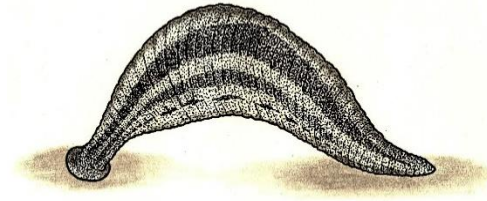


## Medicinal Leeches

Here is what Samuel Lewis had to say about Marloes in 1833:

“MARLAIS (MARLOES), a parish in the hundred of RHÔS, county of PEMBROKE, SOUTH WALES, 11 miles (W.S.W.) from Haverfordwest, containing 427 inhabitants. This parish is situated on the southern shore of Muggleswick bay, a lesser portion of St. Bride's bay, the western extremity forming a small promontory, and is partly bounded on the east by a small pill, or creek, of Milford Haven. It comprises a considerable tract of arable and pasture land, which, with the exception of a comparatively small portion, is enclosed and in a good state of cultivation. The village is principally inhabited by fishermen, who obtain a livelihood in the lobster and crab fisheries, which are carried on here to a considerable extent, and by the sale of leeches, which are found in great numbers in a sheet of water covering from sixty to seventy acres, called Marlais Mere, and which, during the summer months, when it is dry, affords excellent pasturage for cattle.”



Medicinal leech (*Hirudo medicinalis*)

Here is another quote: “The mere was common land until 1811; at that time Richard Fenton mentioned that it abounded in medicinal leeches ([Hirudo medicinalis](#)), from which the villagers derived a considerable trade.”

The big question is – “are there still any there?” Medicinal leeches have declined dramatically all over the country and it is thought there are no longer any in the Mere, or indeed anywhere in Pembrokeshire – the reasons may be complex.

Over-exploitation was probably the initial problem – the trade hit its peak in the mid nineteenth century and each year tens of millions of leeches were exported to Europe and America. Then changes in land use, wetland drainage and reduction in grazing all played their part, followed the introduction of chemical worming treatments such as Ivermectin.

At Marloes Mere it is likely that, for a considerable period, cattle were not grazed on the marsh and this caused the final extinction of the medicinal leeches – they need large mammals walking around in the water on which they can attach themselves, in order to get the blood meals which enable them to grow and reproduce.

Recently, of course, leeches have become a valid treatment for certain conditions – their anti-coagulant properties improve the blood flow in the part of the body where they are attached, and they can also remove excess blood which is pooling in a wound. This aids healing. The leeches used for this are raised in special farms and many of these are in Wales - it is fascinating stuff – just try Googling “leech farms” to find out more. There is a particularly good BBC News story from 2013.