

The Time Machine

Gareth Evans was entranced by the Apothecary's Hall at the National Botanic Garden of Wales



When I first stepped into the Apothecary's Hall at this stunning botanic garden minutes stretched into hours and I emerged to find, to my surprise, that the sun was already setting. The Apothecary's Hall is part of an impressive group of buildings restored and adapted in 2000 from the old Middleton Estate in Carmarthenshire to form the first new botanic garden in the UK for over 200 years.

This garden has a particular emphasis on plant medicine as it lies within the historic kingdom of Deheubarth, home to the medieval Physicians of Myddfai. The surviving thirteenth-century Welsh texts associated with the Physicians have been much discussed and their mixture of classical and home-grown wisdom gives them a unique position in early western medical manuscripts.

The atmosphere of the late nineteenth-century Hall is hushed like an antiquarian library. Around you are the ranks of dark brown drawers labelled in the language that was a byword for obscurity: apothecary's Latin. Although the collection of apothecary jars and bottles are from many periods, the cabinets represent more a singular slice of time. Like any herbal or pharmacopoeia they are a compendium of contemporary use, and the Hall can be seen as a walk-in herbal, complete with familiar and unfamiliar names that excite your curiosity. The drawer labelled *EYE SHADES* might suggest that there was as much interest in poker as pokeweed, but the *ICHTHYOCOLIA* label refers to isinglass, the clarifying agent made from the swimming bladders of Black Sea sturgeon, while *OS SEPIA* are cuttlefish bones that were ground down for tooth powder. The brownish, powder-covered grains of myrrh would have found a home in one of the drawers. An antiseptic and astringent, good for 'spongy gums', it would have been ground up for inclusion into the apothecary's tooth powder or paste.

Other tree resins were used for their binding qualities. The transparent grains of *ACACIÆ GUM*, gum arabic, (*Acacia senegal*), in addition to the waxy contents of the *CERA* drawer, would have been used to fill the intriguing moulds and machines on display to make pills, pastilles and pessaries. Alternatively, it would have been incorporated into the recipe for *PILULA*, the ready-made base to be held in stock before rolling into pills as the need arose.

Some of the herbs are grown in the nearby Apothecary's Garden. The Myddfai Physicians' manuscripts tell one to seek out elecampane root (*Inula helenium*), *marchalan* in Welsh, for those who have difficulty in breathing. The historical origins of the apothecary as 'pepperers and spicers' would have been obvious from the aroma of the

pale, bone-like dried roots in the *ZINGIBER:RAD* drawer that would have fought with the earthy smell of the turmeric powder in the *CURCUMÆ:PULV* drawer next to it. Turmeric is now a focus of research as a possible antidote for Alzheimer's Disease.

WOORAI, or curare, is the name of the Indian arrow poison typically prepared from the forest vine *Chondrodendron tomentosum*. Famous in the history of modern anaesthetics, its presence here has perhaps more to do with its use for complaints such as chronic urinary inflammation. The astringent dried leaves that were in the drawer labelled *BUCHU FOL*: were also a remedy for urinary problems. The pretty blackcurrant-flavoured leaves come from the South African *Agathosma* species, which are represented in the aromatic Mediterranean flora of the garden's famous Great Glasshouse.

The contents of the *ACONITI RAD*: and *HYOSCY: FOL*: drawers are more menacing, and reflect a time when the *radix* or roots of wolfsbane (*Aconitum napellus*) and *folia* or leaves of henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) were used for sedation in various circumstances. *Hyoscyamus* has a long history in Western medicine and anaesthesia and is recorded in the Myddfai manuscripts in relation to the making of the notorious *spongia somnifera*. Henbane's principal alkaloid, hyoscine, is to be found today in a large group of commercial travel-sickness medications. Elsewhere in the Hall is an innocent bottle of 'Tincture of Conium maculatum' that has been made up by a local pharmacist at Tenby at some time. Seven centuries ago hemlock featured in a Myddfai manuscript as one of the active constituents of *dwale* or 'sleep' mixtures. A recipe which can be found in similar medieval compilations, it is prepared 'to induce sleep whilst any diseased part is opened'.

Within the Hall there is an identifiable 'fingerprint' of four or five potent herbs, including wolfsbane and hemlock, that derive their historic use from the great medical school of Vienna more than a century before. The German physician Samuel Hahnemann developed homeopathy with a core pharmacopoeia that included many of these poisonous herbs. This same repertoire is also found among the first alkaloids isolated in laboratories at this time.

This two-dimensional array of labelled drawers easily multiplies into planes of reference stretching through time and space. The Hall is an artefact of the human interaction with plants, and its wide open spaces can be an open invitation to use one's mind, imagination and senses.

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