

MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY
1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN

The Society's Coat of Arms

After obtaining its Royal Charter in 1843, a logical next step for the Society was to apply for a grant of arms for use on a common seal to be appended to its official documents. The right to bear arms is controlled for the Crown by the Heralds of the College of Arms. It has been granted to corporate bodies since the 1400s, when an award was made to the Worshipful Company of Drapers. Applicants are considered by the Earl Marshal the Duke of Norfolk, acting for the Crown.

Most of the arcane terminology of the herald originates from the period of the Crusades and the identifying symbols used by 12th and 13th century Christian knights and their followers when travelling and in battle in the Middle East.

The Pharmaceutical Society received its grant of arms (shield of arms, crest and motto) on 14 March 1844. The two 'supporters' were granted on 27 March 1844. Both grant documents carry a full colour pictorial representation of the achievement.



No accounts appear to survive of the discussion that must have been had about the selection of motifs for inclusion on the arms. Some of the symbolism remains obscure, but in general the choice of devices and supporters reflects

the 1840s chemists and druggists' keen regard for the historical and international roots of their profession.

Some of the imagery used on the Society's achievement of arms is based on that adopted for the Diploma of the Pharmaceutical Society in 1841. The diploma design was by H P Briggs R.A, a close friend of the Society's founder, Jacob Bell.

The motto HABENDA RATIO VALETUDINIS is taken from Cicero. It loosely translates as WE MUST PAY ATTENTION TO OUR HEALTH. (See the Museum's Information Sheet on the motto for further information.)

The arms show

- in the first quarter, a dove bearing an olive branch, the traditional Biblical emblem of peace
- in the second, an aloe plant, representing the use of plants in medicine
- in the third, the medical symbol of a snake entwined staff
- in the fourth, an alembic and receiver, an early apparatus for distillation, which represents the pharmacist's chemical skill.

At the centre of the cross is a pair of scales and above, a stag. Over the arms is the crest, with a mortar and pestle. The two supporters are Avicenna on the left, and Galen on the right.

Galen was born in Pergamum (Bergama, now in Turkey) in 129 A.D. and lived until about 216 A.D. He studied medicine in Alexandria, travelled widely in Egypt and learnt much of the pharmacology of India and Africa. He started his professional career as doctor to the gladiators in Pergamum. He later moved to Rome and eventually served in the Roman Imperial Service. His prolific texts and recipes were used by practitioners until well into the 1600s. He continues to be revered as a 'father of medicine'.

Galen is shown with a gold, hand held steelyard, a weighing device widely used in the Roman period.

Avicenna lived in Persia from 980-1037 A.D. His extensive writings included a 'Canon of Medicine' which fused much of Galen's earlier thinking into a definitive medical discipline. Translated into Latin as early as the 12th century, Avicenna's 'Canon' was published in Venice in 1527. It was subsequently translated into Hebrew and a variety of European languages. Its influence on medical thinking in Renaissance Europe was immense.

Strangely, on the Society's coat of arms, Avicenna has been given the Greek god Aesclepius's staff. He points it at the shield.

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

Please contact us on 020 7572 2210 or email

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