

Wellcome to a real eye-opener

A visit to the new HQ of the Wellcome Trust led to the discovery of some ophthalmic gems from centuries past, writes **David Baker**

The Wellcome Collection, a new £30m enterprise, which opened in June this year, contains a wealth of items of optical and general medical interest and is accessible for public viewing, with free admission.

The former headquarters of the Wellcome Trust, 183 Euston Road, has been remodelled to house the Wellcome Library, contemporary galleries, conference centre, members' club and public events forum. A café has an adjoining Blackwell's bookshop with a decent ophthalmology section.

The nine-storey Wellcome Building was built in 1932 to Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome's specification as part of his vision to display his vast collections in a 'Museum of Man'. Sir Henry was a pharmacist by profession, and his interests included the history of medicine, ethnology and archaeology. His entrepreneurial success provided him with the time and money to amass more than one million objects from around the world.

The galleries contain more than 1,300 exhibits. As part of the collection's mission to build on Wellcome's vision, these aim to explore human well-being through the combination of medicine, life and art. There is art by da Vinci, Gormley and Warhol and artefacts, such as Aztec sacrificial knives, Nelson's razor and a DNA-sequencing robot.

Medicine man

The largest gallery is the ground floor space for special exhibitions. On the first floor are the permanent exhibitions *Medicine Now* and *Medicine Man*. The former focuses on particular contemporary medical topics approached from artistic, scientific and popular culture angles. Of perhaps more direct interest optically are some exhibits among 500 or so artefacts in the latter gallery; although their juxtaposition with other items from different periods and cultures makes for a rather unusual viewing context. For instance: in the 'Seeking Help' cabinet there is an optometer (acquired pre-1936) sandwiched between a late 19th century reliquary with guardian figure from Gabon and a 19th century



Sir Henry Wellcome

Japanese domestic shrine with Shinto and Buddhist deities.

'Treating Yourself' contains several notable optical exhibits. There are glass, silver and porcelain eyebaths (labelled as probably English, acquired pre-1936); a pair of English spectacles circa 1790-1880; a case containing Inuit snow-goggles; and a set of glass prosthetic eyes by W Halford of London (1790-1820). A French (1870) plaster model of the human eye sits among other anatomical models and artefacts in the 'Understanding the Body' cabinet. One cannot but be amazed by the wide variety of general anatomical, surgical and anthropological items on display.

The Wellcome Library

The Wellcome Library is a real gem for those researching optical subjects or, indeed, for anyone with an interest in matters medical, medical-historical and just about anything health-related.

There are over two million items in total, including: 750,000 books, 70,000 rare books (pre-1850), a film and audio collection of 2,500 titles; and over 250,000 paintings, prints and photographs. Now part of the Wellcome Collection, the Library has absorbed the Wellcome Trust's Medical Photographic Library and Medical Film and Video Library.

Sir Henry began to collect books seriously in the 1890s, he was the major purchaser at the auction of William Morris' library in 1898. Another important addition to his collection

was the acquisition of the library of JF Payne, medical historian and librarian of the Royal College of Physicians. The ever-expanding Library was moved into the Wellcome Building in 1945 and opened to the public in 1949. It was refurbished in 1962, giving the main galleried Reading Room its present shape. More recently, in the 1980s, another significant addition to the Library was the purchase from the Medical Society of London Library of manuscripts and about 10,000 books. After several administrative changes it was renamed in 1999 The Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine. It holds several items of historical interest, such as the first X-rays taken by Roentgen in 1895; the scientific papers of Francis Crick (co-discoverer of DNA's helical structure); and a first edition of *Gray's Anatomy*.

The Wellcome Collection has a virtual library called 'Uncover' which is a portal to the Library's collections via an interactive touch-screen. Accessing the Library's website also reveals a wealth of information.

The three entries in *Moving Image and Sound* are worth describing because of their historical value:

- A 12-minute colour film by Trevor-Roper (1960) shows clips of extra- and intra-capsular cataract extraction, and other surgical procedures
- A five-minute film on video/DVD by the National Ophthalmic Treatment Board Association (1946) explains the workings of the eye and the importance of keeping them in good health and shows work environments, eye exams and fitting of spectacles
- A four-minute colour film (1953) on minor ophthalmic surgery was designed for introductory postgraduate lectures.

The books and journals have some crossover with the History of Medicine collection, but it is particularly good on historical themes – for example, biographies of optical interest, ophthalmology around the world and spectacles throughout the ages. One can become a member of the Library by visiting in person with the appropriate proof of identity and address. ●

● www.wellcomecollection.org