

Around the Archives

The Archive of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

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The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh has the oldest and largest medical library and archive in Scotland. The Edinburgh College is fortunate that its founders understood the importance of libraries and archives from the outset. The library was established in 1682, only one year after the College's foundation. In that year 'Three shelves full of books' were donated 'to the Colledge of Physitians'.¹ Their donor, Sir Robert Sibbald, was not only one of the College's founders but also the University of Edinburgh's first professor of medicine and Scotland's Geographer Royal.

As with many similar institutions, prior to the late twentieth century the College's archives were treated as a subset of its library. Its librarian, effectively, combined their titular role with that of archivist. The value of a dedicated librarian was identified almost as quickly as the need for the College to preserve books and manuscripts. Two posts, those of librarian and deputy librarian, were established within only eighteen months of the College's foundation, in May 1683.² At this point the library and archive collections still spanned no more than a few shelves. Indeed, according to one twentieth-century commentator, the post of librarian 'appears to have been considered an office of importance in the College long before there was anything deserving the name of a library to take care of'.³

The role of the College in the twenty-first century is to support qualified doctors throughout their careers in internal medicine, not only within Scotland, but internationally. This involves the organisation and administration of medical examinations, education and training. The College is a membership organisation and admission to membership is open to doctors who have passed the relevant examinations or who are sufficiently advanced in their careers that the need for such a qualification has been superseded by their body of work. Those who are established and sufficiently advanced in their careers, usually consultant

¹ (ed.) F. Paget Hett, *The Memoirs of Robert Sibbald, 1641–1722* (London, 1932), 83.

² Royal College of Physicians (hereafter RCP), RCP/COL/2/1/1, College Minutes, Vol. 7, May 1683.

³ J. Ferguson, 'The College Library', in (ed.) R. Passmore, *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh Tercentenary Congress 1981* (Cambridge, 1982), 104.

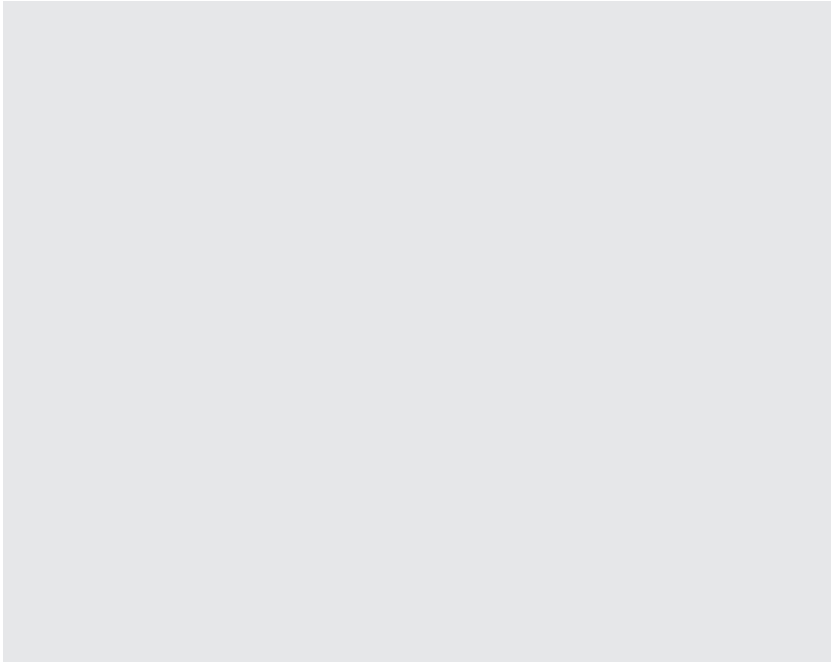


Plate 1 Image of an item from the disciplinary case of Temple and Massie, 1917
(© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

physicians, can become fellows of the College on nomination and election by a selection of their peers. The current archives of the College reflects these roles, with the fastest growing records series being the College's fellowship nomination papers. The decision to admit a physician as a fellow can be a long, complex and sometimes contentious process.

