



Senior Fellows' Club - Summer Newsletter 2026

The College's Senior Fellows' Club is a growing group of over 200 members of those who are retired or approaching retirement. The cost for membership is £15 per year and includes access to attending and watching our monthly lectures with the option to attend a social lunch afterwards. You can also join our walking group as well as attending our annual Guest Lunch and Arts & Crafts exhibition. If you would be interested in joining, then please reach out to our administrator for more information or apply online.

To find out more, please see the SFC pages on the RCPE Website.

Honorary Secretary's Update

Welcome to the Summer Newsletter 2026. If you have received, and are reading this addition to your inbox then I should thank you for your interest and attention.

The lunchtime lectures have been well attended. Following the election of our new College President, Professor Mark Strachan, he kindly made some space in his busy work schedule to address the Senior Fellows on 12th January. Mark outlined his priorities for his time in office and fielded a wide range of questions.

James Ogilvie then delivered a very interesting talk on "*A two month Tall Ship voyage to Antarctica*". We heard of the highs, lows and hazards of braving such a hostile environment, and the talk was an excellent platform for better appreciating our subsequent visit to another sailing ship RSS Discovery for our Summer Outing. He described climbing the rigging to change sail, a feat now also possible on RSS Discovery!



The Guest Lunch and Exhibition on 3rd March were well attended with the, now customary, delightful input from our musical colleagues. This was the swansong for our stalwart organiser Stefan Slater, whose energy and drive over many years have ensured the success of this event. A sincere thank you, Stefan from us all.

Dr James Grant addressed the Club later in March on the topic of "The Art of Quackery". He described quackery of various sorts from ancient times to the modern day, including some amusing 'cures' for Covid. He also described Theriaca, the 'universal cure all' with its origins in ancient history. The talk was illustrated by a range of paintings from history.

Picture description: Attendees of our Guest Lunch at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition

Our own Professor Maggie Bassendine gave us a fascinating talk on the history of the Bassendyne Bible, the first Bible printed in Scotland in 1576. Maggie touched on both her own family connections and the impact which the Bible had on the use of the English language in Scotland.

Each year we join with our sister College of Surgeons in Edinburgh for a joint lunch and lecture. This year was the turn of RCSE as host and we were treated to much engineering and aviation history by Mr John Guy, with the title of his talk "*How to build a flying replica of a WW 1 fighter*".

Our Chair, Professor Nick Bateman, attended a talk by Dr Jeff Aronson on the contribution made to Pharmacology over the 300 years of Edinburgh Medical School. Nick has kindly offered to share a synopsis of that lecture, which is appended to the bottom of this newsletter.

The Walking Group have been active over the last few months and Gordon Drummond has given a round up of their excursions so far.

Jean Keeling has shared her botanical enthusiasm with the Club by organising a trip to the Botanical Gardens, and a report from her can be found below.



Picture description: Dr Ron Fergusson with Dr Malo Scullion, the 2025 Case of the Quarter prize winner

Ron Fergusson awarded the College Journal Prize and the Case of the Quarter Prize at the College's Medical Trainee Conference in February this year. These annual awards are sponsored by the Senior Fellows Club for the best papers written by a doctor in a training grade published in the Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (JRCPE).

From 2026, the JRCPE is not continuing and no longer accepting submissions therefore the Senior Fellows' Club Management Committee are currently discussing options for supporting doctors in training for the future.

Our own Summer Outing this year was to Dundee, both to the V&A museum and to the RSS Discovery, the first ship specifically constructed for scientific Antarctic research.

We were given guided tours around both, with a V&A lunch sandwiched between the tours.



