

Victorian pharmacy lives again

If you have ever wondered what it feels like to be a time traveller ask Professor Nick Barber, says **Jeff Mills**

HE has just spent much of the spring living his professional life in a Victorian pharmacy, albeit one specially created by the BBC for an exciting new series due to be aired during the next few weeks.

Four hour-long programmes, due to be screened on BBC 2 this month (July) and possibly followed up later in the autumn with more episodes on BBC 1, track the development of pharmacy from early Victorian times, round about the 1840s, through to the late 1800s.

In them Nick, together with his co-presenters, historians Ruth Goodman and Tom Quick, experience the day-to-day life of a pharmacist at a time when they were often the only accessible and affordable source of

serious sewerage problems in cities such as London.

“Luckily this was the period when carbolic acid was developed as a byproduct of coal production.

“Other major issues of the Victorian era included the shocking number of arsenic-related deaths, which in turn led to the introduction of the Arsenic Act in 1851 creating the first Poisons Register.”

It wasn’t only medicines that were provided by Victorian pharmacists, says Nick. They dispensed plenty of other things, including perfumes, for example.

“Pharmacists had expertise in essential oils and used to blend their own perfumes. They supplied shaving equipment, too. Why? Because they not only made shaving preparations but also shaved their customers.

Pharmacists’ willingness to take on almost anything

healthcare for a population often unable to afford the services of doctors or other health professionals.

The Victorian Pharmacy series, made by Lion TV, the production company which was also responsible for the documentary series focusing on a Victorian Farm, illustrates amongst other things, early pharmacists’ willingness to take on almost anything to provide their public with what they wanted.

Medicines in those days may have been limited and crude by today’s standards but even then pharmacists, as they are today, were acknowledged as experts in the use of herbs, plant extracts and chemicals, not to mention countless other everyday essentials to Victorian life.

“We started the series by looking at the start of the Victorian era when the use of leeches, bleeding and was rife,” says Nick Barber. “There’s also quite a bit on the use of herbal remedies”.

There were plenty of diseases around to be fought off, he says. “Cholera was a major killer at the time and there were

“Why reading glasses and dental care, you may wonder? Pharmacists used to make tooth powders, extract teeth, test eyes and fit glasses. Indeed, the Pharmaceutical Society was formed decades before the equivalent dentistry and optics bodies.

“And the list goes on – photography, sexual health, dermatologicals and so on. Whatever the public wanted, pharmacists bought, made or created a service for it.”

We could do with some of that Victorian entrepreneurial spirit now, Nick says. Community pharmacy faces one of the worst financial climates for more than 50 years, yet it is tethered to dispensing, for which it will inevitably get less money. “We need to reconnect to our customers, talk to them and offer the services – NHS funded or private – that they want,” he says.

Nick Barber is Professor of the Practice of Pharmacy at the University of London’s School of Pharmacy.

Victorian Pharmacy is due to be screened by BBC2 from the middle of July and possibly repeated in the autumn. ➔





LONDON TV

Checking the history

It all started with a phone call asking what material the Society's held that would help a research enquiry on pharmacy in the Victorian period, recalls **Briony Hudson**, keeper of the Museum Collections

*W*OT an unusual request, but the eventual outcome was a bigger project than the Museum had ever taken on before, with national coverage of British pharmacy history (the Museum's core remit) on primetime BBC2. Quite a challenge with two members of staff to run the Museum's full operation, but well worth the effort.

Yvonne Gray and Stevie Whiteford, two Lion TV researchers, made a preliminary visit to the Museum in February when, with my colleague Peter Homan from the British Society of the History of Pharmacy, our topics of discussion covered controlled drugs, pharmacy education, women pharmacists, children's medicines, how to research the ingredients of 'secret remedies' and pharmacists' forays into dentistry, optometry and photography.

This 'smorgasbord' approach to research for the series continued over the next two months with follow up emails arriving weekly. Topics included: 'Does the RPSGB hold a copy of the Pharmaceutical Joint Formulary, including the formulas of the counter products and proprietary medicines?' 'Which 19th Century medicines for children were opiate based?' 'What might we film in order to cover the issues surrounding poisons in the 1800s?' 'What items did we have in our collections that were significant to the development of the pharmacy industry?' 'Did we have any contraptions, gadgets, or quirky items that would be interesting to viewers in their own right?' 'Did pharmacists ever make paper?'

Yvonne and Stevie's queries were quickly followed by a new line of enquiry – from the author of the book that was being written to accompany the series, Jane Eastoe, a social history author, who had been commissioned to write a book that complemented the series, but wasn't tied strictly to its content.

Jane spent a research day using the Library's collection, particularly focusing on how to add individual stories into the account and uncovering unusual recipes, including one for chewing gum and one for 'Artificial Blacking for Negroes', clearly totally unacceptable to a 21st century customer. At a later date, the Museum's collection was also trawled to provide images for the book which should be published to coincide with the series being broadcast.

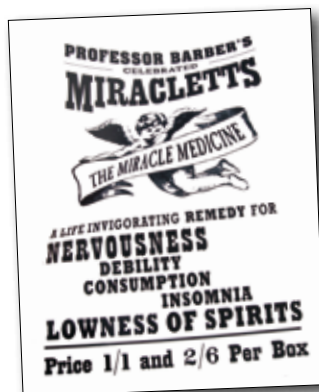
Meanwhile, I had also been contacted by Nick Barber, Professor of the Practice of Pharmacy at the University of London's School of Pharmacy. Following a successful screen test making mayonnaise in his kitchen, Nick had been selected to be the Victorian pharmacist – and enter the world of 19th century pharmacy from his 21st century perspective. Nick and I met up to discuss general issues of the period, so that I could point him in the direction of key resources enabling him to glean as much information as possible prior to the filming.

