Family History

Important advice for family historians

The Society of Apothecaries holds important but restricted information about apothecaries and some other associated persons. The Society’s historical records are those of the organisation, rather than those of individuals, and they therefore contain records of those who were examined in order to practice as an apothecary. Apprenticeship bindings, membership records, candidates’ entry books, and the lists of Licentiates and pharmacy technicians (originally examined as ‘Assistant to an Apothecary’) are held by the Society, and are very useful sources of information for family historians and genealogists. However details of individual’s private lives and personal and family histories are not generally found in the files. The professional career paths of the medically qualified practitioners may be traced in the Medical Directory and Medical Register, which have been published annually, the former since 1845 and the latter since 1859.

Apothecaries

As a City Livery Company, the Society’s jurisdiction over the trade and profession of the apothecary started on 6 December 1617 (when the Society was incorporated) and until 1 August 1815 (when the Apothecaries Act, 1815, came into force), was restricted to the City of London and the area within a seven-mile radius of it. Unless an apothecary was a freeman of the Society at that time, or was apprenticed to a member, there will be no record of that individual in the archives.

Pharmacists

Although apothecaries were originally what we would call community pharmacists today, their role changed gradually and they became legally ratified members of the medical profession in 1704 as a result of the Rose Case, a key lawsuit in the House of Lords. By the early 19th century, apothecaries had evolved into general practitioners of medicine or GPs. Consequently, the Society’s archives do not contain the records of chemists, druggists or pharmacists, or of their shop premises, or of the papers of pharmaceutical manufacturing firms or companies other than the Society’s own pharmaceutical manufacturing stock companies. These are more likely to be found in the records of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, founded in 1841.

Licentiates

Between 1st August 1815 and 31st December 1858 the Society examined and licensed medical students to practice as apothecaries (in effect a G.P.) anywhere in England and Wales and hence anyone wishing to practice as such had to hold the Licence of the Society of Apothecaries (the LSA). The Society holds records of those who gained this qualification. The Society also licensed surgeons who wished to engage in general practice but it did not license surgeons to practice as surgeons. Apothecaries were not trained in surgery unless they had been apprenticed to a surgeon, to a surgeon-apothecary or to a surgeon, apothecary and man-midwife.

After the passage of the Medical Act of 1858, which set up the General Medical Council, the LSA continued to be set and was recognised as a fully registrable medical qualification. However, after the Medical Act 1886 was entered onto the statute book, anyone qualifying to practice medicine also had to be examined in surgery. The post-nominals LSA were therefore altered to LMSSA (Licence in Medicine and Surgery of the Society of Apothecaries) by the Apothecaries Act 1907, to denote the all-round competence of the Society’s Licentiates. The Society holds records of those individuals who took those examinations. However the majority of those who took the examination to gain the Licence in medicine did not become members or Liverymen of the Society itself.
Dispensers and Pharmacy Technicians

The Society also holds records of those who became “Assistants to an Apothecary” under the Apothecaries Act of 1815, which evolved into a qualification for pharmacy dispensing technicians. The last examinations for this qualification were held in 1999.

Employees

Also held at the Hall are some records of staff who worked for the Society and who in a few cases also lived at the Hall.