



Two mortar and pestles, one ceramic, the other brass, sold with a set of boxed weights for £75.



Two brass and wooden pill machines, one with a marble insert. Sold for £100.



£170 bought this highly decorative and colourful group of drug jars labelled with contents which included cannabis and myrrh.

Pharmaceutical Paraphernalia

by Zita Thornton



This mixed group included three drug jars, Dr Nelson's Improved Inhaler and a syringe. Sold for £42.



This whole group of glass pharmacy items including a baby's feeding bottle, poison bottles, measures and an eyebath, sold for a mere £22.

All pictures are courtesy of BBR Auctions. Prices exclude buyer's premium. For details of BBR Auctions at the Elsecar Heritage Centre, Nr Barnsley South Yorkshire, telephone 01226 745156 or visit www.onlinebbr.com or check out our Auctions Diary.

Items from old pharmacies give us an insight into healthcare before the arrival of the NHS. The bulbous glass bottle called a carboy, on display in many a modern day pharmacy, is a reminder of a time when medicines didn't arrive pre-packed and pills and potions were made and dispensed in the pharmacy. To twenty first century eyes these items can seem beautiful, intriguing, interesting or even just plain ludicrous. However, to really appreciate these items and their use you have to understand the history of healthcare.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, apothecaries offered medical advice and diagnosis as well as treatment. It wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century that doctors in general practice and chemists and druggists became two separate groups. Fifty years later, the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain was set up to regulate and register pharmacists. In the years that followed, these pharmacists would not only be called upon to make and dispense medications, but also to extract teeth, practise veterinary medicine or make cosmetics and toiletries. All at the back of the shop! Like today, they would also sell all kinds of related items such as baby's feeding bottles, invalid and infant food and apparatus such as bed pans. A collection of pharmaceutical items will be as varied in content as in price. It might include attractively gilded and painted ceramic or glass jars, their contents labelled in Latin script; pestles and mortars for pounding the contents of the jars; bottles for medicines and poisons; pots and tins which contained remedies made up in the pharmacy; equipment used by the pharmacist in the offering of these products and by the patient in the taking of the treatments; charts and models to aid diagnosis and attractive packaging to advertise goods and services.

At the top end of the collecting scale are the drug jars from the sixteenth century which demonstrate the original use of maiolica, the tin glazed earthenware of the period. These, and later versions were richly decorated with foliage and flowers. Their painted Latin names describing their contents take us right back to the origins of pharmacy, whilst the inclusion of saints gave a spiritual blessing. Wet drugs would be in bulbous jars with a spout and handles. Dry contents would be kept in cylindrical 'alberelli' with a flange neck for tying a parchment cover, often waisted for ease of picking off a crowded shelf. By Victorian times such jars were kept more for display, with a simpler, plainer earthenware jar being used every day. These had painted or paper labels with matching or tin lids. If you find such a jar with a perforated lid, it is likely to have been used to store the live leeches used for bleeding patients.

Other common vessels for storage were jars and bottles. Plain or fancily coloured, they are of varying quality and rarity. Plain glass bottles with intriguing paper labels are fairly common. Coloured glass examples, moulded with the details of the chemist are more desirable. In general, green glass was used for poisons and may also contain vertical ridges. Glass specie jars were, like their ceramic counterparts richly decorated and gilded, with their contents or with a coat of arms. Large amounts of liquid were stored in the pharmacy in large carboys with long necks and bulbous bodies. Smaller amounts were kept in cylindrical 'rounds' with glass stoppers and eventually took over from the carboys for storage. Usually these were of clear glass although cobalt blue was sometimes used for syrups. They had looser stoppers with wide flanges to prevent dust from entering. A pestle and mortar is a familiar sight in many of our kitchens and had a similar use in the pharmacy. In the eighteenth century they were made in ceramic by Wedgwood or in glass, but earlier versions were bucket shaped in wood or metal. The

most highly prized early examples are in bronze, especially if when they have embossed decorations or unusual handles. Equipment used by the pharmacist for treatment or diagnosis, ranges from the bizarre to the decorative. These include graphic charts and models of anatomic studies. Porcelain phrenology heads which chart the 'sentiments' are widely reproduced but prime original examples by L.N Fowler can cost several hundreds of pounds.

