The Biddenden Maids: a curious chapter in the history of conjoined twins

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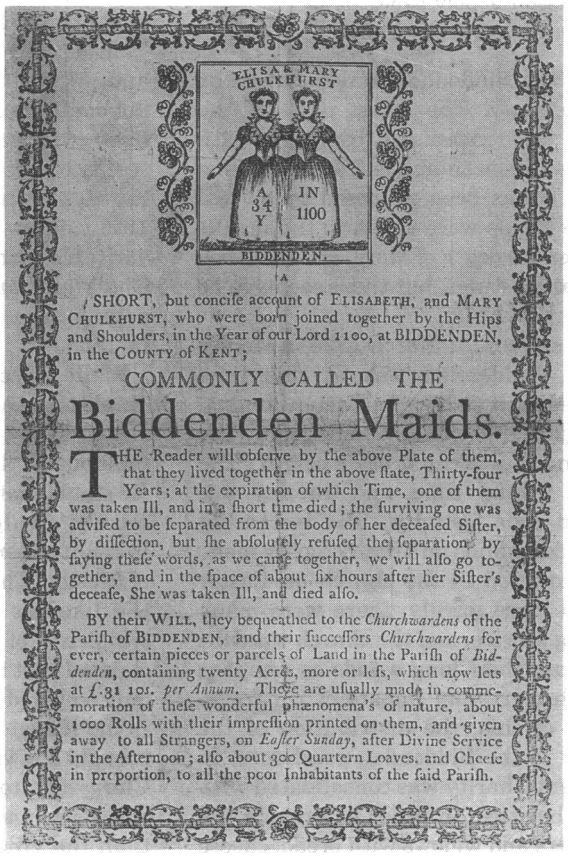
Keywords: conjoined twins; history of teratology; malformations; pygopagus twins

Introduction

On every Easter Monday morning, the small Kentish village Biddenden is the scene of a curious old custom called the Biddenden Maids' Charity. Through the window of a building called the Old Workhouse, tea, cheese and loaves of bread are given to the widows and pensioners of Biddenden, while large amounts of 'Biddenden cakes' baked of flour and water are distributed among the crowd of tourists and spectators. The cakes bear the effigy of the Biddenden Maids, two woman figures joined together at the hips and shoulders. A tradition of obscure and ancient origins tells that these Maids were born in the year 1100 and that they were symmetrical conjoined twins, living joined together for 34 years. While the Biddenden Maids have been extensively cited in the teratological literature as one of the earliest genuine cases of conjoined twins upon record, some antiquaries have considered the tradition to be wholly fabulous. In this paper, the literature on the Biddenden Maids is critically reviewed and new sources are used to bring light on some obscure matters.

The Biddenden Maids' life and death

According to tradition, the Biddenden Maids, Mary and Eliza Chulkhurst, were born to fairly wealthy parents in the year 1100. Their bodies were joined at the hips and shoulders. They were naturally very close friends, although they sometimes disagreed in minor matters, and had 'frequent quarrels, which sometimes terminated in blows'[1]. In 1134, when the Maids had lived joined together for 34 years, Mary was suddenly taken ill and died. It was proposed that Eliza should be separated from her sister's corpse by means of a surgical operation, but she refused with the words 'As we came together we will also go together', and herself died 6 hours later. In their will, the Maids left certain parcels of land in Biddenden, containing in all about 20 acres, to the church wardens of that parish; the annual rent from the fields, which is stated to have been 6 guineas at the time of the Maids' death[2], was to provide an annual dole for the poor. Every Easter Sunday for many years, the Maids' charity of bread, cheese and beer was given to the deserving poor. In 1640, the annual lease of these lands was 12 guineas. In 1681, the Rector of Biddenden, Giles Hinton, reported to the Archbishop of Canterbury that the distribution was made inside the church 'with much disorder and indecency', and he suggested that the custom needed 'a regulation by His Grace's Authority'. The charity remained, however, although the distribution of the cakes was removed to the church porch[3]. In 1770, the income from the Maids' lands was 20 guineas per annum, and a good deal of bread, cheese and beer was distributed in church after the afternoon service[4]. Those who did not gain an entrance into the crowded church had to be content with the hard Biddenden cakes with the Maids' effigy, which were thrown out among the populace from the church roof. A broadsheet on the Biddenden Maids was printed in 1808 (Figure 1), and sold outside the church during Easter[5]. Furthermore, a small plaque of the Maids was made in glazed red clay in imitation of the Biddenden cake[6]. By this time, the income from the Maids' lands had increased to 31 guineas and 11 shillings per annum, and as many as 1000 Biddenden cakes were baked, as well as 300 quartern loaves and cheese in proportion.


