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History of ophthalmology

Do you have a Roman connection?

The Romans occupied Britain from AD 43 to around AD 410. Ophthalmic care was available from itinerant oculists who usually prescribed eye salves (collyria) or drops which were made from a block that was diluted with a fluid such as egg. The solid blocks were often stamped with details of the medicament and the name of the oculist. Some 300 stamps have been found in the Roman empire with 30 of these in Britain (see table).¹ There are 20 modern day eye departments near to where finds have been made. Probably the most closely located is Moorfields Eye Hospital. A cup with an

oculist's inscription by Lucius Iulius Senex for a saffron eye salve was found at nearby Moorgate Street in 1929. Single finds have been made in Wales, Scotland, and southern Ireland. Four of the stamps have been unearthed over the past 25 years. Perhaps there is one lying undiscovered near your hospital.

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¹ Collingwood RG, Wright RP. *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*. Volume II. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishers, 1992: 43-62.

Roman oculists' stamps found in Great Britain

| Location of find (Roman name) | Year of find | Named ingredients | Oculist's name |
|--|-----------------|--|--|
| Bath (<i>Aquae Sulis</i>) | 1731 1923 | Vinegar, quince | T Iunianus Flavius Litugenus |
| Bedford (Biggleswade) (Harrod) | 1873 1895 | Vinegar, celandine, poppy Copper oxide, misy* | Gaius Valerius Amandus Gaius Iunius Tertullus Lucius Iulius Salutaris Marinus |
| Cambridge (<i>Durohiponte</i>) | 1984 | | Quintus Iulius Martinus |
| Chester (<i>Deva</i>) | 1973 | Saffron | |
| Cirencester (<i>Corinium</i>) | 1808 | Frankincense, quince | Minervalis |
| Colchester (<i>Camulodunum</i>) | 1900 | Frankincense, quince, poppy | Atticus |
| Dorchester (<i>Durnovaria</i>) | 1719 | Saffron, quince | Quintus Iulius Murranus |
| Edinburgh (Tranent) | 1975 | Saffron | Martialis |
| Gloucester (Lydney Park) | 1937 | Saffron | |
| Hereford (Kenchester) (<i>Magnis</i>) | 1846 | Saffron | Lucius Valerius Latinus |
| Ipswich (Whitton) | c 1830 | Quince | Iulius Iucundus |
| Kendal (Watercrook) | 1842 | Nard, frankincense | Titus Vindacius Ariovistus |
| Lincoln (Littleborough) | 1963 | Copper oxide, gall | Aurelius Polychronius |
| London (<i>Londinium</i>) | 1931 | | |
| Newport (<i>Caerleon; Isca</i>) | 1974 | | Publius Clodius |
| Norwich (Caistor St Edmunds) (<i>Venta Icenorum</i>) | 1927 | | |
| Oxford (Wilcote) | 1975 | Saffron | Lucius Iulius Senex |
| Shrewsbury (Wroxeter) (<i>Viroconium</i>) | 1929 | Saffron | Lucius Iulius Senex |
| St Albans (<i>Verulamium</i>) | 1931 | Misy | Gaius Silvius Tetricus |
| Waterford (Clonmel) | 1955 | Saffron | Lucius Iulius Senex |
| York | 1927 | | Publius Anicius Sedatus |
| | 1965 | | Maurus |
| | 1808 | Frankincense | Tiberius Claudius M |
| | 1981 | | |
| | 1739 | Balsam, myrrh | Lucius Iulius Iuvenis |
| | 1842 | Misy | Flavius Secundus |
| | 1930 | Misy | Marcus Iuventus Tutianus |
| | | | Iulius Alexander |

*Probably copper pyrites.