The College's remit, of course, has not been static over the last three hundred years. The creation of institutions such as the British Medical Association (BMA) and the National Health Service (NHS) have had significant impact on the role of the College. Prior to the establishment of the BMA, part of the College's remit was the regulation of the medical profession. This undertaking can be traced through the College's records almost from its foundation, with concerns mentioned in institutional minutes in late 1681 regarding an individual peddling 'poysounous tablettis ... as a Vomitur tablett'.⁴ Then, just a few months later, the same minutes note that action was to be taken against 'a pretended chirurgeon'.⁵ The College undertook a range of measures, including investigating unethical

⁴ RCP, RCP/COL/2/1/1, College Minutes, Vol. 1, November 1681.

⁵ Ibid., February 1682.

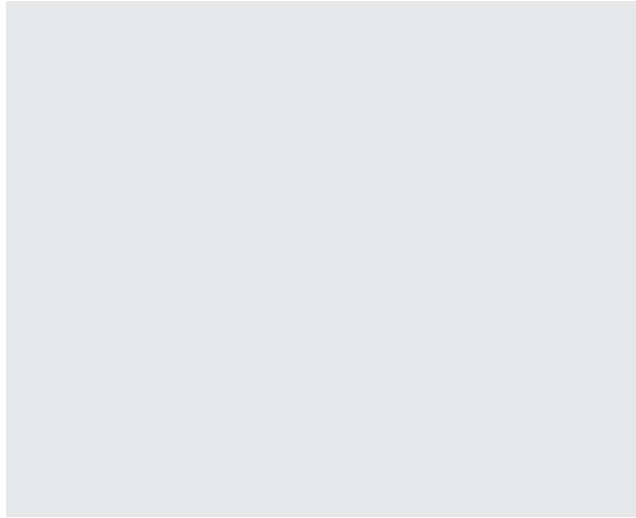


Plate 2 Image of the College laboratory, early twentieth century (© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

or counterfeit physicians, fining them, removed their College membership if necessary and even pursuing them through the courts.⁶ On occasion the College even employed private detectives to investigate and provide evidence of misdeeds.⁷ The College's collection of disciplinary cases, dating from 1862 to 1977, provides insight into this regulatory work, containing cases ranging from the provision of backstreet abortions to physicians supplying homeopathic remedies (Plate 1).⁸

Prior to the establishment of the NHS the College also played a significant role in supporting disease identification, research and treatment. It did this by founding its own laboratory in 1887, which provided free diagnosis of patient samples for doctors – not just in Scotland, but in England, Wales and even overseas (Plate 2).⁹ This was the first laboratory for medical investigation to be established in Britain. By 1947 the College's laboratory was receiving over 30,000 specimens a year for examination.¹⁰ It also carried out research into subjects such as poisonous air in coal mines, the diets of the labouring classes and military

⁶ RCP, RCP/FEL/3, College Disciplinary Cases, 1862–1977.

⁷ RCP, RCP/FEL/3/17, Disciplinary Case: Temple, 'Dr' William and Massie, 'Dr', 1914–1916.

⁸ RCP, RCP/FEL/3, College Disciplinary Cases, 1862–1977.

⁹ J. Richie, *History of the Laboratory of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1953), 1–22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

medicine during the Second World War.¹¹ In 1950, however, as a direct result of the foundation of the NHS two years earlier, the laboratory ceased operation.¹² One previous superintendent of the facility noted his disappointment:

That in the brave new world ... no place could be found for an institution so long established, so widely known and with so high a reputation may seem strange to us, and to future generations perhaps inexplicable.¹³

The records of the laboratory comprise the largest single collection in the College's archives. Eighteen metres of shelving house hundreds of volumes of clinical reports on a wide range of medical complaints. These reports, alongside other laboratory records such as meeting minutes, financial records and correspondence, provide enormous insight into medical research, diagnosis and reporting during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also provide a wealth of information for social historians, giving details of the diet, health and occupations of tens of thousands of individuals over that time period.

The administrative and policy work of the College is also detailed in the series which contains the minutes and papers of over three hundred individual committees. These records provide evidence of the vast array of College interests and activities. Committees were often formed when a decision was to be made regarding College direction, policy or when the College was called upon by bodies such as the BMA and government departments to provide advice and opinion on certain issues of health and medicine external to College affairs.

