The Symons collection: its origins and contents

Cecil Symons (1921–1987) was a physician and cardiologist at the Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead, London from 1961–87. He was also a collector of medical instruments, principally from the Georgian era, which are now displayed in the foyer to the new Seligman Theatre at the Royal College of Physicians.

Influences on the Collection

Cecil Symons’ approach to collecting and the pleasure and inspiration he derived from it is best described in his opening to the 1981 Samuel Gee Lecture, entitled ‘Invalids and the Georgian Era’:

I am not a medical historian but someone who became interested in the Georgian era because of the collection which I have made over the years of contemporary medical instruments. The acquisition of articles may become a passion and arouse interest far beyond the particular inanimate piece collected. To see, for example, an early medicine spoon, inevitably gives rise to thoughts of who used it and how and why . . . The Georgians were very much aware of self-care and comfort, and even in sickness their inherent sense of good design remained evident.

Despite his obvious enthusiasm for the Georgians, however, Cecil Symons did not confine his collection to one era or one country, so both Roman and Chinese medicine are represented.

The Georgian era began in 1714 and ended in 1837 following the reign of William IV, brother of George IV. Known variously as the Age of Reason, Elegance, Romanticism or Enlightenment, stability was the keynote of the period. ‘Medicine’, as both a means of treatment and self-care, received much attention and the vigorous cartoons and illustrations by contemporay artists such as Hogarth, Gillray, Cruikshank and Rowlandson told Cecil Symons much about medical practice in that rumbustious age and about the personalities and preoccupations of both practitioners and patients.

Ill as he was to become, George III always practised self-care and his idiosyncracies were regarded with tolerance and affection. Gillray showed him as ‘Temperance enjoying a frugal meal’, thus setting an example to all at a time when over-eating and drinking, with obesity and gout as a consequence, were prevalent; George is shown eating a boiled egg whilst his wife Charlotte is devouring greens. In contrast, Gillray shows his son, George, Prince of Wales, as a ‘voluptuary under the horrors of digestion’: the Prince’s concern with his health is illustrated by a vegetable draught, a pot of ointment for piles, another for bad breath and a chamber pot full of urine.

Hogarth depicts poverty and alcoholism in Gin Lane whilst, in contrast, Rowlandson shows the pleasures of Bath for the better off – including those who were sick and disabled. Nurses, as such, had not yet been invented. Elderly women, usually addicted to the bottle, filled the role. Rowlandson shows one about to administer an enema; another, in a drunken stupor, will soon have the house on fire.

From the literature of the period Cecil Symons deduced that people were frightened of illness – it was the great unknown. He noted that, in the Diary of a Country Parson 1758–1803, James Woodforde describes only injury. He gives, for example, details of the drawing of a tooth and describes a death, but there is almost no reference to disease. The Symons collection is a useful adjunct to medical history in that it provides so much evidence of how people cared for themselves at that time.

Motivated by a deep interest in France, Cecil Symons founded the Société Clinique Française, based at the Dispensaire Française in London, and initiated exchange visits between the Société and the Hertford British Hospital in Paris. In 1987 he was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre du Mérite. The difference between the English and French approach to sickness and health in the 18th and 19th centuries particularly fascinated him. Whilst the invention of the
The Symons Collection displayed at the Royal College of Physicians.

stethoscope by Laennec in 1819 was the high point of that period of medicine in France, it was the profusion of items relating to infants and motherhood, such as feeding spoons, cups and nipple shields – all of which are represented in the Collection – which was of special interest to Dr Symons and prompted him to study the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and relate it to art.

On a College visit to Singapore in 1986, a year before he died, Cecil Symons told the then Treasurer, Dr (now Sir) Anthony Dawson about his collection and that he would like the College to house it. However, there was no suitable site – until the new extension was built. The architect of the College, Sir Denys Lasdun, having seen items from the collection several years earlier and remembered particularly the nipple shields (‘guards’ as he called them) designed the present exhibition space specifically to house the Symons Collection – and received the enthusiastic support of the College Treasurer, Dr Norman Jones.

Collecting

In most of his travels to find medical artefacts for his collection, Cecil Symons was accompanied by his wife Jean. As well as the historical significance attached to an object, many were bought ‘because we liked them’. The first, an apothecary jar, was found in Chartres in 1957. In 1973, through a pharmacist friend, Henry Brocksom, a silver ‘top-hat’ stethoscope was acquired. However, plans to collect silver stethoscopes were soon abandoned; there were no others. Medical items that made up the early collection included a castor oil spoon with a bottle of castor oil, a wooden stethoscope, a lancet case, an iron double-ended spoon (which turned out to be a kitchen utensil), a cupping set, a tongue scraper (later identified as part of a Stilton cheese scoop), treen cases containing medicine glasses and syringes, and a pap-boat. A bleeding bowl, calibrated for volume, had been used by Henry Brocksom as an ash tray.

