

REMEDIES FROM THE ARCHIVES

Our county archives are treasure troves of historical information and included in these troves are remedies and recipes for bygone medicines.

Woodhorn Museum, just outside Ashington, holds the majority of Archive records for Northumberland and a visit there can unlock some fascinating information on traditional treatments and remedies from earlier centuries. (Woodhorn/Archive staff are currently updating their on-line archive and so searches can be very frustrating and sometimes unproductive): https://northumberland.spydus.co.uk/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/OPAC/BSEARCH_ARC?HOMEPRMS=ARCPARAMS

If the Northumberland Archive yields little, it may be helpful to do the same search in the National Archive database. The link below shows the results from a search for the Bamburgh Dispensary:

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?q=Bamburgh+Dispensary>

Nice to see that the Dispensary had a 'wine account' and from this, they dispensed wine daily to their patients! The Dispensary was actually a hospital at the castle with in-patients as well as out-patients, set up in the late eighteenth century, but more about that another time).

Another archive resource is the County Durham and Darlington Archive at County Hall in Durham City: <http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/article/8338/Home>. They describe themselves as 'a mine of information' so it could be happy hunting.

And finally, the Tyne & Wear Archives are held at the Discovery Museum in Blandford Square just off Westgate Road.

<https://twarchives.org.uk/collection/catalogue>

A relatively recent on-line resource is The Cullen Project.

<http://www.cullenproject.ac.uk/>

Dr William Cullen, who died, aged 80 years, in 1790, left a fascinating archive of letters, consultations and prescription. He was an Edinburgh doctor, who was very famous and influential in his day – a friend of Adam Smith, David Hume and others. Some of his patients hailed from the Borders and North Northumberland but his fame meant that he corresponded with patients and physicians from the whole of the UK and Europe with the occasional correspondence with the West Indies and America. Among his more illustrious patients, he had at least one consultation about Dr Samuel Johnson with James Boswell shortly before Dr Johnson died in 1784 (No, it wasn't his treatment that killed him!)

This archive is well worth a good rummage around showing, as it does, the medical approach in the late eighteenth century at a time when plant medicines had moved towards 'exotic' types of plants from distant, overseas origins, and an increasing use of chemicals such as lead or mercury as part of a remedy. What is also very evident in the consultation letters is the emphasis that Dr Cullen places on the type of diet followed, the exercise taken and 'spa' baths. He frequently recommended cold water baths - just the ticket if you are feeling ill.