Papers of particular interest in this series include those of the Committee of the College on Medical Practice in the Highlands and Islands. The purpose of this committee, which operated from 1850 to 1852, was to determine the extent of medical services provided by medical professionals and lay individuals across the Highlands and Islands.¹⁴ Where provision was viewed as insufficient, the committee aimed to identify the impact this had on the health and well-being of individuals in the area. This collection comprises the returned questionnaires which were the product of this committee's work. These were completed by local medical practitioners and, where such individuals were not present, by other local community figures. The findings of this survey were also summarised by the committee, including their recommendations for improvements which should be made.

The College's committee papers also include the cholera returns for Edinburgh in the mid-1800s which were collected for a Committee of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. Additional examples of historically interesting committee papers include the papers of the Committee appointed to draft a memorandum on the NHS White Paper (1944), the 'Watching'

¹¹ Ibid., 43–94.

¹² Ibid., 95–108.

¹³ Ibid., 107.

¹⁴ See M. McCrae, 'Enquiry into the "Deficiency" of medical men in the mid-nineteenth century Highlands', *Scottish Archives*, 11 (2005), 61–7.

Committee (NHS) (1946), and other such committees formed in connection with the introduction of the NHS White Paper and the subsequent establishment of the NHS.

The collections of deposited papers in the archive mostly consist of the papers of past and present fellows and members of the College along with the records of bodies and organisations connected with the College. Due to the College's place in national and international medical society, its extensive list of notable past members and fellows, and its numerous activities in connection with other bodies, the archives have become extremely rich and varied. Indeed, with nearly four hundred deposited collections the research value of these records is significant.¹⁵

The fine line trodden during the early modern period between medicine and other branches of science means topics such as botany, chemistry and physics are well represented in these deposited collections. This includes the collections of eighteenth-century presidents of the College such as John Hope, Professor of Botany at the University of Edinburgh and the King's Botanist for Scotland, and Joseph Black, who was Professor of Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh and credited with the discovery of carbon dioxide. Other donors of manuscripts have included Sir Hans Sloane, whose library and collections later were to found the British Museum, and George, Earl of Cromartie, who gave five manuscript volumes on alchemy and a very long vellum roll inscribed with the method of discovering the philosopher's stone.

Other prominent individuals who are represented in the College's deposited collections include:

- **Sir John Pringle** (archive reference DEP/PRJ). An eighteenth-century Scottish physician, Pringle graduated from Leiden in the Netherlands before continuing his medical studies in Paris. Having set up a medical practice in Edinburgh Pringle was quickly appointed to a joint professorial position at the city's university. He was made physician to the army in Flanders in 1742 and then physician-general of the entire British army. Pringle is credited with establishing the principle that military hospitals were to be designated as neutral territory in wartime, a development which later led to the establishment of the Red Cross. He wrote extensively on medical practice and held a range of prominent positions, including president of the Royal Society and personal physician to the king. This collection includes ten volumes of notes containing around four thousand entries authored by Pringle which relate to a wide range of medical subjects. Some are transcribed letters detailing his correspondence with eminent contemporary figures, others are patient case notes, medical

¹⁵ Many archivists and librarians over the centuries have been involved in the repackaging, researching, and cataloguing of these collections. Of particular note is Alison Scott who catalogued the entirety of the College's deposited collections onto CALM as part of a project funded by the Wellcome Trust.

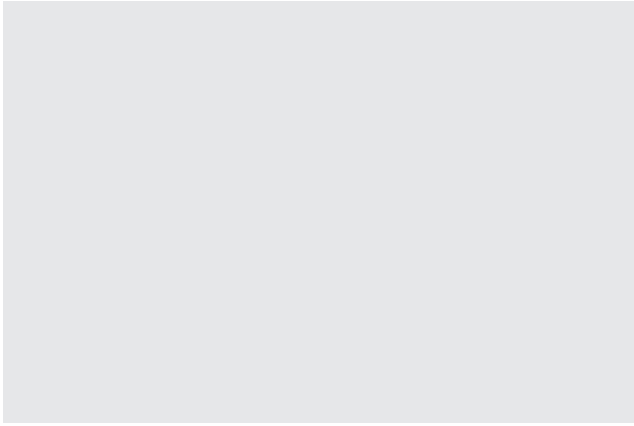


Plate 3 Manuscript chest of John Pringle's medical annotations, 1780s (© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

recipes and jotted ideas, notes and observations. The Pringle manuscript collection has had a particularly complex history. On donating his papers to the College, Pringle insisted that they never be published or allowed out of College premises (Plate 3).¹⁶ It was only in the 1990s, after significant legal consultation, that these stipulations were set aside and the collection was able to be photographed and used by historians in their published works.