Soon afterwards, Nick's 'apprentice, history graduate Tom Quick, was appointed. We spent a fun afternoon with Nick, Tom, Martin Kemp and Peter Cooksley, the series producers/directors picking out quirky exam questions from the 1870s and showing them how pills, suppositories and cachets were made by the pharmacist in the 19th century.

The third person to experience Victorian pharmacy

from the inside was to be Ruth Goodman, a veteran of Lion TV's popular Victorian Farm series, so we also discussed what her role might have been as a woman in a 19th century pharmacy business.

By then, I had agreed to spend a day in late April being filmed as part of the programme. Blists Hill Victorian Town in Shropshire had been selected as the location, with the reconstructed Victorian





pharmacy as the main set. We agreed that I would be filmed talking about ‘cure alls’ and proprietary medicines, and also about qualifying as a pharmacist as a process.

As the filming day approached, the requests to bring a whole range of objects from the Museum’s collections grew, with the end result that a runner collected me and two large boxes from the Society in a car for the long drive to Telford.

The day of filming started with the selection of a costume for me to wear, and the filming schedule

medicines which I’d brought with me for the purpose.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and I got a welcome three-hour break in which I explored the rest of the complex, ate fish and chips cooked in lard by the canal, and spotted the first aeroplanes emerging from beyond the volcanic ash – not very Victorian.

We started my final filming session at about 4pm, in the Victorian school room. The topic was qualifications and education, and the sequence involved two elements, the participants questioning me about the way that people could become pharmacists, followed

*All very relaxed if you ignored the cameraman,
sound man, director and researcher*

talked through. I’ve been filmed both for live and recorded television before, but never anything that so comprehensively threw everyone into a particular era and environment. An impressive mocked up ‘back room’ had been created behind the pharmacy itself for some sequences, and other parts of the Blist’s Hill complex were also used to add atmosphere.

The first sequence I was involved in was a chat with Nick about proprietary medicines. Using some examples I’d brought with me, we discussed the secret nature of their ingredients, the huge sums spent on advertising in the period, and some specific examples of popular medicines that had hit the big time. All very relaxed if you ignored the cameraman, sound man/director and researcher.

With the director prompting us to cover specific questions or subject areas, it was then left up to the editing process to create the final product. The next two sequences saw me acting as chaperone for our objects, rather than appearing in front of the camera: A section on poisons which included filming of a Burroughs Wellcome antidote case from the collection, and a brief series of shots of children’s

by a mock ‘exam’ involving Nick, Tom and Ruth, alongside a herbalist and chemistry historian who were also involved in the filming.

Suppositories had been made by the three participants the previous day for me to judge – not difficult as only Nick had made them before, and it showed! We then used a pharmacy students’ materia medica identification chest to test the ‘students’ who had to recognise seeds and barks from its drawers. We finally chose two tricky questions from the original botany and chemistry exam papers for them to answer. The sequence was very much an improvisation exercise – quite a challenge after a long day.

I left for the drive back to London at about 7pm as team members were preparing themselves for an evening session filming fireworks, linked to a sequence I’d watched earlier in the day, with a historical fireworks expert trying not to blow up the set while Nick watched.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, a fascinating way to use my expertise and promote pharmacy history – and I’m really looking forward to seeing the end product. ➡

Good TV great for pharmacy

The Society's Head of Communications **Neal Patel** celebrates pharmacists' positive media presence

RAISING the profile of the profession through the media is a key part of the role of the professional body, to date media promotion been focused on making sure pharmacists have a presence in the news.

Investment in trained spokespeople from across the profession plus greater media engagement and a focus on issues that matter to the public are paying dividends, but the Victorian Pharmacy is something very different, giving us an opportunity to broaden our scope to achieve the media presence that pharmacists want to see.

As Briony discusses elsewhere the Society made a big commitment to Victorian Pharmacy pre-production and it is true to say that it's difficult to imagine the programme being made without the



Fast forward to today and much of the clinical role that community pharmacy aspires to embrace can be found in past.

Although the products available in the Victorian era were untested at best and poisonous at worst, the role of the pharmacist as professional advisor on health was recognised by everyone.

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support of my colleagues at the Society's museum.

Having a BBC prime time TV series with the word "pharmacy" in the title is not to be sniffed at – having a pharmacist cast in the lead role is something we should definitely celebrate.

So why is this series important and how does it relate to practice today?

The Victorian era was an important time for the profession. Through the establishment of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society it could be said that the mid-1800s marked the point when the pharmacy profession began, always good to remind the public we are a profession with a long and distinguished history.

Jacob Bell and his colleagues lived in a very different world from the one we know now; few people could afford to see a doctor, there was no NHS and many relied on pharmacists to deal with minor ailments and long-term conditions.

How does that role of the pharmacist in the past play in the modern world where Government is talking about tough decisions on health costs?

People are once again being encouraged to "self care" with regard to their health, something that will drive people into pharmacy looking for help, advice and treatment for self limiting minor ailments.

So, the series offers an opportunity to see what pharmacists did in the past as well as to compare that with the present and future roles.

What next? Well, we have had conversations with three TV production teams in recent weeks. Early days and certainly no guarantees, but encouraging that other programme makers are considering pharmacy.

In the meantime I'm looking forward to what I know will be an accurate and entertaining history programme. I feel that having a pharmacist in a key role will add an authentic feel and be a source of pride for the profession. ■

