

A labour of love

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DIGGING UP THE PAST HAS always been one of my hobbies. As a child I was always asking my father 'have you anything old to give me, Daddy'? And the venerable parent would rummage around in the drawer of his writing table, finding perhaps a long discarded fountain pen which did not write, or an unused pocket book several years out of date; for my late father was indeed one of the world's greatest hoarders of useless junk one could wish to find! But, bless him, he did instill in me an interest in things past, and now the totally invaluable quality of appreciation of that which went before, both from good and bad angles, in the belief that history, however minor, however obscure, was always worth delving into.

In a past paper in the *Journal* (Morris 1969) I wrote of the history relating to the doctor's bag. And at that time I had in my possession a few items dating back to the 1920's, including a battered Gladstone bag. I then decided that it would be rather pleasing to try and fit this out as it would have been in those years between the wars. The end result would then surely make an interesting exhibit for permanent display in the College Museum at 14 Princes Gate. I have now—as far as is possible—achieved this aim, and my first illustration (figure 1) shows the satisfying and rather incredible end-product. The collecting of such authentic material—like all specialist antiques—has been intriguing to say the least, and I feel that readers may enjoy an account of it.



Figure 1

The general practitioner's bag and contents, as it would have been in the twenties or thirties.

Having the basic item, the bag, was a good start, for these relics are surprisingly hard to come by, and of course a new one would be costly and in any case defeat the object of the idea. The next step was the acquisition of diagnostic and surgical instruments made pre-war. I had a few instruments left over from the days when my late step-mother was a doctor's dispenser-cum-secretary, and also some which my retired uncle had used. The remainder came from other friends. The wooden-boxed sphygmomanometer and binaural stethoscope—Down Bros, circa 1923—were easily come by. I have collected old stethoscopes for several years and the bulk of my collection is on display in the Wright-Fleming lecture theatre at St Mary's Hospital Medical School. These were the subject of another paper in the *Practitioner* (Morris 1967).

However I did have some difficulty in getting hold of a diagnostic set. I was lucky after contacting Dr J. Burton, the medical director of the Joint Mission Hospital Equipment Board, and he has kindly sent me a very old auriscope and ophthalmoscope, being of course a bit too antiquated for use in current practice. The auriscope is silver plated, with three speculae and is operated by a simple lens and a funnel shaped aperture through which light passes to a mirror within the body of the instrument. I have tried this out and one can get a very clear view of the ear drum. The auriscope was made by Arnold & Sons. The Morton's ophthalmoscope made by William Gowlland Ltd of Croydon, is an equally vintage piece, being worked by a system of mirrors and the usual lenses. I could not get a clear view of the retina with this, but due I think to lack of expertise rather than malfunction of the instrument. This diagnostic set is slightly older than the age set for my exhibit, but never-the-less would not be in any way unusual in the bag. A Handy Haemoglobin Chart (1928) is seen with the diagnostic equipment.

One interesting instrument which I acquired from a lady doctor in Scotland, is an old laryngoscope which belonged to her predecessor. He did apparently carry this on his daily round and made use of it additionally for the general inspection of the pharynx, posterior post-nasal space and diphtheritic membranes. He powered the laryngoscope from a portable battery pack. Similar period pieces included are those instruments used for the dissection of tonsils—presumably on the scrubbed farm or cottage tables of rural parts.

The absence of antibiotics meant that at this time surgical instruments played a larger rôle, and I have included in the bag a general selection for minor surgical work. Here you notice that the scalpels are solid forged. I have also included an ethyl chloride spray, and it is true to say that this method of local anaesthesia is virtually out nowadays; certainly the chloroform drop bottle is. Other instruments which I shall mention here are two silver catheters, an ivory case containing a selection of silver probes and a Eustachian catheter. There are a few more given by Charles F. Thackray of Leeds but I shall describe these separately.

Of the dressings, I have been more than lucky to obtain from that old established firm of Leslie's Ltd, genuine articles taken from their 1923 and 1930 catalogues. The most interesting piece is a surgeon's case and spools of rubber zinc oxide plaster. The plaster has naturally been renewed but to make it more authoritative has been specially made to the 1925 formula. This type of case and contents was supplied in large numbers to general practitioners, and has a most worthy and traditional place in the exhibit. Leslie's have also supplied dressings made in

