Dr Richard Mead (1673-1754) was one of the most eminent physicians of his day and a founding Governor of the Foundling Hospital. He was also a man of great learning and a passionate collector. Unlike Mead’s contemporary, Sir Hans Sloane, who left his collection to the British Museum, over time Mead’s importance has been neglected. Mead was in great demand for his medical advice, but visitors from this country and abroad also gathered to see his magnificent collections, which included coins, books, antiquities and fine art. He was a social, affable man, famed for his hospitality, humanity and generosity. Mead’s chosen motto reflects his generous spirit: ‘non sibi sed toti’ – ‘not for one but for all’.

This exhibition celebrates the life and achievements of Dr Richard Mead, physician, philanthropist and collector.
The eleventh child of a nonconformist minister, Mead was educated at home before studying medicine at the University of Leiden in Holland. He travelled to Turin, Florence and eventually Padua where he gained his degree. This trip is thought to have fuelled his love of antiquities and collecting. Returning to England, Mead set up a practice at his father’s house in Stepney.

His 1702 publication, *A Mechanical Account of Poisons*, was a great success and contributed to Mead’s growing reputation. A year later he became Physician to St Thomas’s Hospital and a Fellow at the prestigious Royal Society, where he was soon elected to sit on the council. In 1716 he became a Fellow and later a censor at the Royal College of Physicians. Mead soon gained an impressive list of private patients, including Sir Isaac Newton, members of the royal family and the painter Antoine Watteau, who travelled from France to consult him.

In 1719, Mead moved into the house of the late great physician Sir John Radcliffe, in nearby Great Ormond Street, inheriting many of his patients and his gold-headed cane. He continued with a busy private practice and would often meet with apothecaries in coffee houses, sharing his expertise with them, for a fee. Mead published on a variety of topics including public health, scurvy and smallpox and became arguably the greatest physician of the day.
Smallpox (Variola major/minor) is a contagious disease which is believed to have originated in India or Egypt over 3,000 years ago. Following a worldwide eradication campaign, the last natural case occurred in 1977, but in the eighteenth century it was a feared killer. Like most physicians, Mead treated many smallpox patients and even fought an alleged duel to defend his treatment of the disease.

Those infected experienced flu-like symptoms followed by the outbreak of lesions which turned into pustules, often completely covering the face and body. Depending on the severity of the disease, the mortality rate could reach 30%. Those that survived were left heavily pockmarked. During the eighteenth century, smallpox was the most common cause of blindness in young adults in Europe.

Although inoculation was well known in China, Turkey, India and Africa, it was not until Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a smallpox survivor, returned from Turkey and championed the practice that physicians in Britain started to take note. Mead was involved in a groundbreaking trial of smallpox inoculation on a group of prisoners held in the Tower. Ordered by Princess Caroline in 1720, the trial convinced her to allow Mead, along with other physicians, to immunise her children. Inoculation still held risks but was used at the Foundling Hospital from the 1740s, probably at the recommendation of Mead, and is likely to have saved many lives.
INOCULATION

Inoculation (or variolation) was the method first used to immunise a person against smallpox. Fluid from pustules was rubbed into a scratch made in the patient’s skin, or powdered smallpox scabs were blown up the nose. The immune cells in the nose and skin had a chance to attack the virus before it got into the bloodstream and, although localised pustules would occur, these would typically subside after two to four weeks and the patient would be immune. However, patients were infectious and therefore a danger to others until they recovered, and the mortality rate for those inoculated was up to two percent.

VACCINATION

Vaccination for smallpox was not introduced until over forty years after Mead’s death. Country doctor Edward Jenner had taken note of the folklore that milkmaids who had been infected with cowpox were immune to smallpox. This led him to develop a vaccine from cowpox, which he first trialled in 1796, promoting it successfully thereafter. Patients vaccinated could not infect others with smallpox, and cowpox was not a fatal disease, so vaccination was a much safer method of immunisation.

George Kirtland, A comparison of a patient’s arm at day fourteen after smallpox inoculation (on the left) and cowpox vaccination (on the right), 1802, watercolour © Wellcome Library, London
During his medical career Mead was a Governor of six of the capital’s major London hospitals including Christ’s Hospital and Bethlem Hospital. Significantly, he encouraged his client and friend Thomas Guy to bequeath his fortune to set up Guy’s Hospital for the poor and ‘incurable’.

Mead was also crucial to Thomas Coram’s campaign to establish a Foundling Hospital. Mead lent his considerable support to the petition put before the King, and was a founding Governor of the institution. He spoke at the presentation of the Royal Charter in November 1739 and attended the first Governors’ meeting at a pub on the Strand. In the early days of the Hospital he advised the institution on aspects of care for the children, attended them when they were sick, and advised on nurses’ wages. In his will, Mead singled out the Foundling Hospital for support, leaving the institution £100.

Mead clearly held Thomas Coram in high esteem. He owned a portrait of Coram, now lost, and when Coram was struggling financially in later life, Mead was the first to sign an appeal, pledging to support him with an annual subscription.
Mead was a scholar and connoisseur, amassing significant collections of paintings, coins, books, drawings, sculptures and antiquities. He was a discerning collector, picking individual objects of merit rather than buying in bulk. In the mid-1730s, Mead employed architect James Gibbs to build a gallery at the end of the garden at his home in Great Ormond Street, to house his growing collection. Here, Mead openly welcomed scholars, artists and curious persons with or without recommendation. He held a club at his home every Wednesday, attracting some of the leading intellects of the day, and corresponded with many of Europe’s literati. In his collection visitors could view highlights such as the magnificent bronze Hellenistic head, then thought to be of Homer, Charles I’s second folio edition of Shakespeare, and paintings and drawings by Holbein, Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau, Dürer and Carracci. Mead’s collection of coins was outstanding and his library was made up of over 10,000 volumes, including many classical works.

Mead was also an important patron supporting the work of artists and scholars in a variety of fields, from medical science to antiquarian research to natural history. At least 35 books were dedicated to him during his lifetime. He helped establish the career of the Scottish portraitist Allan Ramsay, commissioning several portraits from him.
Apart from individual gifts to family and friends, Mead’s collections were dispersed after his death in 1754. Although his income as a physician was significant – up to £6,000 a year – his collecting habits and his generous entertaining had placed him in a precarious financial position. His collection was sold by auction over a staggering 56 days, with ten days alone for the books, raising over £16,000.

Mead was buried at Temple Church, London and a monument was erected in Westminster Abbey to commemorate him. Posthumous publications included the collected edition of his works, and in 1874, 120 years after his death, St Thomas’s Hospital established the Mead Prize. Today, Mead’s reputation and achievements are little known. Perhaps if he had bequeathed his collection to a museum, like Sir Hans Sloane, or left money for a new hospital or library, like John Radcliffe, we would better remember him. However, Mead chose to live his life to the full and to focus his generosity on those he encountered during his lifetime. Samuel Johnson said that ‘Mead lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any other man’.