

Society treasures: a little bit of history

Briony Hudson, keeper of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society museum collections, describes a collection of badges from past conferences

Defining an essentially ephemeral conference badge as a “treasure” may seem overly enthusiastic. However, the museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s collection of badges from the British Pharmaceutical Conference is a wonderful record of the annual event in a way that a programme, ticket or photograph will never be. Part of the museum’s remit is to collect material to reflect the history of the Society, and, although small, this badge collection has a part to play.

The idea of a regular scientific meeting for chemists and druggists, was first raised in 1852 by G. F. Schacht, of Bristol. However, it took 11 years for the first BPC to be held in Newcastle in 1863. Its aim was to establish an annual meeting in different provincial cities to encourage members and non-members outside London to take a more active part in the Society, and to advance the science underpinning pharmacy. The BPC was organised by an independent body until it merged with the Society in 1922.

The museum holds BPC badges for nearly every year since 1905. Each year’s design is different, and gives a sense of the location of the conference. Many of the badges have the host city’s coat of arms as their main feature. For example, Birmingham 1939, Leeds 1934 and Belfast 1935. For the 1953 conference in London, the city skyline provided the badge’s design. Other badges take their inspiration from a national symbol: examples include tartan ribbon for the Glasgow conference in 1925, the Welsh dragon for Llandudno 1958 and, more subtly, a Celtic design (perhaps from the Book of Kells) for Dublin in 1956. For the 1929 conference in Dublin, shamrocks on the badges even extended to the name holder. The badges also provide an insight into the social history context. In 1905, the badge for the Brighton conference



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was made of silver. Compare this with the cardboard badge for the Bath conference of 1924, or for 1949 in Blackpool, or the very functional modern design for the 1940 conference.

Of course, in terms of historical value, the badges provide information about the location of the conference in a particular year, and the name of one of the delegates. However, they are also a tangible three-dimensional souvenir that has survived to give a flavour of the annual pharmaceutical event.

Badges are still issued to all BPC delegates, but they are of the typical anonymous plastic variety with no keep-sake value (although the

museum does retain examples for posterity). Decorative metal badges seem to have disappeared in the mid-1980s. The museum does not hold any badges from BPCs held in the 19th century. This may be because none was produced. However, museum staff would be interested to hear from anyone who has any badges dating from before 1904 (e-mail museum@rpsgb.org).

Some of the badges are on display in the Society’s headquarters, in a case that looks at the role of the Society in the past and today. Visitors are welcome to visit these displays Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. No appointment necessary.