ELISA & MARY CHULKHURST
A 34 Y
IN 1100
BIDDENDEN.

A SHORT, but concise account of ELISABETH, and MARY CHULKHURST, who were born joined together by the Hips and Shoulders, in the Year of our Lord 1100, at BIDDENDEN, in the COUNTY of KENT;

COMMONLY CALLED THE

Biddenden Maids.

THE Reader will observe by the above Plate of them, that they lived together in the above state, Thirty-four Years; at the expiration of which Time, one of them was taken Ill, and in a short time died; the surviving one was advised to be separated from the body of her deceased Sister, by dissection, but she absolutely refused the separation, by saying these words, as we came together, we will also go together, and in the space of about six hours after her Sister's decease, She was taken Ill, and died also.

BY their WILL, they bequeathed to the *Churchwardens* of the Parish of BIDDENDEN, and their successors *Churchwardens* for ever, certain pieces or parcels of Land in the Parish of *Biddenden*, containing twenty Acres, more or less, which now lets at £.31 10s. *per Annum*. These are usually made in commemoration of these wonderful phænomena's of nature, about 1000 Rolls with their impression printed on them, and given away to all Strangers, on *Easter Sunday*, after Divine Service in the Afternoon; also about 300 Quartern Loaves, and Cheese in proportion, to all the poor Inhabitants of the said Parish.

Figure 1. A broadsheet on the Biddenden Maids and their bequest, published in 1808. Reproduced by kind permission from the President and Council, Royal College of Surgeons of England

In the 1820s, a 'new and enlarged' account of the Maids was printed[7], in which it was stated that a gravestone marked with a diagonal line, situated near the Rector's pew in Biddenden church, was shown to visitors as the Maids' place of interment. The church floor has since been renewed, and there is no

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gravestone visible near the Rector's pew, but it might be that it is situated beneath the organ, which now stands behind the Rector's seat. It is most probable that the Chulkhurst sisters were depicted on a stained glass window in the church's east wall, which has now been filled in. The pamphlet contained a poem regarding this:

The moon on the east oriel shone,
Through slender shafts of shapely stone,
The silver light, so pale and faint,
Shewed the twin sisters and many a saint
Whose images on the glass were dyed;
Mysterious maidens side by side.
The moon beam kissed the holy pane,
and threw on the pavement a mystic stain

Thus the grave of the Biddenden Maids cannot be identified with certainty. The oldest parts of the present church of Biddenden are from the 12th century, but an older Saxon church had been standing on the same spot. It has been proposed by a local historian[3] that the Maids were taken to the monks in Battle Abbey after the death of Mary, and that they were later buried at Hastings, but there seems to be little evidence for this theory.