Picture description: Our Chair 'steering' the RSS *Discovery*

For the coming 12 months, starting on 5th October, the following lectures have been arranged:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Speaker/Event</i>	<i>Title of Talk</i>
5th October 2026	Anthony Seaton	Hazard yet Forward: Two Centuries in Medicine
2 November 2026	John Smythe	Edinburgh's contribution to successful cancer treatment

7 December 2026	Catherine Heymans	Astrophysics and Pop-Sci
11 January 2027	Iain Macintyre	'Bringing Enlightenment thinking to the battlefield; Sir John Pringle 1707-1782'
1 February 2027	Fiona Garwood	Dr Elsie Inglis and the lesser known story - Russia 1917
2 March 2027	Senior Fellows Club Guest and Arts & Crafts Exhibition	
22 March 2027	Andy Elder	The Road back to the Bedside
19 April 2027	Erica Reid	Where the river flows - the Tweed and its People
17 May 2027	Susan Cross	Joint meeting with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh Jewellery in Historical Portraiture - status, significance & symbolism

Senior Fellows' Walking Group report, Summer 2026



Picture description: Members of our Walking Group on a recent trip

The monthly walks this year, at least so far, have been in decent weather, to all points of the compass from Edinburgh. We started in March going East to a shore walk starting at Gullane, then South to the Rhymer's glen at Melrose, West to the hidden interests of Almondell with a water supply to the Union Canal, and locally to Harlaw in the Pentlands. In July we plan to cross the Forth and start a walk in Limekilns. We've attracted a number of new members and had generally good numbers at each walk. Each of our members who leads a walk is usually happy to comment on the

points of interest that we pass, even explaining the different ways of pronouncing "Gullane". Most of the walks are between 5 and 7 miles, and a description is sent out beforehand to let you decide if the walk is to your taste. We're a very broad church and welcome new members, partners, and acquaintances. Details are available from sfc@rcpe.ac.uk

SFC Botanical Group

In early May, a group of about 15 Members and a couple of partners visited the Rock Garden at RBGE. The weather was kind. We were shown round by Senior Horticulturalist John Mitchell who has been in charge of that garden for many years. The garden was immaculate, the shrubs beautifully defined with contrasting shapes and foliage. John's pleasure at seeing his ideas realised was apparent. We were then taken through the Woodland Gardens, finishing near the East Gate for those in need of sustenance.

Future plans include another visit to the Herbarium, the Herbaceous border and a possible 'tree walk'.

May I end by wishing you a restful and rewarding Summer, and I look forward to seeing you again in the Autumn.

With kind regards,
John Wilson
Honorary Secretary SFC

300 years of Edinburgh Therapeutics

As many readers will know this year marks the 300th anniversary of the University of Edinburgh Medical School. As part of the celebrations the British Pharmacological Society organised an academic meeting, which included a public lecture given by Dr Jeff Aronson, a graduate of Glasgow and a consultant physician and clinical pharmacologist at Oxford. As part of his talk, he highlighted the importance of the Edinburgh University Medical School as a source of doctors who contributed in the area of clinical pharmacology and therapeutics. For those who were not able to attend the lecture, I tried to take a note of some highlights, some of which I, as a London graduate, was unaware. I apologise to Dr Aronson for any errors in my lecture note transcription used as a basis for this short essay.

Early in the history of the medical school, famous physicians abounded, and they left many written records. Today we are all familiar with the word placebo, derived from the Latin "placere" (to please), but it seems the earliest use of this word in recorded medical literature was by two Edinburgh physicians, Andrew Duncan and William Cullen in the late 18th century. It was used to describe treatments given that were known not to be based on the "therapeutic" effect but would give the physician a way of "treating" the patient without risk of harm. The use of the word placebo in modern medicine is of course much more specific in terms of clinical trials. Many of us are aware that the first clinical trial documented was by James Lind studying scurvy in sailors in the Navy. It was quite a few years later that the Admiralty agreed to use lime juice to prevent this and of course give the name Limeys to English people worldwide. His name will forever be associated with Edinburgh Medical School and the College of Physicians, where he served on council.

