

2015 WSG trip to the Wellcome Collection

*This year, WSG's annual trip was to the Wellcome Collection, nr Euston, London. WSG member **Marion Durnin** recalls the outing:*

“Passing under Anthony Gormley’s figure suspended from the ceiling of the [Wellcome Collection](#) entrance, our group met for coffee excited by the stylish surroundings.

We were warmly welcomed by [Dr Christopher Hilton](#), Senior Archivist of the [Wellcome Library](#) who provided a potted history of the Wellcome Trust from Henry Wellcome’s upbringing in Wisconsin, to his meeting with Silas Burroughs which led to the formation of Burroughs Wellcome & Co. in 1882. First to the market in the manufacture of drugs, they led the way in medical research to become front runners of the British pharmaceutical industry. Dr Hilton’s witty and informative account revealed we owe the word ‘tabloid’ to Wellcome and Burroughs, being a combination of the words ‘tablet’ and ‘alkaloid’ used to denote the firm’s pills.

Success in business was not accompanied by happiness in Wellcome’s private life. He married Thomas Bernardo’s daughter, Gwen Maud Syrie soon after their meeting in Khartoum in 1901. But Wellcome’s passion for travelling and collecting curios, creating in effect a ‘national attic’ cost him his marriage. Following his divorce, Henry buried himself relentlessly in his work. This resulted in the amassing of a vast collection of artefacts rivalling the largest museums in Europe. The riches of this collection have been brought to the public by the Wellcome Trust. Though primarily focused on the scientific and medical, the contents touch on all aspects of life, a boon for research in many fields.

In demonstration of this, Dr Hilton presented items from the Wellcome manuscript archive of special interest to our group. Alongside [handwritten medicinal remedies](#) (1647-1722) written by Elizabeth Sleight and Felicia Whitfield, are their food recipes, giving precise detail of the lives of these women. The instruction on how ‘To Pull a Tooth’ alarmingly commences with ‘Seeth the brains of an hare in red wine; and anoint the tooth therewith...’ The recipe for Sack Posset required, for openers, ‘2 quarts of pure good cream’ and a guide on how ‘To Roast a Large Pike’ is but one gem among many.

We viewed the account book (1790-1804) of a medical practitioner in Northamptonshire (thought to be Timothy Watkins) containing details of the mothers, the births and inoculations along with precise accounts of income and expenditure.

The library reading rooms are open to all and the scope of works ranges far beyond science and medicine. Innovative design is all around; even the library shelves are illustrated and works of art, classic and contemporary, abound. Library Assistant Edward Bishop showed us a dramatic seventeenth century painting of ‘A Troupe of Travelling Performers including a Toothdrawer’ (after Theodor Rombouts) and a ball gown by artist Susie Freeman which on closer inspection is decorated with 6,500 wrapped contraceptive pills.

Following lunch Visitor Experience Assistant [Sarah Bentley](#) gave us a guided tour of particular items in the Permanent Exhibition which included a Mesopotamian amulet, [a scold's bridle](#) of Brussels, with metal horns, used to publicly humiliate women (1550-1775). This proved a profoundly unsettling sight as did a brass corset with wasp waist and Chinese slippers which demanded foot binding.

We finished the day with everyone planning to return as it seemed we had only barely touched on the intriguing and rich resources housed in the Wellcome Collection and Library. We are grateful to the staff at the Wellcome and to WSG committee member Lois Chaber for arranging such a worthwhile and fascinating outing.”

...and thanks to Marion for writing this account and taking the accompanying photos.

(Apologies that photos are no longer available on the website)