The development of the medicine spoon in the Georgian era and particularly whether it preceded the teaspoon – or vice versa – was of great interest to Cecil Symons. In 1979 a spoon came up for auction inscribed: ‘Gift of the Dutchess of Queensberry to Lady Carbery’. Why did she give a spoon in a shagreen case? Was it for medicine or tea? She was known to have a deep interest in potions, tisanes and balsamic draughts and to have made them for her friends. A dose of medicine became known as ‘a teaspoonful,’ and from 1755 when the duchess gave her present until the recent introduction of the 5ml plastic medicine measure, the capacity of the spoon has not changed.

Antique markets throughout England and France
The Symons collection provided good sources of medical artefacts – especially as dealers had not at that time realised their value – as did antique and junk shops as far apart as America and Australia.

Holidays and conferences provided opportunities to visit medical museums – the Medical School and Musée de L’Assistance Publique in Paris, Hospice de Beaune, Hotel-Dieu de Lyons, the Semmelweis Museum in Budapest, museums in Vienna and Padua, and old hospitals in Piacenza, Sienna, Florence, Angers and Bruges. English, Scottish and Welsh country houses also contain items of medical interest which helped Cecil and Jean Symons to identify medical objects in shops and markets that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Elisabeth Bennion, author of *Antique Medical Instruments*, published in 1979, was of great help in tracking down objects – indeed, many could not have been procured without her. Later, she also helped Jean Symons sort the collection and assisted in compiling the catalogue.

**Displaying the collection**

Until it came to the College, the Collection had not been seen in its entirety. Cecil Symons had died in 1987 and it was therefore left to Jean to decide how the objects were to be housed in their allotted space – a showcase seven metres long with two glass shelves. Faced with the task of arranging 400 objects, she called on the professional advice of Colin Lindley to help design the display and to make the mounts.

Visual impact was of course paramount – but it was also important to reflect Cecil Symons’ interests. Thus the leech jar was chosen as an obvious centrepiece, and the display starts with items from the largest group in the collection, ‘invalid aids’. Among these are the nipple shields that had first attracted the attention of the architect, Sir Denys Lasdun. They are made from a variety of materials, including silver, ivory, glass, wood, leather and lead (not good for babies). Modern examples are included to show that although the material has changed, the shape has not.

Next in the display come items for use for infant feeding followed by pap boats, feeding cups and posset cups, one of which has a demountable handle and a
A wicker covered flask resembles an early thermos flask. Three of the pap boats were originally owned by Lord Cohen, a Fellow of the College and Chairman of the GMC (1961–73).

Feeding spoons form the next part of the collection; a magnificent example and the earliest in the collection (c. 1680) has been mounted high on the wall. Below it is a neat French invention – the medicine was in the first compartment with something sweet in the second.

Castor oil spoons follow medicine and tea spoons often called Gibson spoons because they were inscribed by the silversmith 'C Gibson inventor', they were in fact invented by Dr Anthony Todd Thompson (1778–1849) a Fellow of the College. Sick syphons are placed next. These are early drinking straws; being impossible to clean, they were potentially lethal. Also displayed in this part of the collection are Victorian double-ended spoons and travellers' folding spoons many of which came from America. A modern green plastic spoon was given to Cecil Symons by one of his students who spent his elective study period in India. It gives instructions on the dose of sugar and salt for rehydration.

The collection of tongue scrapers is probably the largest anywhere. They particularly fascinated Dr Symons because of the shapes and the variety of materials from which they were made. One example was found by Jean Symons on a College visit to India when she saw pilgrims at Benares using twigs from the neem tree.

Sick syphons – potentially lethal as they could not be cleaned.

Georgian lancet cases.

Pair of buttons depicting Louis XIV before and after an enema.
The Symons collection

Tree to clean their teeth and then splitting them for tongue scrapers – exactly in the way that the original scrapers had been formed.

Next come items for leeching, bleeding and cupping placed adjacent to beautiful lancet cases in a variety of materials.

A selection of stethoscopes includes examples of Laennec and Piorry models, an elegant Neapolitan model made of tortoiseshell and gold in its original case, and one made of glass. Thermometers, pulsometers and tongue depressors are also represented.

A sphygmographe de Marey is displayed in a case marked ‘W Broadbent’. Sir William Broadbent, a Fellow of the College, was Physician to King Edward VII, initially when he was Prince of Wales (1892), and became Physician Extraordinary to Queen Victoria in 1896 and to the new Prince of Wales in 1901.

Among the more esoteric items are a set of guinea scales (an important part of a physician’s equipment); Chinese medicine dolls; a pair of political buttons showing Louis XIV having an enema – before and after; a Charles I pillbox containing four divisions and a watch to show when the next dose is due; and a magnificent William IV silver ear trumpet which unscrews into three parts and could be carried in a handbag.

The Collection has been catalogued by Jean Symons. Items are listed in the same order in which they are displayed, each is dated and, when known, the maker and place of origin are given with any other relevant information. This list will shortly be available to visitors to the College who seek more information than can be accommodated on the labels in the display case.

Postscript

Many items in the displayed collection would have been familiar to the Fellows of the College depicted by Rowlandson and Pugin in 1808 in the Long Room of the College in Warwick Lane, panels from which have been incorporated in the present Censors’ Room.

Dr Symons would have appreciated the vision of the Officers of the College and Sir Denys Lasdum in providing the splendid setting for the Collection – far beyond anything he could have envisaged.

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