According to the entries for March 1826 in Hone's *Every Day Book*[7], Biddenden was at this time completely thronged with visitors on Easter Sunday, 'attracted from adjacent towns and villages by the usage, and the wonderful account of its origin'. The public houses had a busy time, and the day was generally spent 'in rude festivity'. The increasing fame of the Biddenden Maids and their charity made the crowds that gathered in the church on Easter Sunday larger and more unruly; there were many disturbances during service, and the church wardens sometimes had to use their long wands as weapons to keep back the hungry and impatient congregation[8]. As a result of this, the distribution of the charity was moved to the Biddenden poorhouse. In 1907, the Chulkhurst Charity was consolidated with some other local charities, in order to provide the Biddenden pensioners and widows with bread, cheese and tea every Easter and a sum of money at Christmas. In due course, the acres of 'Bread-and-Cheese Land' were sold, and today they contain a number of cottages called the Chulkhurst Estate. The distribution of bread and cheese from the Old Workhouse has been continued as a curiosity, and it is today a rather popular tourist attraction; every visitor may have a Biddenden cake as a memento of the ceremony. The cakes are so hard that they are almost uneatable but they are the more enduring as travel souvenirs. At the Biddenden village green stands a wrought sign of the philanthropic Chulkhurst twins, which was erected in the 1920s.

Some early accounts of the Maids

It has been stated[5,9] that the Biddenden Maids were unknown in the antiquarian literature before they were mentioned in the 1775 edition of the *Antiquarian Repertory*[1], and in Dr Ducarel's *Repertory of the Endowments to the Dioceses of Canterbury and Rochester*, published in 1782[2]. These two early accounts agree that the charity had existed for a very long time and that it had been given by two conjoined twin sisters. According to one version[1], they were joined together at the shoulders and 'lower part of their bodies' and lived 'many years', while in the other[2], it is merely stated that they were joined together in their bodies, and that they lived in this state until they were 'betwixt 20 and 30 years old'. It has been suggested[10] that there was an early account of Maids in the *Lexicon Tetraglotton*, a semi-popular book published by Samuel Thomson in London 1660. However, according to a note[11], this account was apparently a copy of the Biddenden broadsheet on the sisters, which had later been pasted into the book. The earliest proper account of the Biddenden Maids thus is an anonymous article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1770[4]. Interestingly, it was stated here that the Maids were conjoined from the waist downward, and thus not at two separate anatomical sites; they lived in this way until they were 'considerably advanced in years'. In spite of the 'high antiquity' of the tradition, the writer of the article did not doubt its authenticity: 'An enquiry in the parish itself will procure abundant testimony, that the reality of this prodigy has always been honoured with the highest credit'. None of these three independent 18th century accounts of the Maids mentioned two veritable cornerstones in their legend: the name of Chulkhurst and their alleged year of birth 1100; these details were added in the broadsheet that appeared in 1808.

While these three early accounts of the Biddenden Maids took their existence for granted, the antiquary Edward Hasted considered the whole tradition to be fabulous in the third volume of his *History of Kent*. He stated that the legend of the Biddenden Maids was merely 'a vulgar tradition' and that the charity had in reality been initiated by two maidens by the name of Preston. The picture of the women on the cakes was the likeness of two poor widows, the most likely recipients of the Biddenden charity. Hasted also claimed that the print of the women on the cakes had only occurred during the last 50 years (he was writing in the 1780s). In 1645, the Rector William Horner had brought a lawsuit before the Committee for Plundered Clergyman to claim that the Bread and Cheese land was glebe land and thus belonged to the church rather than the villagers. The case caused quite a controversy between the Rector and the church wardens, but after a later protracted lawsuit in the Court of the Exchequer, the Rector was finally non-suited, and the Biddenden Easter charity continued as before. The massive bundles of handwritten court records in these cases are today kept at the Kent County Council archive in Maidstone.

The antiquarian evidence

Edward Hasted's harsh judgement of the Biddenden Maids tradition was uncritically accepted in several 19th century British ethnological and archaeological works, and during this time there was little new information on the Chulkhurst sisters and their curious bequest. The Maids were several times mentioned in the *Notes and Queries*[8,12-14], especially after the Siamese twins had toured Europe and showed that such a malformation was certainly not incompatible with life for a considerable period of time. In a note from 1866[14], the editors of this journal doubted Hasted's explanation of the print of the conjoined twin sisters and the name Chulkhurst on the Biddenden cakes, and considered that the mystery of the Maids was yet unsolved, and that it was 'well worth the attention of some of the Kentish antiquaries' to investigate it.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figures 2-4. Plaster casts of the three wooden stamps for Biddenden Cakes that were available to Clinch in 1900, from his paper[9]

