

Preserving the treasures of medicine: our 'Adopt a treasure' campaign

For over 500 years, the RCP has collected and cared for the treasures of medicine – from apothecary jars and Arabic manuscripts to rare early printed books, portraits and instruments. Together, they tell the extraordinary story of how physicians have advanced medicine, improved health and shaped human understanding across the centuries.

This autumn, the RCP is inviting members, fellows and friends to play a personal part in that story through 'Adopt a treasure' – a new campaign supporting the conservation of rare and significant items from the RCP's world-renowned collections.

Adopters can choose from a specially curated selection of treasures currently in need of care. Each adoption directly funds professional conservation and preservation work, ensuring that these fragile artefacts remain accessible for research, learning and public display.

Telling the story of medicine

'Professor Anita Simonds, Harveian librarian, says: 'Our remarkable collections tell the story of medicine, its discoveries, challenges and the people who have shaped it. Through our new 'Adopt a treasure' campaign, we're not only preserving fragile books, manuscripts and artworks, but also taking steps to diversify our portrait collections so they better reflect the breadth of those who have contributed to medicine. Every gift helps to ensure that these stories, old and new, continue to inspire and educate future generations.'

The range of RCP treasures that are available to adopt is breathtaking – and gives you the opportunity to become part of the areas of medical history that have inspired and shaped your career.

The RCP collection includes texts and prints that were central to the development of medicine across centuries. Texts like Renaissance anatomical engravings or a richly illustrated surgical manual from 1725 represent periods of profound medical transformation. A collection of watercolour prints from the 1860s show the treatment of leprosy cases by Dr Bhau Dajee – a record of early cross-cultural medical exchange, which challenges Western-centric narratives of medicine.

Enduring symbols of the RCP itself are available to adopt – including a portrait of William Harvey, which is one of only two portraits rescued from the RCP's home

in the 1666 Great Fire of London. Harvey, an RCP fellow, revolutionised medicine through his discovery of the circulation of the blood, one of the greatest scientific breakthroughs in history. Similarly, there is the college caduceus, which has served as the president's symbol of office since 1556, and is still carried on formal occasions.

You can celebrate momentous medical discoveries by adopting a 19th-century print by the nephew of Dr Edward Jenner – the physician who pioneered the smallpox vaccine – or engravings celebrating some of the earliest history of modern resuscitation in the 1780s.

There are some more unusual angles to medicine too. The quack doctor is a satirical print from 1814 that mocks some of the 19th century's questionable medical practices – showing an apothecary shop with bottles labelled arsenic, opium and vitriol, and a skeleton assistant mixing up a poisonous treatment. Or you could sponsor the baronetcy costume of Sir William Withey Gull, a prominent Victorian physician, who was erroneously accused of being Jack the Ripper by some 20th-century writers.

Adopting a treasure could help to repair devastating damage to some of these historic objects – from fixing flaking plaster on the bust of Asclepius, Greek god of medicine, to replacing the broken binding on a rare 1517 translation of Galen by Thomas Linacre, the first RCP president. Many of the striking prints that are available to adopt have stains and tears that need to be cleaned and repaired before they are displayed – including one engraving of Sir William Burnett (1779–1861), which has been ripped into four large pieces. Your contributions could help with the vital conservation work necessary to preserve these parts of history.

Adopting an artefact can also be your way not just to preserve an important past, but to shape the future of the RCP – inspiring belonging, representation and change for generations to come. There is the opportunity to support the commissioning of a portrait of Dr Dossibai J R Dadabhoy, an Indian obstetrician, gynaecologist, teacher and campaigner who was the second woman physician formally recognised by the RCP, and the first to receive the RCP qualification of licentiate in 1910. Her story highlights the vital contributions of women and migrant doctors, figures still underrepresented on our walls.

Your way to get involved

Adoptions start from £250, with options to support everything from 16th-century anatomy texts and presidential portraits to early surgical manuals, prints and symbolic artefacts such as the RCP caduceus. Adopters will receive updates on the progress of restoration, and recognition on the RCP website – and, if appropriate, alongside the object when displayed.

Alongside preserving the past, the campaign also supports the RCP's ongoing commitment to diversifying its portrait collections, ensuring that the stories of women, migrant and underrepresented physicians are more visibly reflected within the RCP's historic walls.

The RCP's collections, enriched by centuries of physician donors and collectors, remain a vital record of how science, care and human curiosity have evolved. Through 'Adopt a treasure', that legacy continues; one carefully restored book, portrait or artefact at a time.

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