

THE GENEROUS GEORGIAN: DR RICHARD MEAD

Dr Richard Mead (1673-1754) was one of the most eminent physicians of his day, a pioneer of smallpox inoculation, and one of the founding Governors of the Foundling Hospital. Dr Mead also possessed a deep-seated passion for the arts, supporting artists such as Allan Ramsay (1713-1784) and amassing a magnificent collection of coins, books, antiquities and fine art that people from across the UK and beyond would come and visit.

DR MEAD AND THE FOUNDLING HOSPITAL:

In addition to being a well-established doctor, Mead was a leading philanthropist and was crucial to Thomas Coram's campaign to establish the Foundling Hospital. Mead lent considerable support to the petition put before King George II, which led to the awarding of a Royal Charter. Mead spoke at the presentation of the Royal Charter at Somerset House in November 1739 and attended the first Foundling Hospital Governors' meeting.

Dr Mead would often attend to the sick children at the Hospital, giving his time for free. He also advised on the nurses' salaries, what medicines to keep in stock and on aspects of the children's care.



Dr Richard Mead by Allan Ramsay, 1747 © Coram in the care of the Foundling Museum

Mead's home on Great Ormond Street (which later became the site of Great Ormond Street Hospital) backed onto the Foundling Hospital's grounds. Mead dedicated a considerable amount of time and energy to the Foundling Hospital, encouraging his noble clients to support the charity. Mead probably encouraged artist Richard Dalton to donate a series of classical busts to the Hospital, two of which are on display in the Foundling Museum, alongside the portrait of Dr Mead painted and donated by his friend Allan Ramsay. After his death, Mead singled out the Foundling Hospital in his will, leaving the institution £100.

It wasn't just the Foundling Hospital that Dr Mead supported. During his medical career he was a Governor of six of the capital's major London hospitals and encouraged his patient and friend Thomas Guy to bequeath his fortune to set up Guy's Hospital for the poor and 'incurable'.

DR MEAD THE PHYSICIAN:

Dr Mead was a leading expert and writer on poisons, scurvy, smallpox and public health. He was in great demand, advising the government and working with eminent patients including Queen Anne, King George II and Sir Isaac Newton. He charged significant fees to the wealthy, earning up to £7,000 per year, but treated the poor for free. He would often meet with apothecaries in coffee houses, sharing his recipes for treatment with them.

Smallpox was endemic in Georgian England; it killed an estimated 400,000 Europeans throughout the 18th century and was the most common cause of blindness in young adults. The smallpox vaccination was yet to be discovered, but Dr Mead was a pioneer of using inoculation as a way of providing immunisation against the disease. Inoculation was a historical method for the prevention of smallpox by a deliberate introduction into the skin of smallpox pustules; this generally produced a less severe infection than naturally contracting smallpox bringing immunity to the disease. Other physicians disagreed with Dr Mead's approach and were outspoken against him. Dr Mead even fought an alleged duel to defend his treatment of the disease.

In 1720 Dr Mead was involved in a ground-breaking trial of smallpox inoculation on a group of prisoners held in the Tower of London. Ordered by Princess Caroline, the trial convinced her to allow her children to be inoculated. Inoculation still held risks but was used at the Foundling Hospital from the 1740s, probably at the recommendation of Mead. Of the 247 children who were inoculated at the Foundling Hospital, by 1756 only one had died of the disease. Vaccination wasn't developed until the end of 18th century and the last known case of smallpox was in 1977; it has now been eradicated.

In 1720 Mead was also asked by the British Government to advise them on containing a plague that was rife in Europe. His advice can be seen as an early public health system in England with recommendations including the quarantine of boats carrying infected people.



A Courier just setting out (who has any letters to send?) sketch'd from ye life while his boots were greasing, 1745 etching and engraving © Wellcome Library, London

DR MEAD THE COLLECTOR:

In the mid-1730s Mead had a gallery built at the end of the garden of his home in Great Ormond Street, to house his growing collections of paintings, coins, books, drawings, sculptures and antiquities. He welcomed visitors, and held a weekly club at his home, attracting some of the leading intellects of the day. Painters and scholars were given access to Mead's renowned collection which, in a time before public galleries, offered visitors a rare chance to view artistic masterpieces from around the world. Highlights included a magnificent bronze Hellenistic head, Charles I's second folio edition of Shakespeare, and paintings and drawings by Holbein, Titian, and Rembrandt. He had over 10,000 books and employed a librarian to look after them.

