

## London Health Libraries visit to the Royal College of Physicians 18 July 2014 Jenny McCullough

On a sweltering Friday morning an enthusiastic London Health Libraries group gathered at the Royal College of Physicians to meet Katie Birkwood, Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian, who had very kindly undertaken to show us around the RCP and its collections and Library services.

Katie's first act as our guide was to take us back out into the sunshine for a word about the long history of the College, which took in the journey to its spectacular home by Regent's Park. Founded by Royal Charter of Henry VII in 1518, the RCP was based at first in the City of London. One set of premises was lost in the Great Fire of London and another, near Trafalgar Square, was damaged in the Blitz and is now part of Canada House. Commissioned in 1958 on the site of a bomb-damaged building Camden Council granted permission to demolish, Sir Denys Lasdun's modernist building stands proud between the John Nash terraces either side of it on St Andrews Place. Originally conceived as a cantilevered design, the Library is supported by slender columns elegantly clad in porcelain tiles intended to harmonise with the adjacent Nash villas.

Next Katie introduced us to the RCP's permanent collection, which features treasures such as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Prujean Chest of surgical instruments, a testament to the links between the work of physicians and surgeons in the early days of their professions. Though depleted as a result of the Fire and the plague, the collection, sustained by the tradition of newly-elected Fellows making gifts to the college, includes other precious items such as the demonstrating rod (or 17<sup>th</sup> Century laser pointer, as Katie explained) used by William Harvey and a physician's cane so rich in history that it has its own biography. Before the stethoscope, the cane symbolised physicians, who used its pomander handle to ward off noxious fumes as they went about their rounds. The RCP's gold-headed cane was used by the eminent physicians John Radcliffe, Richard Mead, Anthony Askew and Matthew Baillie.

Katie also showed us the Symons Collection, which highlights medical equipment used not only by physicians but also by patients for self-care. Among the items on show are good luck charms and devices for blood-letting, which give an insight into the links between medicine and the kind of quack remedies which might have contributed to the death of a great many people, including Charles II.

Outside the Treasures Room is the RCP's collection of apothecary jars, which includes one bearing the name of John Battersby, made famous by references to him in the diary of his friend Samuel Pepys. In part the collection serves as a reminder that the RCP was responsible for the *London Pharmacopoeia*, which was published in 1618 as the first standard list of medicines and their ingredients in England, and is the precursor to the BNF.

Our next stop was by the enormous window – the biggest pane of glass it was possible to manufacture when the building opened in 1964 – the better to look out at the medicinal garden and all around us at the light-flooded internal courtyard. On our way to the Censors' Room, where the four censors elected by the college examined candidates for membership and decided disciplinary matters and where ceremonial processions now begin, we stopped by the portrait of former President Lord Moran. Known as Corkscrew Charlie for the flexibility of his views, Moran was personal physician to Churchill and an influential figure in the establishment of the NHS.

The Censors' Room itself is lined with panelling saved from the Great Fire, which has moved with the RCP from the City to Trafalgar Square to Regent's Park, but the arrow slit windows bring Lasdun's influence to bear. Portraits include those of Edward Jenner, who was deemed ineligible to be elected a Fellow and later turned down an honorary Fellowship, and the first woman President, Dame Margaret Turner-Warwick.

Following the processional route for RCP ceremonies, we took in views of the internal courtyard as we went up the central staircase to see the RCP's current exhibition, 'This bewitching poison': Alcohol and the Royal College of Physicians. This includes books containing recipes for alcohol-based remedies, including babies'

gripe water (which continued to contain alcohol until the 1980s), a Cruikshank etching of physicians consulting on the case of Toby Bumper (a bumper being a container for alcohol that could be clinked with another for a toast), and an antimony cup that killed three people who took purging treatments from it.

On our way to the Library, we stopped by the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Paduan anatomical tables, preparations made from human and animal specimens laid out in wood to map vascular, nerve and other systems. Given to the RCP by the Earl of Winchilsea and Nottingham, and assumed to have been collected by the Earl's ancestor William Harvey, they were later revealed to have been in the possession of another ancestor, the diplomat Sir John Finch.

With over 50,000 items, the Library – which has existed since the college was founded – has a strong room and closed stacks elsewhere in the building. Library staff work together with a Collections Officer on preservation and other issues relating to the management of the collections.

After a glimpse of the Dorchester Library which houses the RCP's rare books and special collections and which is in high demand as a venue for corporate and other events, we visited the Reading Room. The Reading Room makes available the RCP's collections of books on the medical specialties, works on the history of medicine and medical biographies. A separate Medical Education Resources Centre is nearby on St Andrews Place. Access to electronic resources is via Athens and there are public access PCs and wireless access. The Library collections are catalogued and searchable via a Soutron OPAC and the Archive and Museum collections OPAC will be launched later this year.

The Library is open to members of the public for reference and to researchers by appointment, and it is used by RCP staff too. Library staff undertake literature searches for policy staff and for Members and Fellows, and the document delivery service is kept busy by the National Clinical Guideline Centre which is part of the RCP. The Library also acts as an enquiry service for the whole RCP, fielding queries on everything from MRCP exams to legal requests for expert medical witnesses to kitchen supplies.

With that we were all left wishing that we had taken the rest of the day off to spend more time exploring the collections. Many, many thanks are due to Katie Birkwood for giving up her morning to host us and for giving us such a lively insight into the RCP and its collections, past and present.

*After a summer closure for the installation of a major exhibition, the RCP will re-open to visitors in September. Find out more at <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/museum-garden/visiting>.*