



British Society for the
History of Pharmacy

The evolution of pharmacy Theme B, Level 1 History of the Pharmaceutical Society



Royal
Pharmaceutical
Society
of Great Britain

The evolution of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

Why was a pharmaceutical society needed?

In the early 1800s, some chemists and druggists had already worked together to protect the profession's interests. They successfully argued for an exemption from the Apothecaries Act of 1815, monitored the progress of a proposed Sale of Poisons Bill in 1819, and created a short-lived General Association of Chemists and Druggists to promote protection against the Medicine Stamp Duty Act (1812).

In 1841, a group of chemists and druggists convened a public meeting in London to discuss a proposed medical reform bill. Although this bill failed at its second reading, they felt vulnerable. Anyone could operate under the title of Chemist and/or Druggist.

Jacob Bell, the son of a Quaker pharmacist John Bell, emerged as a spokesman for those concerned. The group agreed that the best foundation for a permanent independent association was membership based on a recognised qualification.

How did it all begin?

William Allen proposed the formation of the Pharmaceutical Society at a meeting on 15 April 1841 at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, London. Allen became the Society's first president. Forty people were appointed as the first Council. In September 1841, the Society took a lease on a house at 17 Bloomsbury Square, London. There it established a School of Pharmacy, library and museum. The Society listed its founder members, in its *Pharmaceutical Journal*, on 1 January 1842.



What was the Society trying to achieve?

The Society's founding aims were to unite the profession into one body, to protect its members' interests and to advance scientific knowledge.

The Royal Charter of Incorporation, granted in February 1843, gave the purpose of "advancing chemistry and pharmacy and promoting a uniform system of education" and "the protection of those who carry on the business of chemists and druggists."

Establishing the profession

In 1850, Jacob Bell became MP for St Albans, primarily to push for a Pharmacy Act. The Arsenic Act of 1851 soon showed the pressing need for a legal definition of a "chemist & druggist" as without one the act could not restrict the supply of arsenic.

The first victory was the Pharmacy Act of 1852 which established a Register of Pharmaceutical Chemists. It was only for those who had passed the Society's exams. However, unexamined and unregistered people could still practise as pharmacists. Things became more difficult in July 1852 when Bell lost his parliamentary seat. He died in 1859, aged only 49.



Opposition and other organisations

- *The Chemist and Druggist* was launched in 1859.
- The United Society of Chemists & Druggists was set up in 1861. It argued that the Pharmaceutical Society was elitist and unrepresentative. Agreement was finally reached over issues about Pharmaceutical Society membership.
- In 1920, the Retail Pharmacists Union (now the National Pharmaceutical Association) was set up after the Jenkins case proved that the Society could not act as a trade union, regulating hours, wages, prices or employment conditions.

Success and consolidation

The Pharmacy Act of 1868 set up a register of people qualified to sell, dispense and compound poisons. They had to be examined and registered by the Society.

Later acts relating to pharmacy and to poisons introduced new regulations:

- Chemists & Druggists could become full Society members (1898)
- The title of Pharmacist was extended to all registered persons. (1908)
- Membership, with an annual fee, became compulsory for all registered Pharmaceutical Chemists, and Chemists & Druggists. (1933)
- Registration of premises was proposed in 1933, and was first published in 1936.

Supplemental charters, in 1901, 1953 and 2004, have expanded the Society's powers.

Women pharmacists

In 1879, Isabella Clarke and Rose Minshull, already Pharmaceutical Chemists, were elected the first women members. Margaret Buchanan was the first female Council member, elected in 1918. In 1947, Jean Irvine became the first female president.

Expansion and further professionalisation

- The Society established a network of regional branches in 1922, although there had been earlier associations in the regions.
- In 1926 the Society opened its own pharmacological laboratories.
- In 1941 the first simple code of ethics was published.
- The Society's North British branch became its Scottish department in 1948.
- The Society's Welsh Executive was established in 1976.

Royal connections

From 1933, three Privy Council nominees have served on the Society's Council. King George VI became the Society's patron in 1937. The Queen agreed that the title "Royal" should be granted to the Pharmaceutical Society in 1988.

FIND OUT MORE

Links to other sheets:

Theme B: History of the Pharmaceutical Society, sheets 2 and 3

Theme A: What is a pharmacist? sheet 1

Further reading:

Holloway, S W F, *The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain: A political and social history, 1841-1991*, (Pharmaceutical Press, London, 1991)

Other resources:

Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society information sheet: *Tracing people and premises in pharmacy*