- **Andrew Duncan** (archive reference DEP/DUA). Duncan was at the forefront of the public health movement in Edinburgh in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He was key in the foundation of the city's first public asylum and in establishing the position of Professor of Medical Jurisprudence and Medical Police (the first of its kind in Britain), which brought the topic of public health into the city's university. He was also president of the College, first from 1790 to 1792, and then again from 1824 to 1825. Among his papers are ninety-nine volumes of case notes relating to the Edinburgh Public Dispensary, which Duncan founded in 1776. The first of its kind in Scotland, the dispensary provided free medicine and treatment for the poor of the city. While infirmaries in this period, as was the case in Edinburgh, would often exclude children and rarely admit the elderly, the chronically ill, or those who could not pay a financial deposit, the dispensary was freely open to all. This series of case notes details the names, ages, occupations, diagnoses and treatments of thousands of poor patients in Scotland's capital city during the late eighteenth century.

¹⁶ W. S. Craig, *History of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976), 126.

The College is currently undertaking a project, partially funded by the Wellcome Trust, to digitise, transcribe and make available online these dispensary patient case notes.

- **William Cullen** (archive reference DEP/CUL). Cullen was president of the College from 1773 to 1775. He was also an extremely well-known and well-respected medical lecturer, drawing huge numbers of medical students to the Edinburgh Medical School. Cullen studied what were known as 'nervous' disorders and coined the term 'neurosis'. Cullen's medical recommendations were highly regarded and people wrote to him from countries as far away as India, Jamaica and Russia asking for his advice. Medical treatment via correspondence was common at that time and Cullen's consultation letters give a fascinating and unique insight into eighteenth-century medical practice, along with letters received by him from his many notable correspondents and associates including Adam Smith and Benjamin Franklin. This collection has been digitised, transcribed and made available online at <http://cullenproject.ac.uk> as part of a collaborative project between the College and the University of Glasgow, funded by a major AHRC research grant (Plate 4).

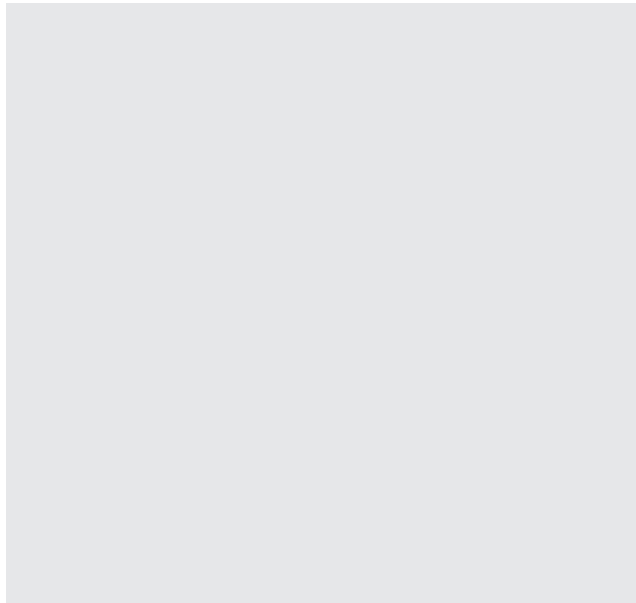


Plate 4 William Cullen online resource, 2019 (© University of Glasgow and Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