This challenge remained unanswered for many years, but in 1900, the antiquary George Clinch published a thorough paper on the Maids, in which a good deal of new information was given[9]. Clinch had obtained plaster impressions of the moulds for the Biddenden cakes, and examined them closely, attempting to determine the custom's antiquity. While on the broadsheet, the Biddenden Maids are depicted as handsome in feature and elegantly dressed in the costume of the time of Mary I, their picture on the oldest cake mould (Figure 2) is primitive and bizarre. The eyes, faces and breasts are represented only by protusions, and the wear and tear of the old mould in the baker's shop could only partially be blamed for the snout-like expression of the faces. There are several other odd details, such as the arrangement of the hair, the presence of naked branches of trees on either side of the Maids, and a star-like object between their waists. The second type of cake (Figure 3) differs from the first in that the design of the faces is flatter and more detailed, and that the dress is more ornamental. This mould was used for Biddenden cakes in the 1820s[7], and also in the 1860s[14]; it is most probable that it was also used in 1875 and spoken of as boxwood dies cut in 1814[8]. The third mould (Figure 4) is the most detailed and ornamental, and certainly the latest; the semi-circular top has the picture of a sun, and the tree branches from the first mould recur. Ballantyne[5] speaks of two moulds for Biddenden cakes being used in 1895, one being the older (probably 150 years old), while the other was made much more recently. It is likely that these were the first and third moulds, respectively, of those photographed by Clinch. Today, only one cake mould is used, and this is of much later date. According to the Trustees of the Chulkhurst charity, none of the older moulds have been kept for posterity.

From his examination of the lettering and costume of the moulds, Clinch considered them to be from the 16th century. However, there are strong arguments that none of the moulds depicted by Clinch were actually in use before the 1780s, since the engravings[1,2] of older Biddenden cakes differ markedly from the cakes used in the 19th century. The 18th century cakes do not record the names of the Maids, nor their year of birth or age at the time of their death. Clinch blames the carelessness of the engravers for this inconsistency, but this seems less probable. It is very likely that there were several older moulds, used in the 18th century: it is reported[1] that the cakes were 'of different fineness and forms', and drawings of two different cakes are reproduced (Figure 5). The pictures of the women on the 18th century cakes have many details in common with those of the later cake moulds, especially the oldest of these (Figure 2).

The three 18th century accounts of the Maids previously quoted do not mention their names, and it is even explicitly stated[4] that 'the Maids of Biddenden are not known by any particular name'. Had the cake moulds photographed by Clinch been in use during this period, there would have been no difficulty in determining their proper names as well as their year of birth. Clinch's arguments about the Maids' clothing may certainly be correct, since the effigy was obviously copied from the older moulds. In the *Antiquarian Repertory*[1], it was stated that the sisters had lived 'as tradition says, two hundred and fifty years ago', and Clinch considered this estimate more trustworthy than the popular belief that they had been born in 1100; this would have placed their year of birth in the beginning of the 16th century. Furthermore, Clinch's examination of the oldest cake mould led him to believe that the second '1' from the left in the date was really a slightly curved five (Figure 2), and that the Maids were thus born in 1500; Heaton had earlier formulated a similar hypothesis[15]. However, the present writer is unable to detect any difference at all between the two '1's in the date of this, or any other, of the Biddenden cake moulds.

