

THOMAS GAYDON — A PIONEERING CHEMIST

In this article, David Moore and his wife Vivianne describe the life of Thomas Gaydon, an apothecary who arrived in Childers, Queensland, Australia in 1894.

A museum in Childers, which is a memorial to his pioneering work, remains today. Readers travelling to Australia later this year to attend the International Pharmaceutical Federation congress, may wish to pay it a visit

With the reduction in cost of international airfares, Australia has become a more affordable holiday destination. On a recent visit, we found that it is also an area crying out for pharmacists. Luckily, the modern day immigrant would find things slightly easier than those who arrived a hundred or so years ago.

The town of Childers is located 325km north of Brisbane. The area was first explored by Europeans in the 1850s, but the town really developed in the late 1880s as a result of the sugar cane industry. Thomas Gaydon, an apothecary, arrived here in 1894, four years after serving his apprenticeship in Brisbane. His first task on taking up his block was, with the help of his partner William Hood (tobacconist and stationer), to clear the land using axes and mattocks. Then, using local timber, they built their shops. Gaydon was an adaptable and versatile man. Besides running the only pharmacy in the area, he was quite happy to take on the role of veterinary surgeon, to supply people's optical needs, remove a tooth and, when someone needed an operation at the local hospital, he would step in to administer the anaesthetic. He was keenly interested in photography, and many a local wedding or bouncing baby was recorded by him.

In 1902, he received a serious setback. That year was dry; most of the buildings were of timber construction and close set, and Childers had no fire brigade. In March, a fire swept through the little town, destroying most of the south side of the main street, including Gaydon's shop. Undeterred, he battled on, and in 1902 moved his business into new premises — brick built this time. The shop was well fitted with red cedar shelving and counters, and a door leading through to a dispensary and office. In 1909, he was doing so well that an upper storey was added, with large windows giving excellent light for the expanding dental service provided there. Gaydon was clearly a public-spirited man who delighted in being busy, serving on many local committees and charities, including the hospital and school committees. He was at various times, president of the Chamber of Commerce and chairman of the Isis Shire Council. He married and had two sons: T. Geoffrey Gaydon, who trained as a dentist, moving into the upper premises, and S. Noel Gaydon, who followed his father to become a pharmacist,



Childers Pharmaceutical Museum first opened its doors to the public in 1989, and contains a collection of 25,000 items and photographs

taking over the business on Thomas Gaydon's death in 1935. The pharmacy was obviously busy as, in 1938, Mervyn G. Hooper joined the staff as a chemist, later going into partnership with Noel and taking over on Noel's death in 1966. Following Mervyn's eventual demise in 1982, his wife Isbell (known as Isa) operated a small gift shop from the front of the property, leaving all the pharmacy material *in situ*. The shop finally ceased trading in 1987.

Thankfully, the residents of Childers recognised the importance of this small piece of history and were able, with help from the National Trust of Australia, to raise the money to lease the building and purchase the contents. The Childers Pharmaceutical Museum opened its doors to the public in 1989, and any pharmacists (and their partners) will find the dispensary fascinating. The shelves and drawers are crammed with the collected ephemera of a hundred years of pharmaceutical history, in total 25,000 items and photographs. There are about a thousand ground glass apothecary bottles, with their original contents. Leather bound prescription books, their pages marble-edged, are filled with copperplate writing detailing the daily ills of this early pioneering community, most of which could be cured, apparently, by tincture of rhubarb. Many of us would look with affec-

tion at the rosewood and brass rolled pill maker, the huge Wedgwood mortar and pestle and Thomas's formulary, and remember with nostalgia the time before blister packs and patient information leaflets.

The shop itself is equally charming: the walls are lined with cedar shelving, crammed with patent medicines and remedies. Tincture of iodine and Beecham's pills rub shoulders with tins of Elastoplast, Strepsils and Rybar inhalers. The cast iron national cash register dating from 1906 is a work of art, although probably as terrifying in its day as a new computer system is in ours.

It was a delightful surprise to find this amazing collection tucked away in a small parade of shops, so easy to miss as you hurry along the Bruce Highway. The museum is a proud memorial to Thomas Gaydon's great achievements and to all the other pharmacists who battled to bring their pharmacy skills to pioneering backwaters all over the world.

OPENING HOURS

The museum is open Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm, and Saturday 9am to 11.30am. Admission AUS\$3.