in this Colony, instituted by Command of HIS EXCELLENCY the GOVERNOR, the colony's Medical Board.'^{5 6}

Tawell operated what we would these days call a 'compounding pharmacy'. That is, in addition to selling already prepared medicines he also prepared medicines according to a doctor's prescription or a 'family recipe'.⁷ He assured his customers that 'Physicians and family recipes (are) dispensed with accuracy and care'.⁸ I wondered whether the spices he sold were also used in making medicines according to prescriptions and recipes. This is possible. Some of the spices have pharmacological properties, for example, coriander, cinnamon. cumin and cloves.⁹

¹ *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 21 October 1820 p.2

² See for example H. Mace Chemist and Druggist', *The Australian* 19 April 1926 p.1

³ I have preciously looked at Pastry Cooks and Confectioners. 'Twelfth Cakes, Fancy Biscuits and Kangaroo Soup. Pastry Cooks and Confectioners In *The Early Colonies of Australia*'. compost.sydney

⁴ *Gazette* 26 October 1820 p.3

⁵ ' *Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 16 June 1821 p.4

⁶ I could find nothing about this Board. The first New South Wales Medical Board was established in 1832

⁷ *The Australian* 19 April 1826 p.2

⁸ *The Australian* 9 February 1826 p.4

⁹ For pharmacological properties of other spices see for example cumin at [Cumin: Benefits and Side Effects \(healthline.com\)](https://www.healthline.com/health/cumin); coriander at [Coriander - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/food-science/coriander); for cinnamon see [PDF Therapeutic and Pharmaceutical Potential of Cinnamon \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331111111); for cloves see [Cloves: Health Benefits and Effects \(verywellhealth.com\)](https://www.verywellhealth.com/cloves-health-benefits-effects/)

In 1822 Tawell erected an 'Apparatus, for draught Soda Water; where also may be had Soda Powders, in boxes; and the different Artificial Mineral Waters prepared to order'.¹⁰

Tawell's Spice Business

The Spice-Dealer arm of his business continued. In 1825 those he had available were: nutmegs, mace, cloves, cinnamon, allspice, caraway and coriander seeds, black pepper, white and ground pepper, long pepper, and mustard seed.¹¹ What might purchasers of his spices do with them? They would certainly have made curries with them and/or curry powders. 'Curry powders were (also) made in the home from published recipes or those handed on by friends – most with assurances of authenticity. Early recipes advise that spices such as turmeric, cardamom and cumin, all uncommon in British cooking could be procured from chemists, ready powdered. Many chemists and speciality grocers also created their own signature blends.'¹² Tawell doesn't appear to have made his own version.

Tawell's General Stores Business

By 1825 his business had expanded into other areas. He stocked:

Gorgens anchovies, Burgess essence ditto, Harvey's sauce, lobster ditto, shrimp ditto, reading ditto, Italian ditto, soy, ketchup, cayenne pepper, currie powder, mustard warranted, patent ditto, salad in sixers, capers, fine olives; excellent vinegar in jars covered, and in draught and bottle; pickled gherkins onion, walnut, cauliflower, cabbage, French bean, and mixed, vermicelli, essence of spruce, saltpetre, prunella, sweet oil.¹³

He sold cakes, preserves, vinegars and candied peel.¹⁴ (See Appendix 1 for the full advertisement.)

In May 1826 he announced that he was now selling 'Coffee, of a superior Quality.- A Quantity just received, and being excellent of its kind, is recommended to Private Families, &c. and will be Sold by the Bag, at a very reasonable Price'.¹⁵

And that was only the food products. He had branched out into selling dyeing materials, perfumery and horse and cattle medicines.¹⁶

All these product lines grew over the next two years with new ones being added continually. So much had Tawell's business grown that he advertised for an assistant first in 1821¹⁷ and then again 1823 asking for 'A genteel Lad, suitably qualified by education, can be taken for a term of years as an Apprentice, with an adequate premium', though perhaps he didn't get anyone suitable in 1821.¹⁸

In 1827 he was described as 'the fortunate and indefatigable apothecary, of Pitt-street the first of his profession who embarked on so extensive a scale in the Colony'.¹⁹

¹⁰ *Gazette* 25 October 1822 p.4

¹¹ *Gazette* 27 October 1825 p.4

¹² Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and Recipes From Australian Kitchens* Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth Publishing p. 210

¹³ *Gazette* 27 October 1825 p.4

¹⁴ *Gazette* 27 October 1825 p.4

¹⁵ *Gazette* 10 May 1826 p.1

¹⁶ *Gazette* 27 October 1825 p.4

¹⁷ *Gazette* 21 June 1822 p.3

¹⁸ *Gazette* 11 December 1823 p.2

¹⁹ *Gazette* 27 August 1827 p.2

Tawell appears to have been quite canny in his practice, targeting customer sectors that may not have been well-served by other apothecaries. In 1821 he ran an advertisement the footer of which promised 'Country Orders punctually attended to.'²⁰ In 1826 he targeted 'Families, Captains of Vessels, and Persons Travelling to The Interior'.²¹ While this was likely mainly for the apothecary side of the business it may also have served those wanting some of his other products.

