

Where have all the fixtures gone?

As pharmacies across the country may be preparing themselves for the new contract with shiny new refits, spare a thought for the fixtures and fittings of yesterday, says **Lin-Nam Wang**



Alex Mulholland behind the counter of his pharmacy in 2000

When Alex Mulholland became the third owner of Stewart's Pharmacy on Sheen Lane, Mortlake, in 1965, it was celebrating its centenary. Opened by T. Palmer in 1865, the pharmacy (Palmer's Chymist) served White Lodge at Richmond Park, home to the Prince of Wales. Edward VIII was born at White Lodge in 1894 and visitors included his great-grandmother, Queen Victoria. The second owner, Stewart Higgs, ran the pharmacy from 1903 to 1965.

On taking over Stewart's Pharmacy, Mr Mulholland moved and modernised the dispensary (which had been housed in an oak shed) but he was determined that the shop floor would remain Victorian and original. "It was wonderful. Many people used to come in and say 'Wow. A real pharmacy'," Mr Mulholland told me. He especially relished the smells of aniseed and peppermint wafting at him each morning as he opened the door.

Finding a fourth careful owner

In 1999, after 34 years of 60-hour weeks Mr Mulholland decided it was time to retire. He put his business up for sale, but there was little interest in a small pharmacy that was, by

then, out of the way and in competition with large multiples. Eventually, the dispensing contract was sold to a supermarket, which did not want to take on the premises. This left Mr Mulholland in a peculiar situation. He could sell the premises, but it was unlikely that a buyer would want the pharmacy fixtures and fittings. "My first thought was what shall I do with it? What would happen to the mahogany drug run of 45 drawers, each with its own glass knob," Mr Mulholland said.

All but a small section of the shop floor (which was only replaced in the 1980s because of dry rot) was original. In addition to the drug run, there were mirror-backed shelves with decorative scrolls and an iron frieze at the top, a 12-foot long counter and carved display cabinets with glass fronts. Other objects included a large number of glass bottles ("shop rounds"), a clock and a set of scales with a wicker pan for weighing babies. Even the first private prescription book had survived, according to which the first prescription dispensed was a remedy for a digestive complaint and contained dilute phosphoric acid, orange tincture and ginger syrup in equal parts.

Because it was important to Mr Mulholland to keep the collection in the area, he contacted Richmond Museum to ask if it would take it on. "But [the museum] was not the slightest bit interested," he said. Mr Mulholland was faced with two other options: he could sell pieces off individually or put it all up for auction, as a single lot. In that way, at least the collection would be kept together.

The man from Christie's

And so it was that in 2000, Mr Mulholland invited Christie's to look at the collection. The valuer, Mr Mulholland recalls, was impressed when he saw everything in situ, comparing the pharmacy to Aladdin's cave. It was rare for someone to sell such a complete collection he said, and valued it at between £25,000 and £35,000. However, the man from Christie's advised, by the time Mr Mulholland had paid for everything to be carefully removed and cleaned, transported to London and stored until the auction date, all the money might be spent.

Then Mr Mulholland had a better idea. He telephoned Holly Lodge, an education



Stewart's pharmacy with modern objects removed

centre in Richmond Park, and offered it the collection as a gift, to be used as an educational tool. As a result, and with assistance from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the Victorian pharmacy project was created. The collection, now in storage, is to be housed in new, purpose-built premises in the park, as an example of Victorian pharmacy practice. Up to 70 per cent of the children who visit Holly Lodge have special needs so the building design includes wheelchair access. However, the project, which is estimated to cost between £75,000 and £85,000, has no funding and the project team is currently developing a fund-raising strategy. So, the story could be on its way to a happy ending and, it is to be hoped, visitors to Richmond Park next year will not only encounter deer, but also a Victorian pharmacy.

Museum collections

What happens to other old pharmacy interiors and equipment? Some do find their way into museum collections. Take a stroll along The Victorian Walk at the Museum of London and you will find at number 13, just past Rattenbury & Co the pawnbrokers and tucked away between a "fancy stationer" and a grocer, a tiny pharmacy.

Peer through the glass of the door and you will see a collection of 165 objects, from a gas heater to a pill roller. However, unlike Mr Mulholland's collection, this display is an amalgam of different pharmacies. Some pieces were donated, whereas others were bought by the museum. For example, the marble counter, dating from the late 19th

century, was bought in 1973, from a pharmacy at 10 Gloucester Road, South Kensington.

Alex Werner, the Museum of London's curator of social and working history, said in many instances, a member of the public will alert museums to the fact that a pharmacy is closing or is being redeveloped. Just after the 1939–45 war, a lot of pharmacies were stripped out and some ended up in museum collections. Although the Museum of London is no longer actively collecting pharmacy-related objects, if they come from an area with a local museum, it will encourage that museum to take an interest.

A larger example of Victorian pharmacy is on display at the Science Museum. This is Gibson's Pharmacy, from Hexham, Northumberland, owned by the Gibson family from 1834. When the pharmacy closed in 1978, the Wellcome Trust bought the fittings. Gibson's Pharmacy included a sight testing room: the fixtures might be different, but is pharmacy really so different from 100 years ago? It seems that somewhere between then and now, pharmacy took a backwards step. A hundred years ago, pharmacists diagnosed and offered medicines accordingly. They weighed babies and tested eyesight. Today, pharmacists are doing supplementary prescribing. Pharmacists are now weighing people who are obese and performing cholesterol tests.

Of course, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum also has a vast collection of pharmacy-related objects. Unfortunately, its community pharmacy interior, dating from

the 19th century, was destroyed in a warehouse fire earlier this year (*PJ*, 3 July, p31). Sadly, this interior had never been put on display because there was no space.

Some museums have pharmacy objects that are really old — one theory is that drug runs go back to at least the 1600s — but most of the interiors on display are Victorian. Briony Hudson, keeper of the museum collections at the Society, believes that when Georgian pharmacies (and their predecessors) became obsolete, people probably did not even consider saving them. It was not until the 20th century that museums became interested in "room settings".

Last of a dying breed

As time goes by, there will be fewer and fewer pharmacies like Mr Mulholland's on the high street. Inevitably, the owners of those that remain will, one day, find themselves in the same position as Mr Mulholland. But they might not have the same happy ending. According to Alice Nicholls, medical curator at the Science Museum, it is unlikely for museums to acquire a whole pharmacy these days because of the restrictions on resources, such as space, and the enormous amount of cataloguing that would be required.

Only a handful of pharmacy interiors will be in a position to be appreciated by many, in a museum display. Others might live in storage for many years. Others still, might not be saved at all. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society's museum maintains a list of museums with pharmacies on display. Why not visit one over the festive period?