- **Sir Alexander Morison** (archive reference DEP/MOR). Morison was educated at Edinburgh’s High School and then graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1799. He initially practised in Edinburgh before relocating to London. Morison then took up a series of asylum positions, first as inspecting physician of lunatic asylums in Surrey in 1810 and then, fifteen years later, as physician to London’s Bethlem Hospital. Although unable to find an institution willing to offer him a teaching position, Morison developed his own lecture course on cerebral and mental diseases. He also wrote extensively, including *Outlines of Lectures on Mental Diseases* (1826) and *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (1840). Morison’s research included the subject of physiognomy – the theory that a patient’s facial features or expression could reveal the internal conflict caused by their mental illness. Our Morison manuscripts include 249 original illustrations of asylum patients which he commissioned to accompany his lectures on mental diseases and used in his publications to illustrate his theories. Much of Morison’s work was quite progressive, particularly his focus on the patient as an individual, with individual circumstances and personal experiences that the practitioner must understand in order to be able to successfully treat them. His diagnoses, however, remained largely within established boundaries for the time, including ‘unnatural propensity’ (a common nineteenth-century term for homosexuality) and nymphomania, as illustrated in Plate 5.

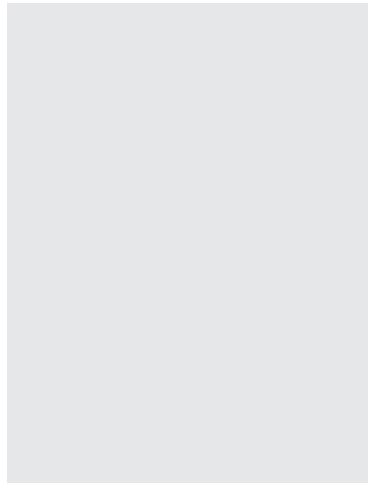


Plate 5 Portrait from the Morison illustration collection of an unnamed female patient at the Aberdeen Asylum diagnosed with nymphomania, 1840 (© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

The College also holds some major records of other bodies and institutions. These include:

- **The Scottish Medical Service Emergency Committee** (archive reference DEP/SMC). This committee was established in 1914 to address the medical crisis faced by civilian populations at the outbreak of the First World War.¹⁷ The mass sign-up of many doctors to military service after the outbreak of war led to shortages of support for civilians. The aim of this committee was to survey every doctor in Scotland to determine whether they intended to enlist.¹⁸ It also established a tribunal role for appeals from doctors who wished to avoid military service.¹⁹ A project has been carried out, led by the College's previous archivist Alison Scott, to make these records available online. As a result a web resource is now available that enables searching of these records by name, geographical location and other keywords which details addresses, military ranks and other information relating to these doctors. It also contains a glossary of medical and military terminology and acronyms. This collection can be viewed online at <http://smsec.rcpe.ac.uk>.
- **The Society for Improving the Conditions of the Insane** (archive reference DEP/SOC). Alexander Morison, discussed above, founded this society in 1842. The undertakings of the society included establishing an annual essay on subjects relating to asylums and the treatment of the insane. The aim of the society, according to Morison, was to improve the standards of asylum staff. Some attendants could be neglectful or even violent towards the patients under their care, and according to Morison, his society would prevent this by offering training and financial rewards. Ten years after it was founded Morison's society was running out of money. Members gave excuses to avoid turning up to meetings (including bad feet and 'an attack in the bowels').²⁰ The society was disbanded in August 1865. The College's records of the society include submissions to its annual essay competition, occasional papers submitted by members, reports and brochures for asylums around the country, and case histories and notes on patients.

With the proliferation of e-resources over recent decades the need for physicians to access our collections in order to research topics for their current medical practices has diminished. Increasingly, our usefulness is to academics and to members of the public who are interested in the history of medicine. As a result the College has begun to develop a wider programme of public engagement activities, which includes the development of digital and other online resources.

¹⁷ Ibid., 658.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ RCP, DEP/SOC/3, Correspondence of the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Insane, 1842–1864.

The Cullen, Duncan and Morison digitisation projects mentioned above are only a sample of the work that the College has undertaken in this area. Other online projects include the development of a fortnightly history of medicine podcast, the hosting of recorded talks online and the creation of oral history recordings for the web.

Our public engagement undertakings also stretch beyond digital and online resources. In 2018 the College opened a professionally designed exhibition space, formally titled the Physicians' Gallery. This space allows us to showcase some of the highlights from our extensive collections and demonstrate both the breadth of our resources and the expertise of our fellows and members. The exhibitions, which are open to the public free of charge from Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., are rotated approximately every six months. Our first exhibition, 'Searching for the Elixir of Life', a study of alchemy, had over five hundred visitors per week (Plate 6). We have been working to increase this further, most recently with the exhibition that ran until Spring 2020 entitled 'Moonstruck: 500 years of mental health'. The latter exhibition was developed in consultation with a range of mental-health charities and medical practitioners and was aimed at those with a casual, professional, or personal interest in the subject. Our goal is not to create elite exhibitions which will only be of interest to a select few specialists but, rather, exhibitions which will open up the collections and the subject matter to as wide an audience as possible.

