

MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY
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INFORMATION SHEET: 8

POWDERS AND CACHETS

A POWDER WAS A SIMPLE WAY TO TAKE MEDICINE - IT COULD BE STIRRED WITH WATER AND SWALLOWED. BUT SOME POWDERS HAD A TERRIBLE TASTE, HOW COULD IT BE MASKED? CACHETS WERE ONE ANSWER.

HISTORY

Early medicines were prepared by soaking herbs in water or alcohol and drinking the resulting liquor. Later the whole or parts of herbs were crushed or powdered and taken with water. Minerals such as chalk were powdered and taken as medicine. Mixtures of powder were made in bulk and a portion eg a teaspoonful would be taken. For more accurate dosage or for convenience powders could be wrapped in separate doses.

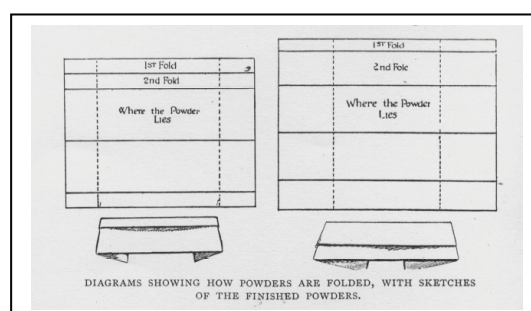
Unpleasant tasting powders were sometimes taken wrapped in a rice-paper wafer, softened by dipping in water, then swallowing with a draught of water. This idea was further developed in France by Limousin of Paris in the 1870's when they produced the cachet, two rice-paper cups which were joined together with powder inside.



POWDERS

Whether for bulk or individual powders, the total ingredients were weighed and mixed, either in a mortar and pestle or with a spatula on a sheet of paper. Bulk powders were packed in a paper bag, glass or tin container and labelled with a suitable dose (teaspoonful, tablespoonful, etc.). For individual powders each dose was weighed and wrapped in good quality paper (white demy) as per the illustration. An adjustable *powder folder* ensured that all the folded powders were the same length and would fit into a chosen box size.

Some powders would react when mixed together, especially if damp. This was overcome by wrapping the ingredients as separate powders and mixing them in water immediately before taking.



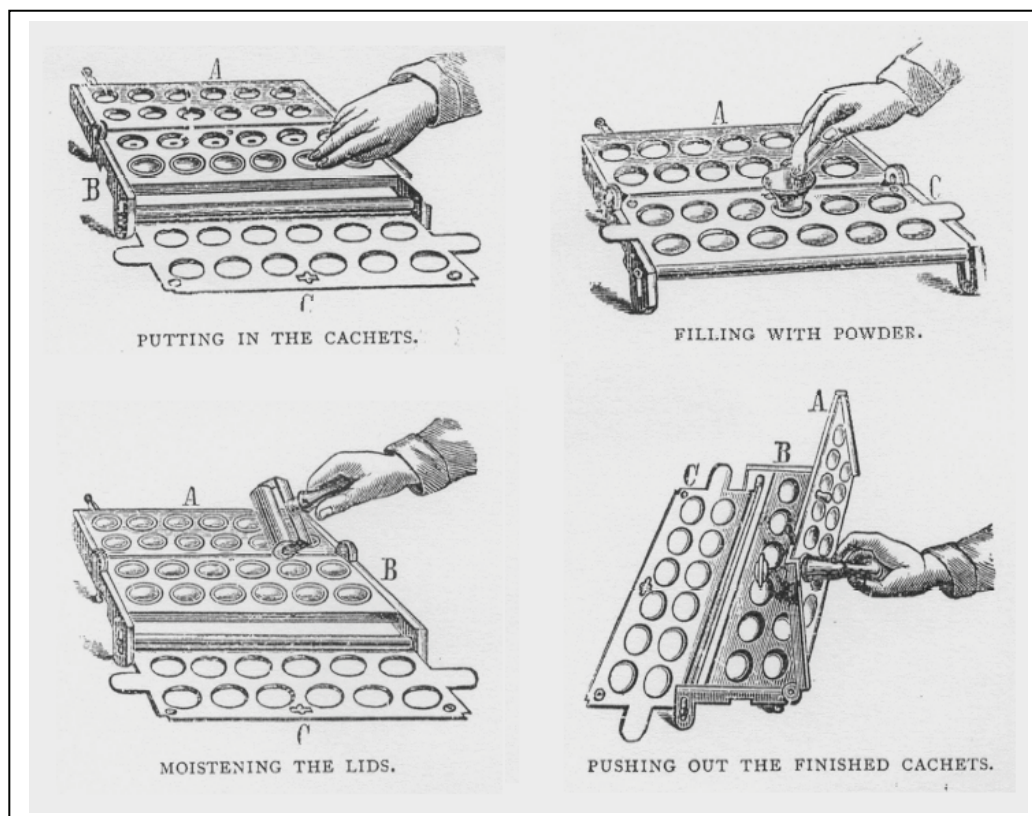
CACHETS

There were two types of cachet - *wet-seal* and *dry-seal*. The filling process was similar. Wet-seal were closed by wetting the flanges of each half and joining, with dry-seal the two halves were pushed together.

The standard *cachet machine* consisted of three metal plates drilled with holes of varying diameter for the size of cachet used. A half cachet fitted loosely in the base-plate. The centre plate masked the rims of the cachets to prevent powder being deposited. Funnels were used to guide the weighed dose of powder into the lower half-cachet. Tampers were supplied if the powder needed to be compressed. The other half of the cachet fitted snugly into the third plate and was held there. When the cachets were filled, moisture was applied to the rims of the cachet halves in the third plate, the centre plate removed and the two halves brought together. After a few minutes the cachets were dry and could be removed.

The dry-seal cachet machine was used in a similar manner but the upper plate was sprung to push the two halves together and to allow room to release the cachets.

Cachets were taken by holding one between the thumb and first finger, dipping in water to soften, then placing on the tongue and swallowing with a draught of water.



Filling cachets

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The photograph overleaf shows powder folders from the Museum's collection. Other illustrations are from *The Art of Dispensing*, 1926.

This information sheet is also available in a large font size.

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