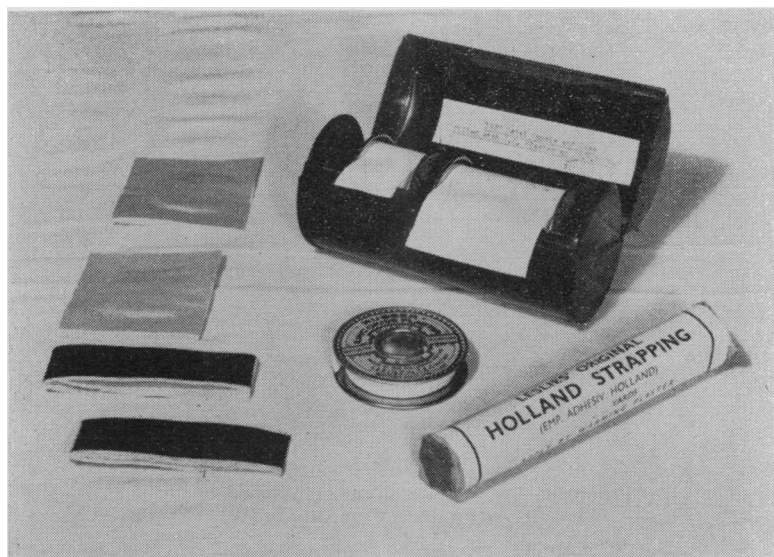


Figure 2

Metal spools and zinc oxide plaster in a special 'surgeon's' case—circa 1927—together with dressings and Holland Strapping of a similar vintage. All supplied by Leslie's Ltd.

1923—their centenary year—made from pure silk stockinet with no plaster present underneath, thus permitting complete aeration. These are called the 'G and P' (Gauze and Plaster) dressing. Also seen are 'black' finger dressings circa 1923. Emp. Adhesiv. Holland is a plaster dating back to the 1800's and which has not changed. Doctor's often used to carry this in a loose condition in their bags, and a roll is included here. The label is vintage. Leslies are the originators of Zinc Oxide Plaster—ZOPLA—and I am most grateful for all their help and the very keen interest they have shown in this exhibit.

The authentic drug packs presented more of a problem. Most of the old established firms had unfortunately nothing available, and those which had were for the most part loath to part with them, such items being important to their own archives.

I did get great help from the Winthrop Laboratories formerly Bayer Products Company. Some years ago a friend of mine who was in the process of resigning his practice found in what had been his father's dispensary a tube of Prontosil Album tablets. These were a clinical sample which had been distributed, probably in the late thirties. Thinking that this would be of interest to a medical historian he passed the tube on to me. I then got in touch with Winthrop telling them about this wonderful find, and naturally they showed great interest. In addition to this the firm were able, through a Mr Dixon who had been an employee for many years, to let me have—via a medical colleague—a box of Prontosil Soluble ampoules for the exhibit. The drug Prontosil is historic in itself being a form of chemotherapy and a breakthrough in the treatment of streptococcal diseases, primarily puerperal sepsis. Dr D. M. Hughes, giving the Fourth James Mackenzie lecture before the College in 1957, relates how in 1935, while still residing with his old predecessor, he read at night by the aid of a solitary candle a brief account of the new wonder drug. Indeed it was amazing that there had at last been discovered a chemical which could go as far as to cure one of the most dreaded conditions known in general practice and the practice of obstetrics. Other listed indications were erysipelas, follicular tonsillitis, sepsis following otitis media, cytitis, pyelitis and poly-arthritis and its allied affections. This was surely the turning point in the treatment of infection, and Dr Hughes felt that its significance brought new light into his darkened bedroom (1958). Mr Dixon also found me an empty carton which had contained Luminal tablets grain 5. Again a pleasing relic.



Figure 3
Prontosil—the 'wonder drug'. Supplied by the
Bayer Products Company Ltd.

It is true to say that luck and very good contacts have played an important rôle in the collection of material. I have already mentioned the various bits and pieces I have picked up from retiring doctors, but the following interesting things were kindly donated by my good friend Dr A. M. Kellock of Lostwithiel in Cornwall. A really pleasing item is a black leatherette

case containing 12 tubes in which Dr Kellock carried medicaments on his round. The case is labelled Oppenheimer Son & Co. Ltd and I would presume it was a presentation piece. Another item I have never seen before is a swab in a metal tube case, but this is another of Dr Kellock's relics, together with a set of exploring trocars and two microscope slides in a wooden box. The bottle of Ethobral tablets is perhaps of the more recent past but never-the-less is a well-trusted product used in general practice for nearly 20 years.