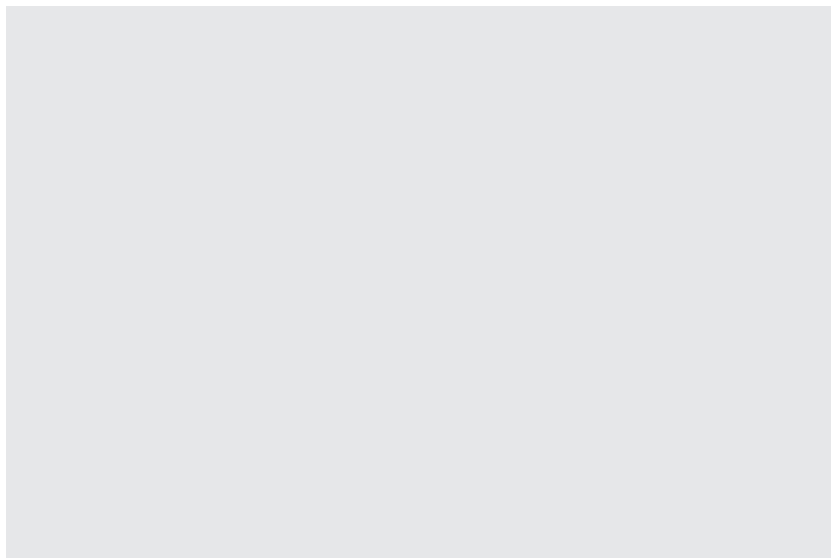


Plate 6 Searching for the Elixir of Life exhibition, 2018 (© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

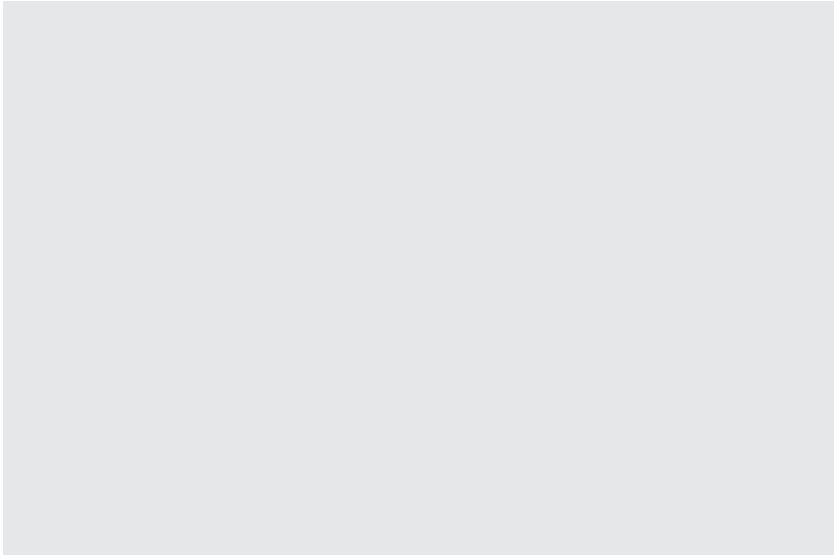


Plate 7 Heritage public event, 2018 (© Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh).

The College also hosts a range of public events, including talks, workshops and tours (Plate 7). We work closely with a range of academic partners such as the University of Edinburgh with whom we organise an annual series of history of medicine lectures.

This brief introduction to the archives of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh provides some insight into the range of both our collections and the work that we do, although inevitably it cannot cover the full breadth of our archives and activities. Our records are a useful resource, not only for medical historians, but for genealogists, social historians and those interested in the history of science, botany, or Scottish history more generally. Our public engagement activities are aimed at a broad cross section of society, opening up access to our collections to those who, historically, may have been unlikely to engage in research within the confines of a reading room.