Apothecaries and the food supply system

There were other apothecaries in Sydney during the period 1820 – 1829. A. Swinton, 'surgeon, and apothecary' began his practice in 1816 and I assume was still operating when Tawell began.²² James C. Phelps advertised his business commencing in 1821.²³ H. Mace styled himself as a Chemist and Druggist, commencing his business in 1826.²⁴ His range of advertised food related goods was like Tawell's.

The apothecaries were part of the food supply system the other parts of which were importers, oilmen, grocers and general businesses.

Goods were brought to the colony by ship from where they were moved to an importer's warehouse. The importer then advertised the arrival of the goods and invited customers to view and then hopefully purchase them. This could be by bulk to others in the food system or retail to individual customers.

MACQUEEN AND FERGUSSON beg to inform the Public, that they have now ON SALE, at their Retail Warehouse, an extensive ASSORTMENT of the undermentioned ARTICLES ... M. and F. are now Selling the above Articles as low as they can be had in any Part of the Town to Families and also make reasonable Abatements to Dealers.²⁵

Apothecaries were one of the bulk purchasers. There were two others, oilmen and grocers.

Oilmen literally sold oil for lamps and other domestic use but sold other goods as well. They were often listed separately in an importers advertisement.

Oilman's stores – as capers, French olives, essence of shrimps, Harvey's sauce, lemon pickles, mushroom and walnut ketchup, Chili vinegar, pickles in quarter cases, mustard in pound and half pound bottles; stone blue, and allspice; soda powder, in bottles, first quality; rum, Geneva, and best French brandy...²⁶

Tea Dealer Grocers like Thomas Brett sold a range of foodstuffs also.

TEAS. SUGARS.

Gunpowder, 6s per lb	Refined loaf, 10d
Imperial, 5s. ditto	per pound
Hyson, 5s. ditto	Isle of France 3¾d,

²⁰ *Gazette* 22 November 1822 p.1

²¹ *The Australian* 19 April 1826 p.2

²² *Gazette* 16 March 1816 p.1

²³ *Gazette* 16 June 1821 p.1

²⁴ *The Australian* 19 April 1826 p.1

²⁵ *Gazette* 13 November 1823 p.4

²⁶ *Gazette and* 17 February 1821 p.3

Hyson skin, 6s. ditto	4d., 4 ½d per ditto
Souchong, 2s. ditto	Pine cheese, 2s. per do.
Split peas	Bathurst 9d per ditto
Irish pork	Oatmeal
Preserves	Groats
Vinegar	Mustard
Pepper	Pickles
Starch	Sauces
	Blue
Mocha coffee, unburnt, 1s. per 1lb	
Cylinder-roasted coffee, ground, 1s. 6d. per lb.	
Fine Westphalia HAMS, 1 s. 6d. per lb ²⁷	

The other competitors were general businesses like Parr's.

ON SALE, at PARR's, opposite the Lumber-yard, hyson, hyson skin, best souchong, and imperial teas, by the chest or caddy, sugar candy, loaf and best moist sugar, by the bag or ton, coffee, cocoa, and chocolate, English hams and cheese, sauces of sorts, mustard, capers, olive oil, olives, curry powder, white wine vinegar, English bottled gooseberries, raisins, nutmegs, allspice, cloves, mace, cinnamon, ginger, pepper, essence of spruce ...²⁸

There was then a competitive group of businesses and not an integrated network. Advertisements for one or other of the businesses often emphasised the low cost of the goods or other ways in which the purchaser could get the best price.

