

Sir Stuart Threipland's medicine chest

The Threipland medicine chest was used by Dr Stuart Threipland to treat patients during the 1745 Jacobite rising led by Prince Charles Edward Stuart. It is in a good state of preservation and holds a comprehensive range of the medicines that were available for use during the eighteenth century. A list of these has been drawn up and their use related to present day practice.

SIR STUART THREIPLAND (1716–1805)

Stuart Threipland was born in 1716, the son of Sir David Threipland of Fingask and the grandson of Sir Patrick Threipland, the first baronet, who was a successful businessman and a member of the Scottish Parliament. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University and was a founder member in 1737 of the student group, the Medical Society of Edinburgh, subsequently the Royal Medical Society. He graduated MD in 1742, was admitted a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1744 and began practicing in the city.¹ The family were loyal supporters of the Jacobite cause and Stuart and his elder brother David joined Prince Charles Edward Stuart's army in 1745 to support his attempt to reclaim the throne. David was killed soon afterwards at the Battle of Prestonpans, while Stuart was appointed Physician-in-Chief to the Prince. He carried the medicine chest throughout the campaign.

THE TRAVELLING MEDICINE CHEST

The medicine chest is thought to have been given to Threipland by Prince Charles himself and is likely to be of French origin. There are no distinguishing marks on the chest and the medicines have printed labels in pharmaceutical Latin, making it difficult to prove its origins. The provenance of the chest is well documented as it was given by Sir Stuart Threipland to Mr Alexander Wood (1725–1805), whose son Dr George Wood left it to Dr John Smith, who donated it to the College of Physicians.²

The chest is compact, measuring 10 inches (25cm) square, but it is surprisingly heavy as it contains around 147 products, the majority of which are in glass bottles. It is hinged into two halves and secured with a brass lock and key. On unlocking the chest it swings open on brass hinges to reveal that the contents are further protected by sliding wooden panels which keep the medicines in place. The left hand section holds three bottles labelled 'tr. ipecacua, tr. sach and acet scil.', 'tr' indicating tincture. A paper label is fixed to the back of these bottles, with marks dividing the contents into separate doses. There are four metal drums and six metal boxes. Below these there is a drawer which contains two ink wells, a pen holder, miscellaneous packets and glass tubes and a further 16 metal containers. A metal box contains a list which is headed 'Alphabetical catalogue and index to

medicines within the box' and on the second page 'Alphabetical index to the medicine chest 1766'. This has proved invaluable in examining and preparing lists of the contents of the chest. The right hand division holds 16 bottles and four metal containers. Behind these two sections and accessible by a spring release are four additional sections, two on either side. These hold a total of 61 glass containers and nine metal containers in addition to those listed above which makes a total of 80 bottles and 39 metal containers, a total of 119 items. There are other items in paper packets in the drawer.



FIGURE 1 Sir Stuart Threipland's medicine chest (RCPE).

Listing the contents

The contents of the medicine chest have been examined and two lists prepared. List I is based on the original listing contained in the chest. This is in alphabetical order and follows the nomenclature used in this original list where it is legible. It is numbered in sequence with the title as shown on the original list followed by the number that appears on the label, the section in which the product is stored and a short explanation of the product. This list has been compared with the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* of 1722.³ This has a number of sections including a list of 'simples' followed by lists of 'preparations'. The products have been marked EPS if they are listed as a simple and EP if they are in the lists of preparations.

