



Above: a silver medicine spoon (c1755) inscribed 'Gift of the Dutchess of Queensberry to Lady Carbery'; an 'S' engraved on the stem for 'Stafford', Lady Carbery's maiden name.
Below: a silver teaspoon (c1765) inscribed 'A Dutchess'.

A duchess, a physician and a spoon

Article by Jean Symons

The gift of an eccentric duchess to Lady Carbery, this modest silver spoon makes an intriguing part of the Symons Collection at the Royal College of Physicians.



Left: The Duchess of Queensberry as portrayed at the National Portrait Gallery. Above: The Duchess of Queensberry's spoon as it was presented to Lady Carbery in a velvet-lined chagrin case. The length of the spoon is 9 cm.

In 1979 a silver spoon with the inscription 'Gift of the Dutchess of Queensberry to Lady Carbery' was discovered at auction by Cecil Symons, a physician, cardiologist and collector of medical artefacts. Described as a 'medicine spoon', Cecil was intrigued to find out its origins. Why was it presented to Lady Carbery? Was it for medicine or tea? His investigation led to an eccentric duchess, who was a great beauty and literary patron with a passion for potions and dressing like a milk maid.

The silver spoon was made around 1755 by Paul Callard in London, and is now part of the Symons Collection at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP).¹ It was originally presented to Lady Carbery in 1755 in a velvet-lined chagrin case by the Duchess of Queensberry (1701–77), who became central to Cecil Symons' often-asked question: 'Which came first, the teaspoon or the medicine spoon?'

A spoonful of medicine

The duchess, Catherine Douglas (formerly Kitty Hyde), enjoyed making potions, tisanes and balsamic draughts for her friends, often accompanied by her forthright opinions and common-sense advice. Catherine's cousin, Mary Delany, wrote in 1756 that the duchess kindly made the tisanes and emulsions used to treat her chest inflammation.² Cecil speculated that by 1765 Catherine had given many spoons as tea (or herb) measures to her friends. He noted with interest that the measure of tea became known as 'A Dutchess', as engraved on a similar spoon in the Symons Collection made around 1765 by Thomas and William Chawner in London. A dose of medicine became known as 'a teaspoonful' and the modern plastic medicine spoon, still called a teaspoon, has an identical 5ml capacity to the duchess's silver spoon, which further suggests it may have been used as a medicine spoon.

The duchess's spoon presented another mystery in the form of an 'S' engraved on the stem. The recipient of the gift, Lady Carbery, was named Anne.³ However, her maiden name was 'Stafford' and thus the engraving reflected the custom for married ladies to revert to their family name when they were widowed. Lady Carbery was the wife of the

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MP for Westbury and a friend of the Duchess of Queensbury who lived in neighbouring Amesbury, Wiltshire.

Invalids in the Georgian era

The development of the medicine spoon in the Georgian era became a particular subject of interest to Cecil and he was fascinated to discover whether it preceded the teaspoon or vice versa. His collection of medical artefacts, principally from the Georgian era, also led to an interest in the Georgian preoccupation with self care. In his opening to the Samuel Gee Lecture, 'Invalids in the Georgian era', at the RCP in 1981, he said: 'I am not a medical historian but someone who became interested in the Georgian era because of the collection which I have made over the years of contemporary medical instruments. The acquisition of articles may become a passion and arouse interest far beyond the particular inanimate piece collected. To see, for example, an early medicine spoon, inevitably gives rise to thoughts of who used it and how and why... The Georgians were very much aware of self-care and comfort, and even in sickness their inherent sense of good design was evident', as seen in many items in the collection.⁴ Cecil read a great deal about the history of tea and arguments for and against its medical use, but reached no conclusion as to the purpose of the duchess's spoon.

Tea and 'physick'

Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary, which was published in the same year that Callard made the spoon in 1755, defines a 'spoon' as 'a concave vessel with a handle used in eating liquids' and a 'medical spoonful' as 'half an ounce'; 'tea' is described as 'a Chinese plant, of which the infusion has lately been



Cecil and Jean Symons at the time of their marriage in 1953. Cecil Symons MD FRCP (1921–87), was a physician and cardiologist at the Royal Free Hospital, London from 1961–87. His collection of medical artefacts is now displayed in the foyer to the Seligman Theatre at the Royal College of Physicians. The collection was catalogued by his wife Jean who also continued his research about the Duchess of Queensberry's spoon.

