

SIR HENRY WELLCOME

“Sir Henry Wellcome was one of the world’s greatest collectors, maybe the last great non-art collector. Much of his collection has never been seen, yet is a treasure trove of insight into human wellbeing through the ages.”

Dr Ken Arnold, Wellcome Trust, Head of Public Programmes

Sir Henry Wellcome (1853-1936) dedicated his life to improving the health of humankind. Wellcome created a pharmaceutical empire which pioneered medical research. He mixed with London’s rich and famous and strove to aid Africa’s poorest. His passionate interest in medicine and its history, as well as ethnography and anthropology, led him to gather more than one million objects from across the world. On his death his will founded the Wellcome Trust, which now holds £13.9bn of investment assets and spends around £500m per year on research and other activities.¹

Early curiosity

- Born in America’s Midwest, his father was first a farmer and then a minister in the Adventist Church.
- As a child, Wellcome worked in his uncle’s drugstore. At 16 he advertised his first product in the local newspaper: homemade invisible ink.
- After graduating from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, Wellcome worked as a travelling salesman for a pharmaceutical company in New York.

Burroughs Wellcome & Co

- In 1880, Wellcome travelled to London to set-up a pharmaceutical company with his friend, Silas Mainville Burroughs. Burroughs Wellcome & Co was very successful, building groundbreaking medical research laboratories.
- Wellcome coined the name “tabloid” for medicinal tablets, made by compressing powders into pill form.
- Wellcome gained sole ownership of the company when Burroughs died in 1895. He used a large part of the profits to develop his collecting interests.

¹ As published on 21 December 2006.

Wellcome's collecting

- From his student days Wellcome began to amass a vast number of medical, cultural and anthropological objects from across the world – which he termed a “museum of man”.
- In 1913 Wellcome opened his original Historical Medical Museum in Wigmore Street in the West End to house his rapidly growing collection.
- By 1936 Henry's collection consisted of more than one million items.

Wellcome's marriage and private life

- In 1901 Wellcome married Syrie Barnardo, daughter of the philanthropist Thomas Barnardo. The couple separated in 1910 and in 1916 a scandalous divorce followed when Syrie bore a child fathered by the writer Somerset Maugham (whom she later married).
- Wellcome had impressive connections, including Henry Stanley, Andrew Balfour, Lord Kitchener, Joseph Chamberlain, Oscar Wilde, May French Sheldon and Roger Casement.
- Wellcome became reclusive during the last 25 years of his life, finding satisfaction in his work, travels, archaeological and collecting interests.
- In 1932, Wellcome was knighted by King George V. In that year he was also made a Fellow of both the Royal Society and the Royal College of Surgeons, a rare distinction for someone who did not hold a medical degree.

Wellcome & Africa

- In 1900 Wellcome visited Sudan. Having witnessed the sickness which ravaged the country, he founded the Wellcome Tropical Research Laboratories which pioneered developments in the control of Malaria.
- Wellcome also spent a fortune in archaeological explorations both in Sudan and the Middle East.

Wellcome's legacy

- In 1931 work began on the Wellcome Building at 183 Euston Road. The impressive building of Portland stone was built to Sir Henry Wellcome's own specifications and opened in 1934, two years before Sir Henry's death.
- Wellcome's last Will and Testament, written in 1932, was used after his death in 1936 as a guideline for the establishment of the Wellcome Trust. It is still used today to guide the Trust's work.

- Today the Wellcome Trust is the largest charity in the UK and the second largest medical research charity in the world. It spends around £500 million each year, supporting research to improve human and animal health.
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