The undersigned having concluded to part with his Stock at as nearly as possible the cost prices as possible, the above are for cash only; and no book entry can be made at that rate.²⁹

Close of Business

In October 1826 Tawell advertised an 'Eligible Business To Be Disposed Of', his apothecary, because of his 'present ill health'³⁰. For reasons that are undisclosed he couldn't sell it that time. He continued operating but in August 1827 he again put the business on the market.³¹ In January 1828 he announced that the business had been sold to Mr Foss and Mr Mahony.³² In April 1829 Tawell and his wife sailed for England.³³

²⁷ *The Australian* 15 April 1829 p.1

²⁸ *Gazette* 3 November 1821 p.4

²⁹ *The Australian* 29 August 1827 p.1

³⁰ *Gazette* 25 October 1826 p.1

³¹ *The Australian* 22 August 1827 p.2

³² *Gazette* 7 January 1828 p.1

³³ *Gazette* 30 April 1829 p.2

Appendix 1 October 1825 advertisement for J. Tawell

TAWELL'S WAREHOUSE,
ON SALE, by J. Tawell No. 18, Pitt-street, Sydney

LONDON CONFECTIONERY... Lozenges, peppermint, cinnamon, rose, ginger, lesson, and heartburn coughs and colds ; Talc, Bath, nitre and black currant ditto ; lemon barley sugar, refined and Spanish liquorice, crack jokes, ornaments for cakes, nonpareils, peppermint seeds and drops.

CAKES-Cakes, biscuit drop«, best spice nuts, savoy, sponge, and queen «aces, pound cake ,cake ginger bread, and two cases of various mixed biscuits, from Regent-street, London.

COMFITS-Barberry, cardamom, cinnamon, raspberry, and mixed; sugar'd and burnt almonds.

PRESERVES & - Damsons, cherries, gooseberries, ginger, citron, orange marmalade, raspberry jam, red and black currant jelly, ditto Hoffman's, raisins, almonds, raspberry vinegar, nuts and filberts.

CANDIED PEELS-Citron, lemon, and orange.

SPICES--Nutmegs, mace, cloves, cinnamon, allspice, caraway and coriander seeds, black pepper, white and ground pepper, long pepper, mustard seed.

ITALIAN GOODS; &c- Gorgens anchovies, Burgess' essence ditto, Harvey's sauce, lobster ditto, shrimp ditto, reading ditto, Italian ditto, soy, ketchups, cayenne pepper, currie powder, mustard warranted, patent ditto, salad oil in sixes, capers, fine olives; excellent vinegar in jars covered, and in draught and bottle; pickled gherkins, onions, walnuts, cauliflower, cabbage, French bean, and mixed, vermicelli, essence of spruce, saltpetre, prunella, sweet oil.

SUNDRIES- Loaf sugar, fine North Wiltshire cheese, fine arrow root, tapioca, sago, pearl barley, ditto in cannisters prepared, groats, ditto in canisters prepared, oatmeal, fine table rice, ground ditto, bird seeds, beer wax, rotten stone, Toiler's earth, black lead, ivory black, lamp black, linseed oil, turpentine, English yellow and card soap, best English starch, thumb, fig, and powder blue, pearl ashes, soft soap, liquid blacking, and blacking paste, ink, sealing wax.

DYEING ARTICLES - Indigo, Prussian blue, cochineal, alkanet root, logwood, fustic, French berries, madder, vermilion, gamboge, turmeric, alum, copper, soft soap, dragon's blood, litmus, verdigris; all the various gums. painting brushes, &c.

SNUFFS – Prince's, Tonquin, Hardham's, Ruddiman's, and Morton's mixtures; Paris, brown, and black rappes, Scotch, plain, and scented, &c.

PERFUMERY, &.-Lavender, honey, and rose waters, in sizes; milk of roses, fancy soaps in great variety, macassar and Russia oil, rose oil and essences, in great variety; plain mid violet powder, pomatums of excellent scents, cold cream, court plaster, cut smelling bottles, aromatic vinegar, tooth powder, durable ink for marking linen, salt lemons, floating lights in small neat boxes, sponges, pink saucers, shaving boxes with glass, soap, and brush'; Smith's tooth brushes in sets, shaving, tooth, and nail brushes in variety; small tooth dressing, pocket combs, and comb brushes, wax tapers, improved fire boxes, aromatic pastiles for fumigating rooms.

PATENT MEDICINES-Cheltenham salts in powder and chrystal, essences of peppermint, and chrystal, essence of peppermint, Dalby's carminative, Godfrey's cordial, Daffy's elixir, Hooper's and Scott pills antibilious ditto, Seidlitz and soda powders, eau de luce for curing the bite of venomous reptiles and insects.

By the above, is received a fresh Supply of various useful Medicines; medicine chests completely fitted; prescriptions accurately prepare ; medicine chests ready for Sale.

*Some good oil peppermint, and various essential oils for cordials.³⁴

³⁴ Tawell's Warehouse', *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 27 October 1825 p.4