Several British antiquaries commented on Clinch's article. While MacMichael defended Hasted's arguments and stated that 'the whole story is discredited by competent antiquaries'[16], Hussey had examined the index of wills at the Canterbury

Figure 5. Two 18th century Biddenden Cakes, reproduced from the Antiquarian Repertory[1]. *Another similar 18th century cake is reproduced by Ducarel*[2]

Probates Office, and found none with the name of Chulkhurst[17]. However, an early reference to the old Biddenden Easter custom was found in the archives of the Archdeacon's Court. When Biddenden Church was to be visited by the Archdeacon of Canterbury on Easter Day 1605, the custom that 'on that day our parson giveth unto the parishioners bread, cheese, cakes and divers barrels of beer, brought in there and drawn' was not observed, because it was usually accompanied by 'much disorder by reason of some unruly ones, which at such a time we cannot restrain with any ease'[17]. Among the historical and ethnological writers of today, the opinions on the Biddenden Maids are divided: some agree with Hasted that the old tradition is entirely fabulous, while others consider the version of Heaton[15] and Clinch[9] that they lived in the 16th century to be the most probable. In the teratological literature, however, the legend of the Biddenden Maids is uncritically accepted[18-20], including their alleged year of birth 1100.

The teratological evidence

A further difficulty in accepting the tradition of the Biddenden Maids as entirely authentic is the nature of their malformation: in the available cakes and drawings, they are depicted as being conjoined both at the shoulders and at the hips. It is most uncommon that Siamese twins have two separate parts of conjunction, and very few such cases have been reported; most teratologists would not accept the possibility of a fusion at the hips and shoulders. In 1895, the teratologist J W Ballantyne was the first to consider the Biddenden Maids from a teratological point of view[5]. He suggested that they were in fact only conjoined at the hips and thus belonged to the teratological type pygopagus. Such conjoined twins each have two arms and legs, and it has often been noted that in order to walk without difficulty, they put their arms around each other's shoulders; this might have led to the Biddenden Maids being depicted in the way described above. The learned German teratologists Schwalbe[21] and Hübner[22] supported Ballantyne's hypothesis.

The teratological type pygopagus, where the twins are joined at the sacrum, comprises about 18% of the conjoined twins. The twins have more or less complete fusion of the rectum and other perineal structures, but the spinal cords are usually separate. The first successful surgical separation of pygopagus twins was performed in 1950, and in later years, several pairs of such twins have been separated; the success of the operation depending very much on the extent of the conjunction between the bodies and the number of shared organs, as well as the occurrence of additional cardiovascular malformations. A fair proportion of the pygopagus twins are perfectly viable at birth, and several of the historical cases of this malformation have reached maturity. The Hungarian Sisters, Helena and Judith, were a celebrated pair of pygopagus conjoined twins in the 18th Century; they travelled extensively through Europe, and were examined by many eminent naturalists. In later life, the Hungarian Sisters entered a convent, where they died in 1723 aged 22 years. The pygopagus twins Rosa and Josepha Blazek were even more famous. They were called 'Le pygopage du Théatre de l'age Gaité', and were a well-known attraction at the Paris stage of the 1890s; they amused the audience by singing and playing violin duets. Later, the two inseparable sisters married the same man and moved to the United States; they died there in 1922 aged 43 years[19].

In the light of these case histories, it is certainly not unlikely that the Biddenden Maids might have lived as long as 34 years. Nor is it impossible that one sister survived the other for six hours. At the death-bed of the original Siamese twins, Chang survived Eng for at least 2 hours, despite that their livers were connected[19], and in a French case[6], one conjoined twin survived the other for more than 10 hours. Hübner[22] quotes several similar cases, including that of a pair of xiphopagus twins where one individual survived the other for 7 hours.

Evidence from historical and teratological chronicles

Due to the mystery and fascination of congenital malformations, the annals of teratology stretch back far into the dark ages. Although the old prodigy-books and chronicles of strange events are unreliable sources, it was considered of interest to examine some of the old standard works of teratology, as well as some English historical chronicles, in order to look for early references to the Biddenden Maids. Due to the argumentation of Heaton[15] and Clinch[9] about the Maids' year of birth, both the 12th century and the 15th and 16th centuries were considered. It turned out that the Maids were not mentioned in any of the major teratological works of the 16th and 17th centuries, such as those by Aldrovandi, Liceti, Paré, Schenckius and others. Nor were they noticed in the Philosophical Transactions or any other British collection of teratological descriptions. This is an argument against the opinion that they lived in the 16th or 17th century, since most other remarkable monsters that reached maturity occasioned much publicity in the popular and scientific works of this period. Conjoined twins that lived for 34 years were quite some sensation, and it is reasonable to presume that if the Biddenden Maids had lived in the 16th or 17th century, they would certainly have been mentioned in the annals of teratology.