Other therapeutic aspects of the Medical School's history include James Mounsey, who was a physician to Peter the Great. He saw the benefits of rhubarb in Russia and smuggled seeds out of Russia to use in the UK. He was apparently subsequently always frightened that Russian agents would come after him and slept with defensive weapons near his bed. The rhubarb was used in a very famous medicine of the time, formulated by James Gregory, a professor of the practice of medicine in Edinburgh and fellow of the college. It consisted of a powder of rhubarb, ginger and magnesium carbonate, which, when mixed with water, was called Gregory's mixture.

I had not appreciated that William Withering was an Edinburgh graduate. Records state that his interest in botany was poor while in Edinburgh. Amusingly, this was later stimulated when, as a qualified physician, he cared for a young female patient in Staffordshire. She was a very able botanical illustrator, and he fell in love with her. They married after she recovered. Something that might cause a problem today but not then. His later interest in digitalis might in part perhaps result from this event. There is an apocryphal story that he discovered the benefits of foxglove when he observed an old woman with dropsy, who had improved when he returned to see her later, and showed him her recipe. Jeff told us in his lecture that this story was made up by a pharmaceutical company who were later marketing digitalis! The problems of pharmaceutical marketing obviously have a long history.

Most of us will know of the solvent parties held in Edinburgh in the 1800s and the discovery of chloroform by James Young Simpson. Did you also know that the cod liver oil many of us were forced to swallow as children was also introduced by an Edinburgh physician, John Hughes Bennett, probably in the 1840s. Later in the 1800s Lauder Brunton described the use of amyl nitrite in the treatment of angina.

The use of eponymous descriptors for diseases is now out of fashion, perhaps quite rightly. At one time every medical student's hope was to have a disease named after them. In the 1970s I worked for a lovely physician called Dai Davies in the northeast of England. As a senior registrar in the London Hospital, he had been responsible for the care of nurses in the on-site Nurses Home. He had observed an illness transmitted between the patients he saw which consisted of stiffness in the neck. He carefully documented each case and worked out from transmission that this was a viral illness. He then wrote up a paper which was published in the Lancet. He thought it would make his name and paid for 100 reprints to send to interested readers, which cost a considerable sum at the time. He told me he still had the pile of reprints over twenty years later, he did not receive a single request for a reprint, and we never talk about Davies' disease today. He described it as a life lesson, and I always admired him for being so transparent and honest to a junior colleague. It is nevertheless interesting to reflect how many Edinburgh graduate names still feature eponymously. For example, Colles' fracture, Corrigan's pulse, Bright's disease, Addison's disease and the Argyll-Robertson pupil. They are all gradually disappearing from common usage and it is a shame that we forget the great names of the past.

In the mid 1800s Edinburgh became famous as a site of advances in basic pharmacology and therapeutics. Robert Christison attracted some talented graduates to work with him. He famously took Calabar beans to study their effects. The first dose did nothing but the second, larger one, had a very different result, and he thought he was going to die. Indeed, his colleagues came to sit by him, at the time all physicians could do, to try and comfort him in what they believed to be his last hours. Fortunately, he recovered and went on to study the effect of the extract of the bean and

discovered physostigmine. Subsequent work on the pharmacology of the autonomic nervous system led to the development of the concept of drug agonism and antagonism by Edinburgh pharmacologists. Fraser described antagonism in 1872. Competitive antagonism was discovered by Alfred Joseph Clark in 1926. Subsequently in 1956 Robert (Steve) Stephenson introduced the concept of efficacy, and related this to receptor binding, a key development in the understanding of the mechanism of drug action.

Coming to more recent times, a sense of innovation has not been lost, and the first ever chair of general practice in the UK, and quite likely the world, was established in Edinburgh with the professorial appointment of Richard Scott in 1963. Finally, the establishment of acetylcysteine for paracetamol overdose in the early 1970s by one of our current Senior Fellow members, Laurie Prescott, has saved thousands of lives worldwide. The influence of the Edinburgh Medical School therefore lives on, and one can only ponder what the next 300 years might bring.

Nick Bateman with thanks to Jeff Aronson for correcting a draft version.



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