

MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY
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INFORMATION SHEET: 14

ENGLISH DELFTWARE STORAGE JARS

ENGLISH DELFTWARE TOOK ITS INSPIRATION FROM THE MORE FAMOUS DUTCH STYLE. IN LONDON, PRODUCTION OF DELFTWARE, INCLUDING DRUG STORAGE JARS, WAS BASED ON THE SOUTH BANK OF THE THAMES.

Storage containers have always been essential for the practice of pharmacy. Crude drugs, dried goods and chemicals require appropriate storage, as do the solid, semi-solid and liquid preparations made up from them.

Until the late 1800s, apothecaries, or chemists and druggists, the forerunners of the pharmacist, prepared most of their medicines in full view of customers rather than in a back room or dispensary. They therefore needed a range of storage containers to hand. They had to be both attractive and functional.

The earliest surviving British pharmacy jars are of tin-glazed earthenware, and date from the late 1500s. Before tin-glazed containers, apothecaries are thought to have used lead-glazed earthenware and wooden or metal boxes. However, there is a surprising lack of evidence about the storage containers used to store drugs before this period.

Early tin-glazed earthenware containers were basic, and seem not to have been marked with the drug name. Large, straight-sided tin-glazed jars with simple decoration were used for shop storage. Medicines were supplied to the patient in small, usually plain, dispensing pots. These are often called 'ointment pots' by modern collectors.

Many of the early specialist potters in London were Flemish. By the mid-1600s they were making more sophisticated pharmacy jars with a decorative framing for the drug name, which was inscribed in Latin. These jars are generally called *Delftware* after the distinctive, Dutch-influenced, blue and white decoration. This design was common to many English drug jars made between about 1650 and 1780.

The blue and white colouring comes from the oxides used in the glaze. Tin oxide added to the glaze produced a white, opaque finish. The unglazed pot was usually fired at a low temperature before being dipped in the glaze. Once dry, designs could be painted with cobalt oxide, which gave a blue colour once the second, higher temperature firing took place.



Apothecaries used bulbous spouted jars, usually with a splayed pedestal foot, to store liquids, oils and syrups. Solids were held in straight or convex sided jars with a wide foot and lip. On earlier jars, parchment secured with twine protected contents from dust. The spouts on syrup jars may also have had similar covers. Later jars had metal or ceramic lids.

From the middle of the 1600s, the jars' designs nearly always showed a plaque or *cartouche* featuring an abbreviated form of the jar's contents. The *cartouche* is often edged with scrolls or ribbons, with some kind of satyr's head above and grotesque head at either end, or with an angel above with outspread wings. Other designs include songbirds, fleurs-de-lys, and cherubs. To some degree, the different designs can be used to date the jars. For example, it has been argued that some jars show their maker's political feelings from the angel's hairstyle. Some seem to have a puritan's appearance, while others resemble the reigning monarchs, including James II and William III. Perhaps the most impressive designs are those on large jars showing the coat of arms of the Society of Apothecaries of London. It seems likely that such colourful and large jars were used for display rather than storage purposes.



The jars were expensive, so only the most successful apothecaries are likely to have owned them. From around 1650 to around 1780 such jars were made to order for smart apothecary shops by small potteries on the south of the Thames. The earliest Dutch potters settled in Aldgate and Southwark, but Lambeth became the leading centre in the mid-1600s. In 1680, the potter James Barston came to the former site of Norfolk House, near Lambeth High Street, and began production of tin-glazed earthenware of the type often now called 'Lambeth delftware'. By about 1730, there were further potteries in Lambeth High Street itself, where the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is now based. Drug storage containers and other pharmacy wares continued to be produced at Lambeth in the 1800s and 1900s, with the growth of Doulton and other new potteries.

However, tin-glazed jars were also made outside London, including Bristol, Liverpool, Dublin, Glasgow, and Limerick. Today, "Lambeth delftware" is often used as a catch-all term. It is very difficult to determine where an individual jar was made, as there are few identifying marks.

The manufacture of tin-glazed jars began to decline by about 1760. They were overtaken by cream-ware, cream coloured earthenware, produced most famously in Staffordshire, but also across England and Wales.

The image overleaf is from a Museum postcard showing a delftware tin-glazed earthenware syrup jar. It dates from the early 1700s. The label refers to *Meconium*, a syrup made from opium poppy heads, probably used to treat coughs.

The second illustration shows a delftware tin-glazed earthenware drug or display jar with the coat of arms of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London. It is dated 1647, and stands 40cm (16 inches) high.

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