Another instance of getting hold of some old *materia medica* came through a casual phone call to the oldest pharmaceutical chemist shop in Nottingham. This had recently been taken over by new management, who had found themselves in the possession of a truly remarkable assortment of antiquated packs dating well back before the war. These were for the most part Burroughs Wellcome 'Tabloid', 'Hypoloid' and other brands. I was able to find for the collection some of the original Blue Pill and Rhubarb Compound tablets, analgesics, anathelmintics, trinitrin and what must have been an original nikethamide pack. For the treatment of wounds there was 'Vaporole' Iodine and packets of Tabloid Bismuth Gauze. All these, for the most part long discontinued preparations, were earmarked for destroying. I was however able to classify them because one of the things that my late father gave me on one occasion from his drawer was a Wellcome Memorandum Book for 1929. This too is included in the exhibit.

The firm of Roche Products Ltd are without doubt very well-known in the field of psychotherapeutics, and I have managed to include in the bag an empty box which once contained 50 x 2ml ampoules of the product Somnifaine. It must have been acquired by my stepmother in her dispensing days, and had in it Christmas cake decorations when I came across it. This product, developed in the early 1920's and discontinued in 1963, was a powerful sedative and hypnotic, useful in all forms of moderate to severe insomnia; in convulsive states; in severe vomiting; and in acute mental crises. Roche have provided an old house leaflet, which I have placed in the box.

The last two old established firms which have helped me in this collection are the surgical instrument manufacturers and suppliers to dispensing doctors—Messrs Philip Harris of Birmingham and Charles F. Thackray of Leeds.

Philip Harris would have liked to have been of more assistance, but due to the fact that they have in recent years moved from their Edmund Street premises, they had at that time to abandon much old stock which would have been helpful and applicable to my project. However I have included a tube of BIPP and with the papers that are in the bag, a couple of labels from old stock bottles of the Company, for I am sure that many general practitioners will know the firm and hold it in high esteem. They have also been kind enough to send me a corked, flat, medicine bottle and some pill boxes, again things of the recent past.

From Charles F. Thackray I was sent what could be rightfully termed 'a box of intrigue', for in this I found all manner of items relevant to the history of therapeutic and clinical medicine. Unfortunately I could not use all the material sent, and indeed some of it was of an earlier vintage than that of my project. What I did keep for inclusion is as follows. First of all there is a delightful injection box, complete with its contents and a special spirit proof container for a syringe. Inside the box there is another syringe made completely of glass. Another metal box contains two lancets, a spirit lamp and tubes with screw tops, presumably for blood samples. There are swabs and zinc oxide tape also in the box; a brass ear syringe, fibre kidney dish, vaccinator, trocars and Southey's tubes both in ivory cases; and lastly two folding knives, one with a hook, and a lancet, which are added to the surgical equipment in the bag.

There are a few additional items which I consider relevant and have included. For example the metal soap tin containing a piece of Wright's Coal Tar soap; and a pair of rubber gloves. Soap had a dual purpose: for washing and for using as a lubricant on the gloved hand. An enamel lotion bowl and nail brush are also to hand.

To keep the kiddies happy I knew a doctor who would carry a tin of 'Allenburys' (Allen & Hanburys) Glycerine and Blackcurrent pastilles. These are of little use therapeutically, but are pleasant and soothing—so into the bag goes a pre-war tin which contained these. Also there is a free sample of Iodex.

Papers carried on the round were minimal compared with today's selection. Writing paper and envelopes, the memorandum book already mentioned and small envelopes for on-the-spot dispensing are seen along with the fountain-pen—an old Parker. Interesting items

here are two original prescriptions of 1926 and 1928, the latter written by my uncle. They are for 'mixtures' and were found in the envelopes issued at the time of dispensing by a local pharmacist—who incidentally was killed when a bomb hit and destroyed his shop during the last war. And strangely enough he had spent several years with the pharmacy in Nottingham that supplied some of the material for the exhibit.

Many readers may wonder just why I have gone to such lengths? It has been no chore—but a labour of love. Tremendously satisfying to one who would have very much liked to have been a general practitioner in the truest sense of the title. When I began the collection and announced that I was going to give it away when complete, my young wife said I was 'bonkers'! Perhaps she is right. But if I have produced something historically useful to the Royal College of General Practitioners, and aroused the interest and enthusiasm and pleasure of others in helping me with this project, then I have achieved my aim.

Acknowledgements

I have mentioned within the article all those persons who have helped me and to whom I am more than grateful, but additionally I must thank Mr Gordon Dunning for his usual excellent photography, and especially Dr Thomas for his interest and encouragement.

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