



MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY 66-68 East Smithfield, London E1W 1AW

History of the Society's Museum

The Society's museum was created in 1842, a year after the Society. It was intended as a reference collection for the students of the newly formed School of Pharmacy. Jacob Bell, the Society's founder, wrote in the first edition of *The Pharmaceutical Journal* that the School should be equipped with a laboratory, a library and a "complete museum of *materia medica* comprising specimens of good and bad drugs."

Bell described the museum soon after it was set up:

The museum is a front room on the ground floor, 26 feet by 20, containing not a vestige of furniture. The bare boards are well-scoured, the ceiling and walls are in a perfect state of repair, but there is not even a chair or table to invite the student to sit down and contemplate what alterations are likely to take place in the apartment within the next six months. On the floor at one corner is a small heap of brown paper parcels, containing a few donations from two or three members, and on the mantel-shelf are about a dozen glasses and bottles, in which are sundry crystals, roots and other substances. These objects form the nucleus of the MUSEUM OF MATERIA MEDICA OF THE PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN.

Theophilus Redwood (1808 –1892) was the first museum curator. He was also the first librarian, the professor of pharmacy at the Society's School, and the sub-editor of *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. Along with a museum committee, Redwood encouraged donations from Council members, officers, Society members and pharmaceutical businesses to build up a collection.

By 1863, the museum had expanded to occupy three rooms of the Society's headquarters. According to *The Pharmaceutical Journal* in 1858, "many of the early supporters of the Society vied with each other in presenting the most rare and curious specimens, as well as others varying in quality to make the collections as complete as possible." The museum was principally used as a source of lecture specimens by Professors Redwood and Bentley, and increasingly as a collection of examples that could be used as a comparison with others to assess their purity. However, in the early days, it did not see regular use by students:

The approach of these [Society's] examinations could always be predicted from the group of eager students gathered around the drawers. But at other times, and except for the occasional visit of one or two of Dr Pereira's class bent on verifying some point in his morning's lecture, the Museum was not much frequented by us. R.W. Giles, Session of 1847-48

Unsurprisingly, in view of his many roles, Redwood admitted that he neglected the museum. After his retirement in 1867, the Society agreed to a full-time curator post, at an annual salary of £150. Between 1867 and 1872, there were three museum curators.

The appointment of Edward Morrell Holmes in 1872 was a significant turning point in the museum's history. Holmes (1843 – 1930) was curator for 50 years until his retirement in 1922. He built up the museum collections to over 20,000 specimens. He collected samples of crude drugs from around the world, established separate teaching collections, published full catalogues and reports,



Jacob Bell around 1841



wrote more than 350 articles and notes for *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, and was an active member of the Museums Association. His achievements far exceeded the Society's definition of his post: "They reflect the man, not the office, for there is no record that his predecessors did much else than keep the place tidy."

The “Chemistry” Museum at Bloomsbury Square, in about 1883

A new chapter in the Museum's history began in 1937, when the decision was made to establish an historical collection, to coincide with the Society's move to a new headquarters. Although the move to the new headquarters was abandoned for financial reasons, the museum collections expanded as was intended. Agnes Lothian, the librarian and part-time curator from 1940 to 1968, carried out an ambitious purchasing programme, particularly in the areas of ceramics, caricatures, and proprietaries (brand name medicines).

By the 1950s, the original *materia medica* collections were out of favour. Although their research potential was still recognised, changes in pharmacy and pharmacy education meant that the museum's original purpose, its "practical utility" for students, was in an irreversible decline. The herbarium and *materia medica* was transferred to the University of Bradford in 1965, and then to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 1982. These collections are still at Kew, and are available for research.

In 1976, after 135 years at Bloomsbury Square, the Society moved to new headquarters in Lambeth. From the outset, objects from the museum's collections were displayed throughout the building, from the basement to the fifth floor.

In 2015 the Society moved to its current headquarters at 66-68 East Smithfield, London. Here the museum displays are concentrated on the ground floor.

Since the 1980s, with the appointment of specialist curators, the museum has concentrated on a wide range of activities from conservation programmes and computer cataloguing, to outreach events, exhibitions and publications. It is also a member of the London Museums of Health and Medicine group. Its collections have grown to around 40,000 items, including:

- traditional dispensing equipment
- drug storage containers
- fine "Lambeth delftware" dating from the 1600s and 1700s
- proprietary (brand name) medicines dating from the 1700s to the present day
- bronze mortars
- medical caricatures
- the Society's photo archive.



The illustration overleaf is from a Museum postcard showing Jacob Bell, the founder of the Pharmaceutical Society (1841) and the first editor of the Pharmaceutical Journal.

This information sheet is also available in a large font size.
Please contact us on 020 7572 2210 or email museum@rpharms.com