Although Dr Mead earned a lot of money as a physician, he also spent a lot of money on his collecting habits and his generous entertaining. Aware of the importance of his collection and spiralling debts, Mead sold some of his key objects such as his miniatures and Greek manuscripts to friends and collectors. After his death in 1754 his family were probably left with debts, so his collections were sold by auction over a staggering 56 days. Some of Mead's collections can now be found in The British Museum, The Royal College of Physicians, the Royal Collection and the Wellcome Trust Library.

Today, Mead's reputation and achievements are little known. Other physicians from his lifetime are better remembered, such as Sir Hans Sloane who left his collection to the nation (which became the foundation of the British Museum), or John Radcliffe who left money for a new hospital and library. However, Mead chose to live his life to the full and to focus his generosity on those he encountered during his lifetime. The writer Samuel Johnson said that 'Mead lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any other man'.

ACTIVITY: DR MEAD BY ALLAN RAMSAY

Can you imagine what Dr Mead's personality is like from looking at Allan Ramsay's painting? Sit in the same pose as him, mimic his facial expression.

In the background the statue of Hygeia, goddess of health can be seen, indicating Mead's profession. What do the other objects, the setting and the choice of clothes tell us about Dr Mead's life?

If you were to commission an artist to make a portrait of you what would you wear, where would it be, what would be in the background and what objects could you add to it to reveal something about your personality?

Draw, paint, or make a photographic portrait of yourself.

Ramsay's magnificent full length portrait of Dr Mead was presented to the Foundling Hospital in 1747. It is hung next to William Hogarth's portrait of Thomas Coram, inviting comparisons from visitors. Where would you have your portrait hung? Who would you want to be hung next to you in comparison?

ACTIVITY: GOLD-HEADED CANE



Gold headed cane, probably eighteenth century, wood and gilt

This cane, with a gold head is engraved with the arms of its physician owners. The first owner was John Radcliffe, it was then it passed to Richard Mead. It had four owners afterwards; all were seen as the heads of their profession at the time. Why do you think a gold-headed cane was chosen as an object to pass on?

Think of an important profession. What object could be given to someone to show that they are important to that profession? Think about how the object represents importance and the profession itself.

In 1827 William Macmichael published a book written from the point of view of the cane about the lives of its various owners. As a result, the term 'a gold-headed cane physician' has come to mean a physician of high standing. Find an object that has belonged to different people over time, it could be a family heirloom, clothes handed down to you from a friend or relative, an object in a museum, a school book, or an object in a classroom. Imagine the history of the object - what it has seen, where it has been, how it has been used and who has touched or owned it.

Use this as the starting point for a poem, story, series of drawings or a play.

ACTIVITY: MEAD'S MOTTO

Dr Mead's chosen motto reflects his generous spirit: 'non sibi sed toti' – 'not for one but for all'.

What motto reflects your outlook on life? It could be a made up phrase, a well-known saying or a line from a song or book.

Can you think of a motto for other people, or even for places? Lots of schools and sports teams have their own mottos. What could be the motto for The Foundling Hospital?

Write the motto down. Design a font to match the motto. Where could you display it? Perhaps even design an emblem to go with it.



*The site of Dr Mead's house became Great Ormond Street Hospital.
49 Great Ormond Street, London, in course of demolition. 1882 © Wellcome Library, London*

ACTIVITY: DR MEAD'S LEGACY

Why is it important for us to remember people like Dr Mead and their achievements?

How should people remember them?

Does a person have to do something significant or leave something important behind to be remembered?

Do you think a person thinks about leaving a legacy and that may be why they may have done the things they did and lived their lives in a certain way?

