

WOODHAMS
—STONE—
COLLECTION

Woodhams Stone Collection

Medicine Chest

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This large medicine cabinet has recently been added to the Woodhams-Stone Collection. While its exact history is not known, it appears to have retained most of its original contents. It has also had some wonderful extra items added to it including an enema kit and a glass nipple shield. It probably dates to about 1900.



The chest contains ointments, powders and liquids all in their original containers. They were used to treat a whole range of conditions. For example there is salicylic acid for warts, psoriasis, dandruff and acne; terebinth ointment for relief from bronchitis, arthritis, gout, scabies and lice; Guipsine pills, made from fresh mistletoe, for high blood pressure, gout, 'troubles of the menopause' and nephrosclerosis; and also Belladonna ointment for joint pain, sciatica and many other problems.

Despite the powerful and often poisonous contents (there are warning marks on the bottles and skull and crossbones stickers on some of the racks) it is unlikely that this cabinet belonged to either a doctor or a pharmaceutical chemist. It was probably for private use by the owner and their family. The cabinet has been competently made, but has rather unusual features. It may have been made locally and may be unique.

Before the NHS, doctors were expensive and they often had to travel miles to see patients, especially in rural areas. It was therefore important, as of course it had been for centuries, that most ailments could be treated at home. The people in charge of this were in most cases the women of the family. They were the ones familiar with the uses of medicines, herbs and home remedies in the sick room. As early as the 17th century prepared medicines were being purchased from outside the home, but homemade remedies were extremely

common. Traditionally recipes for medicines had been written down as part of family recipe or household books. Making home remedies like this continued well into the 20th century, with cough mixtures and pick me ups, liniments and ointments all being routinely made at home.

As well as being used for home treatment, medicine cabinets were also particularly popular in this period because of the high number of people travelling abroad. Many of these were travelling to the British colonies. This is reflected in the 1907 Army and Navy Catalogue which guarantees to provide medicine cabinets for all climates and conditions. It is interesting to note the many types of homeopathic medicine chests that were available in the catalogue. Homeopathy was extremely popular in the late 19th century and was especially popular with women partly because of its gentle effects as well as its efficacy.

This chest also has hints that its owners may have travelled quite widely. It contains 'Yzerchorid Watter' from Amsterdam, a tin containing 'Gipswindsel' a type of dressing or bandage also from the Netherlands, a small ointment pot from the College Pharmacy in Philadelphia and a box of Guipsine pills made by a doctor in Paris, but purchased from an apothecary in Brussels.