

## Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

### The earliest known dated delftware drug jar

One of the most important objects in the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum collections is the earliest known delftware drug jar bearing a date.

On 10 October 1953, Ernest Saville Peck, a pharmacist from Cambridge and a past president of the Society, wrote to Agnes Lothian, the Society's librarian, who was also in charge of the museum. Mr Peck had been contacted by the Reverend H. R. Willimot of Langport, Somerset, who sought his opinion about a large tin-glazed drug jar dated 1647 that he was planning to donate to a local museum.

Mr Peck, an enthusiastic and knowledgeable collector of both bell-metal mortars and delftware jars, sent a photograph of the jar in question to Miss Lothian. She replied immediately: "This seems to be a very important 'find'. Can you not persuade him to leave it to the Society's Museum or give us the opportunity of acquiring it by purchase?"

The evidence of Mr Peck's powers of persuasion is obvious, since Miss Lothian wrote to him on 2 December 1953 saying that she had bought the jar for £100. He wrote back saying that he was "delighted". The Society's Establishment and Publications Committee also "congratulated the Librarian on this purchase".

There was good reason for congratulations, since the jar can boast two claims to fame. Not only is it the earliest known dated delftware drug jar but it is also the earliest dated appearance of Apollo, the god of medicine, on an English drug jar.

The large jar, 40cm tall, is decorated in blue and yellow with the coat of arms of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries on the front. The arms show Apollo, the Roman god of healing, killing the dragon of disease. He is supported by two unicorns, from the royal arms of King James I, and a rhinoceros as believed to be medicinal). The date 1647 appears above the rhinoceros. The rest of the decoration consists of an all-over leaf design with a pomegranate and a bell-shaped flower among the foliage.

The jar was made in London, most likely in Southwark, which was one of the centres of "delftware", or tin-glazed earthenware, in the 1600s. Its size and appearance suggest that it was probably used for display, rather than as a practical storage container. Jars and pill tiles with the Apothecaries' arms could have been displayed by members of the Society to proclaim their professional standing to their customers.

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries is a City of London livery company, formed in 1617. The motto, "Opifer que per orbem dicor," is taken from the first book of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'. It translates as "I am spoken of all over the world as one who brings help."

The Museum's collection of tin-glazed drug jars is one of the finest in Britain. A significant number of jars from the collection are on display in the



The drug jar, showing the date "1647" above the rhinoceros crest

Society's headquarters. There are also plans for an illustrated catalogue of the delftware collection to be published by The Pharmaceutical Press later in 2005.

Members and their guests are able to view the Museum's displays during office hours on Monday to Friday. The displays are open to the general public on Tuesdays between 1.30pm and 4.30pm. Bookings can be made through the museum office (tel 020 7572 2210; e-mail museum@rpsgb.org.uk). Researchers are able to make an appointment to see items from the collections on any weekday by contacting the museum.