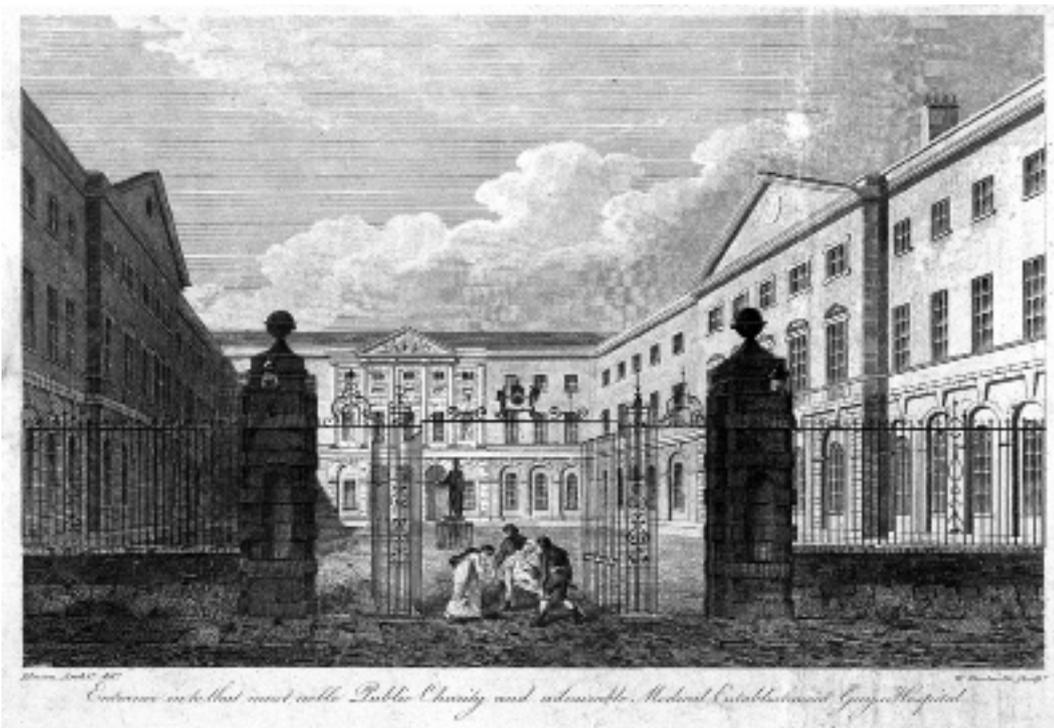
Why is Dr Mead not as well remembered as other people from his time, such as Thomas Coram?

What are your aspirations in life? How would you like to be remembered? If you could leave a fortune behind how would you want it to be spent?

IMAGES: THE GENEROUS GEORGIAN DR. RICHARD MEAD



William Henry Toms c1700 -c1758, *Old St St Thomas's Hospital southward: a birds eye view looking east over the courtyards* 1739 © Wellcome Library, London



William Woolnoth (active 1770) after James Elmes (1782-1862), *Guys Hospital Southwark, entrance courtyard*, 1799, reproduction of engraving © Wellcome Library, London

DR MEAD TIMELINE:

On 11th August 1673 Dr Mead was born. He was one of eleven children.

He was educated at home in England before studying medicine at the University of Leiden in Holland.

He travelled to Turin and Florence; this is thought to have fuelled his love of antiquities and collecting.

In 1695 he gained his degree as a Doctor of Philosophy and Medicine from Padua University in Italy.

In 1696 he returned to England and 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. As part of his research he handled and extracted venom from snakes himself, even drinking the venom to prove it is not poisonous if taken orally.

In 1703 he became Physician to St Thomas's Hospital and a Fellow at the prestigious Royal Society.

In 1714 he attended Queen Anne on her death bed.

In 1714, Mead moved into the house of the late great physician John Radcliffe, in Great Ormond Street, inheriting many of his patients and his gold-headed cane.

In 1716 he became a Fellow at the Royal College of Physicians.

In 1717 he treated Caroline, Princess of Wales, who later as Queen to George II championed Dr Mead and his pioneering inoculation treatment, having her own children immunised.

1720 saw the first publication of his *A Short Discourse concerning Pestilential Contagion, and the Method to be used to prevent it* - it is of historical importance to the understanding of the preventory and treatment of transmissible diseases.

In 1727 he was appointed to the post Physician in Ordinary to George II.

On 16th February 1754 Dr Richard Mead died aged 80. He was buried in Temple Church and a monument to him stands in Westminster Abbey. Later, his house became the basis of Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital.

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