

MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY
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INFORMATION SHEET: 12

DISPENSARY BOTTLES

BOTTLES FOR DISPENSING WERE DESIGNED TO BE USEFUL AND DECORATIVE.

HISTORY

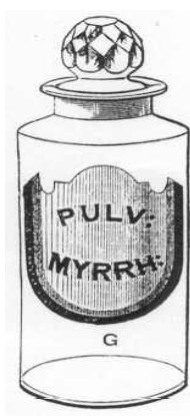
Bottles have been used as symbols of the pharmacy for many years. *Carboys* (from the Persia word 'Quarabah' meaning a large flagon used for wine or rose-water) were used to store and to transport liquid substances. They would also be used by the apothecary/pharmacist to prepare his extracts and tinctures by placing them in the window and using the sun's heat to aid the preparation. Windows were small and the bottles were conveniently placed on shelves, one behind each pane. Developments in glass manufacture made large, clear window panes possible and windows were used to display the goods for sale. The storage bottles were moved behind the counter and continued to be decorative.

SHOP ROUNDS

Shop round is the name given to a dispensary storage bottle that is decorative and designed to store a particular form of medicinal preparation. The pharmacist could select from the many different designs of bottle and label that were available. The

original labels were of gilded paper, hand painted with black lettering. Varnish would be applied over the label to resist damage and staining. Later bottles were made with a recess to take a paper label which would then be covered with a strip of glass to make it stain and water proof.

Design of the shop round was dependent on the type of preparation to be stored:



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Powders and granular substances would normally be stored in a wide-mouthed bottle. The wide mouth would make it easy for the substance to be extracted by shaking the bottle or by using a spatula or spoon.

Liquid preparations such as tinctures, solutions and liquid extracts would be stored in a narrow-necked bottle with a lip to assist pouring. While



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also suitable for syrups and oils, it was possible to purchase more specialised shop rounds for these substances.



Oils, such as olive oil or almond oil, are inclined to cling to the glass and run down the outside of a container. To prevent this, a stopper was designed with a sharp pouring spout set into a collar that had a hole to return any spilt oil back into the bottle. A glass dome covered the entire stopper. For volatile oils eg eucalyptus or clove oil, which were prone to evaporation, a larger covering dome was made and designed to return any condensed oil to the collar. Drying oils eg linseed oil, could make the dome stick to the bottle so a bottle with a cap usually sufficed.



Syrups posed a problem. The basis of most syrups was sugar in water. Crystallisation of residues after pouring caused stoppers to become sticky and then to become jammed. One answer was the use of a wide-brimmed, loose-fitting stopper that would not stick but would keep out dust. A simpler method was to cover the neck of the bottle with a cap. Earlier caps were made from tin and later ones from rigid plastic. Syrup bottles were usually blue in colour.



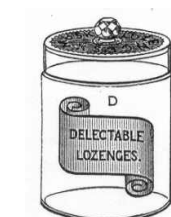
Ether and other very volatile substances need special precautions. Not only do these substances vaporise at low temperature, but pressure builds up which might blow out the stopper or even cause the bottle to explode. Ether is also very flammable and fire could easily start. An ether bottle was designed with a special heavy, close-fitting dome over the stopper so that, in the event of the stopper blowing out, it would release the pressure, bounce on the dome and fall back into the bottle.



Poison bottles were of the same designs as above but were recommended to be distinguishable by touch. Many methods were used to achieve this including attaching sandpaper, painting thick lines or applying bells. The most common method was to use bottles with vertical or horizontal grooves. They were available in various colours, blue, brown or clear but most poison bottles were green.



Counter products such as lozenges and jujubes were often stored in very similarly designed bottles as part of the overall shelf display.



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The coloured illustration overleaf is from a Museum postcard showing 'stoppered rounds and jars' from S Maw, Son and Thompson's 1882 wholesale catalogue. Other illustrations are from this and S Maw, Son and Son's 1903 catalogue.

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