

## Leech Aquarium

Among the pills and potions of a bygone era in the Museum's chemist's shop is a large shapely clear glass jar. At a first glance it might look like an item from the sideboard at home, but this is a leech aquarium.

The jar's slightly grey appearance shows that lead was added when it was made and the swirls within the glass, tell us that it was blown and not moulded.

Most surviving leech jars are ceramic and highly decorated. Chemists often purchased such jars in sets of three. One for leeches, one for tamarind and one for honey. It would have been unfortunate to mix them up, so no doubt they were well labelled.

Our glass aquarium has a narrow neck with a wide rim. To prevent the escape of the medicinal leeches, the opening would be closed using muslin or linen stretched tightly over the hole and securely tied around the neck. The highly valued leeches were kept in the aquarium in clean water which was changed frequently.

The use of leeches, for 'blood-letting', as a way of treating a variety of health problems, dates back at least to Roman times. Leeches are much like earthworms, but their mouths have tiny but very sharp teeth. They grip while gently rocking and are thought not to be painful to the patient. Bruising and inflammation were two conditions that leeches were used to treat. Several leeches would be put on the damaged area for around twenty minutes. Eventually they would drop off bloated with blood.

A leech's saliva has anti-coagulant properties and also acts to dilate veins. The anti-coagulant works as the blood is drained, to keep a steady flow free from clots. It is thought that the leech's gut contains a unique bacterium which prevents the growth of other bacteria and this stops the ingested blood from putrefying as it is slowly digested.



There has been a recent resurgence of using leeches for medical needs, including after plastic surgery to help heal deep wounds. They are not kept in glass aquariums anymore.

Image – the leech aquarium which can usually be found in the Museum's chemist's shop.