

## Treasures of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Collections

### The mystery of Mrs Smith's medicine chest

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum collections include over 30 medicine chests, each interesting in its own right. They primarily represent the heyday of medicine chests in Britain — the 19th century. However, one of the most complete examples has remained something of a mystery because no records survive about its age or provenance. The only fact known about it was that it was donated to the museum by a Mr Francis in 1960. Finding out more has involved a significant amount of historical detective work.

The chest's form itself offers a clue, as its "Duke of York" style with a lifting lid and a door to the front was typical from the late 1700s to about 1830. Military-style flush brass handles became popular in the 1820s, so if this were a fashionable chest, its protruding handles would suggest an earlier date. Makers' names are rarely printed on medicine chests, and this one is no exception.

From the late 1700s onwards, medicine chest bottles were rectangular in section to fit effectively into a rectangular chest. Many have labels on their shoulders, so that they can be read from above when placed in the chest. Emptied bottles would be refilled back at the pharmacy and sometimes relabelled, as was the case with the laudanum bottle in this chest.

The rectangular bottles in this chest have been blown, with pontil marks. Four of the bottles in the top section have metal caps, typical of the early 1800s. Most of the bottles are labelled "Pope, 96 Oxford Street, London, To HRH the Duchess of Gloucester, From Messrs Savory Moore and Co, Bond St".

Pope remains enigmatic. However, the history of Savory and Moore is well-documented. This long-running business opened its Bond Street pharmacy in 1794, although it did not trade under the name Savory, Moore and Co until 1814. It became Savory, Moore and Davidson between 1818 and 1826, and reverted to Savory, Moore and Co from 1826. The Duchess of Gloucester at the time was Princess Mary

(1776–1857), the fourth daughter of George III.

The bottles primarily contain a range of laxatives and purgatives: Turkey rhubarb, tincture of rhubarb, jalap powder, tincture of jalap, calcined magnesia and tincture of senna. One bottle, labelled "Peruvian bark", contains the powdered bark of cinchona. The fact that it is not labelled as "quinine powder", a description that dates from the 1820s, and that it is an "old-fashioned" crude drug rather than a tincture, suggests an early 19th century date. Cinchona was used to treat fevers and malaria, but was also taken as a tonic for headaches, coughs, sore throats, smallpox and "putrid measles".

The chest's upper section also includes storage for equipment: a hand-balance and weights, two lancets with tortoiseshell handles for use by a professional to lance boils and abscesses, a ceramic tile as a surface for mixing or making medicines, neatly housed in a vertical slot, and a spatula for mixing medicines or spreading plasters.

The chest's lower section contains five bottles, including spirit of lavender (for lack of appetite, faintness, flatulence and hysteria), camphor liniment (a rub for rheumatism, sprains and stiff joints), and spirits of sal volatile (ammonium carbonate in an aromatic solution). This bottle is labelled "Savory, Moore and Co. Chemists to the Royal Family. 136 New Bond St & 220 Regent St., London." The company did not open its Regent Street premises until 1826.

The chest has four drawers. The first contains fabric, presumably on which to spread a plaster, and four hand-written prescriptions. Two are for a Mrs Smith: "The Powders" and "The Aperient Mixture" on one, and "Cough Mixture" on the other. Tantalisingly, this recipe is dated 25 January but with no year given. It therefore seems safe to assume that the chest belonged to a Mrs Smith at some point in its life. The other two pages are each entitled "Dr Hatchell's Prescription for Cholera". The first cholera epidemic in Britain occurred in 1831, so Dr Hatchell's prescription may relate to this outbreak.

The second drawer contains three packets of Dr James' Fever Powders. This popular medicine was developed by Dr Robert James of Lichfield. It contained antimony as a febrifuge, a



The upper section of the medicine chest

poisonous substance responsible for many deaths when the powders were taken to excess. The ingredients were a guarded mystery like many other secret remedies of the time.

One of the packets is labelled "F. Newbery and Sons, 45 St Paul's, London", and priced 2s 9d. Francis Newbery was the nephew of John Newbery, publisher (of 'Mother Goose' among other things) and medicine merchant. John Newbery and Dr James entered into an agreement after the fever powders were patented in 1746, in that Newbery would manufacture the powders in return for a half share in the takings. Francis Newbery took over his uncle's business, and built a new warehouse at 45 St Paul's Churchyard in 1778. All three packets have a medicine duty stamp for three pence (3d) attached to them. This dates them to after the Medicine Stamp Act of 1812 that introduced the requirement that a duty stamp be attached to the medicine's packaging.

This drawer also includes a printed advertisement for Dr James' Fever Powder. However, this seems to have been a later addition to the chest as the many testimonials featured include one from *The Lancet* dated 1859.

The remaining contents of the drawers include glass pots with chamois covers. Among them are pots containing blister plaister, yellow basilicon, calomel (mercury subchloride) and blue pills (a purgative, including mercury). There is also a pewter Seidlitz measure, specifically made for two powders (collectively called a Seidlitz powder) which were a treatment for indigestion. The final items are a funnel, probably used when refilling bottles in the medicine chest, and a glass mortar and pestle which were used for preparing and mixing medicinal ingredients.

The clues all point to an early 19th century date for the chest, although it has clearly had later additions. This was not unusual for an item which was effectively a precursor to our current first aid kits. Although the chest may have been owned by Mrs Smith almost 200 years ago, its subsequent history may remain a mystery.



The lower section of the chest