There is a remarkable accumulation of reports of English conjoined twins in the beginning of the 12th century. According to Lycosthenes' *Chronicon Prodigorum et Ostentorum* from 1557, conjoined twin brothers had been born in England in 1112, and their

bodies were joined at the hips and 'ad superiores partes', like in the popular descriptions of the Biddenden Maids. Even more interesting is that a medieval historical chronicle, the *Chronicon Scotorum*, tells us that in AD 1099, a woman gave birth to 'two children together, in this year, and they had but one body from the breast to the navel, and they were two girls'. In the Irish chronicle *Annals of the Four Masters* is an almost identical description, although the conjoined twin girls are stated to have been born in 1103; in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* their year of birth is given as AD 1100. These ancient descriptions are unreliable in details and probably dependent on each other, but in spite of this, they add some credibility to the old tradition that the Biddenden Maids were really born in 1100. It should also be added that in this year, King William Rufus was found dead in the New Forest with an arrow either of a hunter or an assassin in his breast. Several prodigies were said to have preceded his death, and at Pentecost, blood was seen to gush up from the earth like a fountain. Conjoined twins born this year might well be regarded as another strange prodigy foreboding the King's death, and thus be much noticed both in the chronicles and in folk tradition.

Concluding remarks

The old legend of the Biddenden Maids has many elements of truth. Several events in the Maids' story, such as their living joined together for a considerable time, their refusal to be separated and one of them living for some hours after the other had died, are likely to have a great impact on popular imagination. The old tradition is teratologically quite possible, providing that the hypothesis of Ballantyne[5] that the Maids were pygopagus conjoined twins is accepted; this interpretation has support from the earliest description of the Maids, and it is possible that the idea of a double conjunction derives from a later misinterpretation of the figures on the Biddenden cake. The historian Edward Hasted's attempt to discredit the old legend seems less convincing, and some of his statements have been proven to be wrong. Chambers[23] supported Hasted's arguments and presumed that the ignorant villagers had invented the story of the conjoined twin sisters, after the real origin of the charity had been forgotten. However, it is impossible to find a reasonable motive for the 18th century Biddenden villagers to make up such a story, and it would certainly have been beyond their capacity to make it teratologically correct.

The Biddenden Easter charity can be traced back into the first years of the 17th century, and in the mid-17th century legal documents in the Kent County Council archive in Maidstone, it is stated to be of a considerable antiquity. It is notable, however, that it is not explicitly stated in these documents that the Biddenden Maids were conjoined twins; it is simply declared that the charity was originally given by 'two Maidens of Biddenden'. While Ballantyne[5] favoured the traditional version of the legend that the Maids were born in 1100, Clinch[9] suggested that they had in fact lived in the 15th or 16th century, but his arguments concerning the cake moulds do not stand up to a critical examination. Furthermore, it would seem odd that the only pair of British conjoined twins to reach maturity would have gone totally unnoticed in the popular and scientific literature, if they had lived at this time of great interest in the study of teratology. Instead, there is a remarkable accumulation of old records concerning the birth of conjoined twins in the early 12th century, and the old legend that the Maids were born in 1100 cannot be dismissed.

Acknowledgments: Mr J Witherden, Mr Harold Farris and the Rev Roger Smith, Biddenden, are gratefully thanked for important information. The staff of the Kent County Council archives, Maidstone and of the Reading Room, British Library, are thanked for providing access to some scarce books and manuscripts. Financial support from the Crafoord Foundation (Lund, Sweden) is gratefully acknowledged.

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(Accepted 14 May 1991)