

Early Science in New College II: The Oglander Collection (1730): A Deluxe Chemistry Set from the Eighteenth Century

In around 1925, the first Keeper of the newly-opened Museum of the History of Science, R. T. Gunther, was invited to the muniment rooms in New College by the legendary ancient historian J. L. Myers. Gunther, who had just set in type most of the third volume of his exhaustive survey *Early Science in Oxford*, was excited to find ‘a cabinet containing in six drawers a complete collection of such objects of natural history as were supposed to be useful in medicine during the first half of the eighteenth century. The drawers had rarely been opened since the death of the owner.’ Gunther immediately wrote this note and inserted it at the end of his chapter on biological collections in the colleges.¹

The ‘owner’ was John Oglander, who was Warden from 1768 until his death in 1794. He was a connoisseur, with an eye for paintings, and in 1770 he also gave to the college the two fine Adams celestial and terrestrial globes and kept today in the college in glazed cabinets in the McGregor-Matthews Room.

Gunther had no time to write further on this remarkable survival of an eighteenth-century chest of *materia medica*, but he clearly managed to persuade the college to place the chest on permanent loan in the Museum of the History of Science, as in 1925 it was handed over to the Museum, and there it remains today (Inventory no. 25401); Myers spoke in favour of the deposit before Governing Body.²



As we can see, the chest is indeed divided into six drawers, labelled (in abbreviated Latin) ‘Woods, Barks, Gums, Saps’; ‘Flowers, Seeds, Fruits’; ‘Roots’; and finally two drawers of ‘Parts of Animals’. These last two drawers also each contain a bound volume of dried and classified plants, collections known as *horti sicci*, or ‘dried gardens’.

¹ *Early Science in Oxford* (1925), vol. 3, p. 342.

² NCA 9644, fol. 249 (Stated General Meeting minutes for 14 January 1925): ‘On the proposal of Professor Myres, it was agreed to deposit a cabinet of scientific specimens, presented to the college by Warden Oglander about 1770, at the Old Ashmolean Museum, on the understanding that the Collection shall be kept intact.’



After the Museum had had time to examine the chest, a great deal more was ascertained about who made it, for whom, and when. The old label that was affixed to the chest explains these matters, and fixes the date of the chest's construction to 1729-30, by a London Quaker pharmacist. Here is the text of the Museum's old label:

Wooden cabinet containing a materia medica collection made up in 1729-30 by the London apothecary Joseph Clutton for a gentleman client, Thomas Jobber. The six drawers are divided into labelled compartments for individual specimens, the tinier ones being also contained in pill-boxes and the liquid ones in glass jars with brass caps. The subjects of the drawers are: flowers, seeds and fruits; roots; woods, resins, etc.; metals, precious stones and minerals; and (two drawers) animal specimens and a two-volume herbarium containing 460 pressed plants. There are 1,032 specimens in all, and the collection is in an almost perfect state of preservation.

The itemised invoice survives, the cost being £21.6s.8d for the cabinet and contents, plus 'wt. he pleases' for the 60 days work of arranging and labelling. The specimens are not a random accumulation but were chosen to illustrate comprehensively the raw materials which a chemist, apothecary, and physician should at that time have been able to recognise and employ. Everything in the collection had a medicinal use. The purpose of such a cabinet was thus educational, for use in university teaching, in training apprentices, and in the private education of gentlemen's children. It might also have formed an intellectual conversation-piece in the drawing room of a country house or the common room of a college.

Unfortunately nothing is known about Thomas Jobber, the original owner. The compiler, Joseph Clutton, was a Quaker pharmacist with expert knowledge of medicinal materials and a widespread business. He was, for instance, the official supplier to the County Hospital, Winchester. He engaged in righteous controversy with the quack Joshua Ward, and published a work on the cure of fevers. He died in 1743. His apprentice, Thomas Corbyn, later succeeded to the business, and the firm of Corbyn & Co. was well-known for over a century.

The collection was later owned by John Oglander, Warden (1768-94) of New College, Oxford, thereafter remaining in the college until transferred to the Museum.³

Because the cabinet is not easy to display effectively in a museum and also because it contains several dangerous substances, including arsenic, it is not on public display and is instead kept carefully in a corner of the Keeper's office. I went to visit it on the afternoon of 28 August 2012 in the company of the Keeper, Jim Bennett, and the conservator, Cheryl Wolfe, and it is in excellent shape and in excellent hands. As the original label suggests, it was never really a working resource but more an item of display, a teaching tool, or a prompt for discussion. That it was not made for practical use by an apothecary or physician is also demonstrated by its pristine condition – such losses as it has suffered are minor and presumably quite unconnected to any medical or chemical use – and by the fact that all its labels are written in Latin. Thomas Jobber, and after him John Oglander, acquired this chest as a kind of miniature museum of natural history: its flower albums were for looking at, not using, and it is hard to see what practical use could be made of its crustacea, visible on the left hand side of the photograph above.

As the Oglander Collection is not really the kind of object that can be displayed or handled with ease, the Museum has taken high-resolution photographs of it, reproduced here. But readers are encouraged to go to the Museum's website and look at the pictures there, for they can be easily enlarged, allowing a 'virtual tour' of the chest. The labels can be read and the intricacy and vivid colours of the samples admired. It is notable that, as Clutton says, he took sixty days to assemble this dazzling collection, a collection that we might tentatively hail as the harbinger of the serious study of chemistry and pharmacology in the college.

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³ Inventory no. 25401, former display label, available at <http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/collections/search/display-narrative/?irn=9426&index=0>







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