The second list has been constructed from an examination of the chest. The products are listed by the name shown on the label, in the order in which they are stored in each section and the number is as it appears on each label. One or two products have lost their label over time and some are illegible. In these cases the name of the product has been deduced from the information available in list I, where possible. All the items in the list can be cross referenced to list I where more information is available. Both lists are available on the College website. There are some discrepancies in the number of products contained in

the chest. Girdwood (our Notable Fellow in this issue) examined the chest in 1979 and mentioned 158 drugs, compared with the 150 in list 1. He does not list the items but he divides the contents into balsams, elixirs, oils, tinctures and pills etc. The total in these classes is shown as 97. Classifying the items in list 1 in a similar way gives a total of 95 items. There are some items in the drawer that are not classified and some missing labels so the totals do bear some comparison to each other.⁴

The medicines in the chest

When the medicine chest was constructed, medical treatment was still dominated by the theory of humours. This encouraged the physician to decide which of the humours were in excess and reduce this by bleeding and the use of purgatives, vomiting and enemas. It is therefore not surprising to find socotrine aloes, elixir proprietatis (a compound elixir of aloes), manna, *pill aloctis* (pill aloes and *coccygnathos*), *pill jalap*, rhubarb powder and other purgatives present.

The *Materia Medica* at that time was largely vegetable-based, although there was a slow move towards the use of chemicals. There are supplies of borax, potassium acid tartarate, dilute sulphuric acid, calamine, zinc oxide and lead acetate, examples of the chemicals that were in use at the time. The greatest number of medicines however, are vegetable in origin. The early *pharmacopoeias* included a number of peculiar items. Although these were being discontinued throughout the eighteenth century, the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia* of 1722 still listed some of these substances. For example we find *cornu cervi* (stag's horn), *lapis lazuli preparatus* and *trochisci viperini*. There are few of the less reputable medicines in the chest. However some blunderbuss preparations are included, for example *theriaca edinenses* (a local variant of the *theriaca of andromachi*) with 17 ingredients, which is also in the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia*. There are also three proprietary mixtures, *mistura antifebrifuge* (a fever mixture), *mistura antiscorbutic pro gingivitis* (a mixture for scurvy or gingivitis) and *mistura pro odontalgia* (a mixture for treating toothache).

The wide range of medicines contained in the chest is particularly interesting, and many of these continued in use for some 200 years. Girdwood pointed out that many of the drugs available to him in 1942 were used in practice in 1745. While quinine had replaced peruvian bark, the chest contained *tinct opii*, *tinct ipecacuanha*, *tinct myrrh*, *tinct asafoetida*, senna leaf and glaubers salts, which

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were all still in use. The more recent discoveries are missing, including adrenaline, insulin, neoarsphenamine, the antimonials for tropical diseases, emetine and the sulphonamides; nevertheless, the medicine chest had a sufficient range of medicines to be of use to a practitioner in the 1940s.⁴

CONCLUSION

The Threipland chest, sometimes known as the Culloden medicine chest, is in a good state of preservation. In places some of the contents have reacted with their metal containers destroying the labels, and several labels are missing from other canisters. In these instances, thanks to the existence of an original list of contents in the box, it has been possible in most cases to deduce the substances. The contents of this chest are a comprehensive representation of the medicines in use in the eighteenth century.

Many of the medicines contained in the chest are still familiar today and their use continued for many years, in some cases well into the twentieth century. Most forms of administration are represented, including gums, ointments, powders, balsams and spirits. Pills are a convenient form of administration and there are seven examples; there is a comprehensive range of 16 essential oils and nine tinctures. There are also a number of less familiar items; *balsam lucatelli*, a preparation of turpentine, yellow wax and red sandalwood, *unguentum saturnin* a lead acetate ointment, manna and *pill mathei* did not retain their popularity. *Theriaca edinensis*, an ancient multi-ingredient preparation, is listed and continued to be found in the *Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia*, although it was discontinued later in the century.⁵

The contents of the chest highlight the very significant developments that have taken place in medical practice. While it is possible to compare the medicines in the chest with the *Materia Medica* of 1942, there is little comparison with treatment in present day practice. The chest is currently on display in the College.

Epilogue

Sir Stuart Threipland was more fortunate than many of his fellow Jacobites. He returned to successful practice in Edinburgh, bought back the family estate of Fingask, became president of the RCPE and lived to enjoy the years of the Enlightenment, dying at the age of 89.

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