

Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

The mystery of the Sun King's mortar

Among the many historical exhibits on show at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's London headquarters sits an item that connects the Society to Louis XIV of France (the "Sun King"), the persecution of the Protestant Huguenots in 17th-century France and the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London.

The item in question is an ornate and unique mortar given by Louis XIV to his personal master apothecary, Charles Angibaud. Monsieur Angibaud fled France to escape religious persecution and came to England where, in 1728, he rose to become the Master of the Society of Apothecaries.

Many mysteries still surround the origins of the mortar, including how it made its epic journey across the Channel from France. The Society's museum staff are keen to solve the final pieces of this historical jigsaw and are asking for information from pharmacists, collectors, antiquarians and historians alike.

The mortar is made of bell metal, an alloy of copper and tin that is easily melted and cast into shape. It is the largest mortar on display at the Society, and its size alone makes it a unique item. It stands 360mm (14in) high and has a rim diameter of 480mm (19in). It is said to weigh a colossal 129kg (284lb or 20 stone).

Boasting two rams' head handles jutting out from its sides, the mortar's decoration consists of three coats of arms and an inscription which runs around the outer rim reading, "CHARLES ANGIBAUD ME APPRE ET ORDINAIRE DV ROY A PARIS 1678". One of the decorative coats of arms depicts an angel reaching towards a sunlit sky. This has been interpreted as the arms of Charles Angibaud as it could be a play on his name; "ange" is the French for angel and "beau", in this context, means fair weather. Angibaud used this mark on all of his products as a sign of their authenticity. This coat of arms is flanked by two royal standards of Louis XIV.

Research undertaken over 40 years ago by the Society's former librarian, Agnes

Lothian Short, shows that the mortar has led an extremely varied and exciting life.

The mortar was commissioned by Louis XIV from the Royal foundry and presented to Angibaud in 1678.

Charles Angibaud was born into an established apothecary family in the town of Saintes, near Bordeaux. His grandfather, Jean, had an apothecary shop on the Grande Rue of the town as early as 1636.

Charles's father, Daniel, followed Jean into the business, as did Charles. Shortly after the mortar was presented to Charles he left Paris and the royal court for London, to escape religious persecution as a Protestant. At that time France was undergoing an extended period of religious tension when the Protestant Huguenots' freedom to worship was being publicly questioned.

Establishing himself in London, Charles became a naturalised English subject and on 6 October 1685 he was sworn in as a freeman of the Society of Apothecaries. This allowed him to practise his family trade in the city of London, or within seven miles of the city limit.

He established a business in St Martin's Lane near Charing Cross, selling such notable products as his famous "Pectoral Lozenges of Blois" and the family recipe of "Juyce of Liquorice" and liquorice paste.

At the close of the 17th century Charles was summoned to the livery at the society and "fined" £15 and clothed to become a liveryman. He advanced further in his career by being elected to the positions of renter warden in 1721, upper warden in 1726 and finally master of the Society of Apothecaries on 22 August 1728.



Angibaud's mysterious mortar

So how did his mortar end up in the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum? The truth is that the full story is still not known. Whether it came from France with Angibaud or somehow made its way across the Channel at a later date is unclear. We do know that it was presented to the Society in 1902 by Percy Robbins, son of John Robbins, who was treasurer of the Society from 1880 to 1890. In the 1860s John Robbins had trained as an apprentice to Alexander Garden, a founder of the Society, at his premises at 372 Oxford Street — not a million miles from where Angibaud had established his shop at St Martin's Lane.

Therefore the mystery remains as to how this wonderful piece of pharmaceutical history travelled across from France, who with and why, and how it ended up in the possession of Percy Robbins, who eventually presented it to the Society.

If anybody can shed any further light on the history of Louis XIV's mortar, the Society's museum staff, and no doubt many others, would be fascinated to know more.

Anyone with information should contact Briony Hudson (tel 020 7572 2211; e-mail briony.hudson@rpsgb.org).

Replica jars

Replicas of three ceramic jars from the collections of the Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society are available for purchase from the Society:

- Leech jars — copies of a fine example of a 19th century glazed earthenware show jar for leeches, 15cm high with a circumference of 15.5cm, £50
- Drug storage jars — replicas of a pot used for storing candied orange peel, bearing the inscription "C: CORT: AUR", which is an abbreviation of the Latin "Conditus Cortex Aurantiorum", £56
- Syrup jars — copies of a jar bearing the inscription "S ROSAR. CU AG", an abbreviation of the Latin "Syrupus Rosaceus Solutivus cum Agarico" (solute syrup of rose with agaric), £86

The jars are available by mail order direct from the museum. Full details and an order form can be downloaded from the museum section of the Society's website (www.rpsgb.org/museum), which also has photographs of the jars. Alternatively, orders can be placed by contacting the museum (tel 020 7572 2210; e-mail museum@rpsgb.org).

The mail order postal charge within the United Kingdom is £22, which covers up to five leech or drug jars or two syrup jars. Postage charges for Europe and the rest of the world are given on the order form or are available by contacting the museum.

The jars and other merchandise, including cards and books, can also be bought in person from the Library at the Society's headquarters during normal working hours.