The oldest sick note

A 450-year-old letter written by Mary Queen of Scots excusing a nobleman from his duties was sold at auction earlier this year for £6000 [1]. Dated 14 March 1554 it has been described as the world’s oldest sick note and was sent by Mary to the Laird of Blair, relieving him of his duties at court as he was suffering from gout. Gout, traditionally an affliction of the rich, was even worn as a badge of honour rather than the more common rheumatism. Many famous individuals have suffered from gout including Martin Luther, Sir Isaac Newton and Thomas Jefferson. But in the bicentennial year of his birth, England’s greatest fictional author not only suffered with the condition but featured it repeatedly in his writing. Sam Weller, in the Pickwick Papers, cautions his father against excessive drinking fearing it will bring the old man to the grave. ‘A sovereign cure for the gout’ said Mr Pickwick hastily producing his notebook ‘What is it?’ ‘The gout, sir,’ replied Mr Weller ‘the gout is a complaint as arises from too much ease and comfort. If ever you’re attacked you’ll never have the gout agin.... I can warrant it to drive away any illness as is caused by too much jollity.’ [4].

John Hobson
e-mail: hon.editor@som.org.uk

References