much drunk in Europe'; 'medicine:physick' as 'any remedy administered by a physician'; 'herb' as 'those plants whose stalks are soft and have nothing woody in them'; and 'dutchess' is defined as 'the lady of a Duke'.⁵

John Coakley Lettsom's *The Natural History of the Tea-Tree with observations on the Medical Qualities of Tea, and on the Effects of Tea-Drinking* (1772), suggests there was little consensus on the medicinal benefits of tea at that time: 'Between extremes are many gradations and everything else being alike, Tea will be found to be more or less beneficial or injurious to individuals as their constitutions approach nearer to these opposite extremes'. However, he also states: 'In medicine tea has but very little reputation amongst us. It is scarcely recommended as part of the furniture of the sick chamber'.⁶

Sir John Hill, who combined the careers of physician, journalist, actor and writer, wrote about the medicinal uses of plants in *The British Herbal: an History of Plants and Trees, natives of Britain, cultivated for use, or, raised for beauty* (1756). However, its descriptions are confusing and shed no further light about the health benefits of tea.⁷

Thus, it seems tea, medicine, herbs and physic (or 'physick') were not easily distinguishable in the Georgian era, and that a teaspoon could be used for many purposes.

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Cecil Symons, Samuel Gee Lecture, 'Invalids in the Georgian era' (1981)

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The duchess in letters

Catherine Douglas was much admired in society as a great beauty and patron of writers, but was equally well known for her forthright views and blunt manner. She was excluded from the court of King George II for speaking out in support of the playwright John Gay, and her choice of fashion was thought to be eccentric as she shunned the finery of a duchess and often chose to wear the simplest garments.

In a letter to a friend, Mary Delany describes a ball gown worn by the duchess: 'white satin embroidered, the bottom of the petticoat brown hills covered with all sorts of weeds and old stumps of trees ... round which twined nastersians, ivy, honeysuckles, periwinkles, convolvuluses and all sorts of flowers and weeds'.² In contrast to this elaborate description, the duchess appears in the National Portrait Gallery dressed as a dairy maid. An account of Beau Nash, a leader of fashion in 18th-century Bath, describes how Nash snatched the duchess's apron in the Assembly Rooms, saying it was fit only to be worn by servants.^{2,8,9}

Horace Walpole, who later became the fourth earl of Orford in 1791, wrote that he thanked God that the Thames flowed between his home at Strawberry Hill and the duchess's home at Petersham, as he considered her to be 'just short of downright mad' and called her an out-pensioner of Bedlam.^{8,10,11} It is recorded, in William Hone's year book, quoting Robert Chambers, who was not considered entirely reliable, that Catherine was

confined to a straight-jacket on several occasions.^{8,9} There are many stories of the duchess's eccentricities in local guidebooks and year books – the equivalent of modern gossip columns.^{9,11}

The duchess herself had no hesitation in expressing her strong opinions. In a stiff letter to King George II, provided by the late Duke of Buccleugh, Catherine thanks him for banning her from court.

The Wiltshire archives have several letters from the duchess that show her interest in medicine and in which she writes about medical matters, including 'enoculation'. However, these historical records shed little light on her habit of making gifts of silver spoons to her friends.

Scurrilous rumour and speculation

Cecil's quest to discover 'which came first, the teaspoon or the medicine spoon' led down several roads of enquiry, including searching archives and reading diaries, letters and Georgian herbals. Several scurrilous quotes about an eccentric duchess and some rather obtuse thoughts about the medicinal benefits of tea were uncovered, but the principal question remained unanswered. The only mention of a teaspoon found in Johnson's dictionary is an unintelligible quote from Swift: 'When you sweep, never stay to pick up tea spoons'.⁵

However, given her interest in herbal preparations, her fondness for sharing her wisdom and her open dislike of the trappings of wealth, one could surmise that the Duchess of Queensberry's gift to Lady Carbery was intended as a spoon for measuring herbs or as a multi-purpose spoon. Something of which the duchess herself would have approved. ■

Read more about the Symons Collection on the RCP website: www.rcplondon.ac.uk/museum-and-garden/museum/symons-collection. The collection was catalogued by Jean Symons. A guide to the collection is available to visitors who seek more information than can be shown on the labels in the display case.

References

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- 11 Edward Walford. *Greater London. A narrative of its history, its people, and its places*. Volume 2. Illustrated, London: Cassell & co., 1883.

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