Pharmaceutical equipment is a reminder of the pharmacist's versatile trade. Pillmakers, scales and lipstick moulds are handsome in mahogany and brass. Small knives kept in silver or mother of pearl cases are a reminder of how it was thought that bleeding patients would cure any number of ills. The pharmacy was the place to buy, not just pills, suppositories and liquid medicines but also the apparatus needed for taking the treatments. Syringes would be sold alongside inhalers and infusion jugs with their perforated plates at the top. When liquid medicines ceased to be dispensed in single dose phials and were more commonly sold in multi-dose bottles, medicine spoons and measures were required. The latter resembled a small wine glass or may have included a spout for ease of administering the contents to an invalid. Spoons can be found in reasonable numbers today, in different sizes and styles, sometimes being double ended. They were made from ceramic or metal and usually had a looped handle and a flat base which was often covered. In 1827 the Gibson spoon was introduced which allowed the medicine to be administered right to the back of the throat, which was useful in an age when medicine tasted most unpleasant. These were made from silver, pewter, bronze or horn, with decorative handles. Eye baths have their own following today. Most of us are familiar with the dark blue Optrex version or with clear glass or ceramic stemmed examples. However, the prettiest and most expensive eye baths are ceramic with transfer print decoration or Victorian examples in coloured, moulded glass, with a stem and foot, and sometimes an additional spherical reservoir.

The pharmacy of a hundred years ago was a handsome place with its dispensing counter as a focal point, its shelves and drawers for display and storage behind. These fine pieces of furniture are useful for today's collector, to keep a collection of pharmaceutical items. They can sometimes be found with their integral labelling intact. A smaller alternative is the travelling dispensing chest, which became the forerunner of today's medicine cupboard. The most interesting contain pharmacy equipment such as weights and scales, pestle and mortar and bottles. The increasing popularity of collecting pharmaceutical items was reflected in BBRs first pharmacy sale in September. Varied lots ranged from a mixed group of ceramic and glass bottles and drug jars which sold for £10, to a leech jar which surprised everyone by selling for £2,460 when the original estimate had been £20-£30. Good value was seen in the large number of drug rounds, ranging in price from £20-£200 and medicine chests for around £80. Carboys varied from £70 to a stunning purple glass example which sold for £780. There were pillmakers from £80-£120 and microscopes for £70-£80. There were plenty of pot lids (£10-£1,005) and a great many bottles. Perhaps the most unusual item was the stuffed crocodile (£60), which, along with turtles, would have been found displayed in pharmacies. (All prices exclude buyers premium.)

Scientific and medical auctions usually include a variety of curious and unusual pharmaceutical pieces. However, antiques shops and fairs offer plenty of lower priced items. A recent foray of the antique shops at Rye turned up a Meggason sore throat pastille tin (£5), a glass medicine measure (£12). Measuring cylinders, hand etched in ounces and drachms (£4-£8). An assortment of eye baths (£5-£6). A large pharmacy jar with a paper label was the most expensive item (£38). So there's plenty on offer, from the attractive to the macabre, to suit all tastes and pockets. However, it is worth noting the cautionary warning from BBR that care should always be taken when handling old pharmacy items as the contents may be harmful. Wash hands after handling and keep away from children and pets.

W.A.Jackson's book for Shire Publications *The Victorian Chemist and Druggist* £2.95, gives information about a wide variety of pharmaceutical items and a comprehensive list of places where you can visit reconstructed pharmacies.



A handsome honey jar. Sold for £100.



This rhubarb specie jar remind us of pharmacy's natural roots. Sold for £60.



Cylindrical Delft drug jar labelled and decorated with flowers and birds. Sold for £180 despite chips to the base and rim.



Sugar coated and soluble, steel and penyroyal pills were contained in this attractive glass pill bottle. Sold for £80.



The stunning purple glass, shop display carboy with its gold and black label raised £700.