Editorial

Edward Jenner and the discovery of vaccination—An appeal for the Edward Jenner Museum

The discovery of vaccination was one of the greatest medical advances of all time and, indeed, an estimated 8–10 million lives are presently saved on an annual basis worldwide by vaccines. Included in this number are the many that would have died of smallpox, eradicated by vaccination in 1977 [1]. The potential for doubling this number exists if vaccines can be developed to control the major world health problems of HIV, malaria and TB and even cancer.

Few readers of this journal will be unfamiliar with the story of Edward Jenner (1749–1823) and his invention of the smallpox vaccine back in 1796 in the small market town of Berkeley, Gloucestershire, in the UK [2]. However, many will not be aware that the house and grounds in which Jenner conducted his famous vaccination of the young James Phipps more than 200 years ago still exist and are maintained by the Jenner Trust as a museum and memorial to the life and work of Edward Jenner.

The museum is housed in the Chantry (Fig. 1), the vicar’s residence or vicarage, immediately adjacent to the 13th century church of St. Mary’s where Jenner was buried in 1823. The Chantry was Jenner’s home for 38 years from 1785 until his death. Buildings in the UK of historic interest are classified in terms of their significance, hence, Grade I are buildings of exceptional interest, Grade II* are particularly important buildings of more than special interest, and Grade II buildings are just of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve them. The Chantry is an exceptional Grade II*-listed Queen Anne house of historic importance in its own right, but also unique in being the home of Edward Jenner and, therefore, is a site of global significance in the history of medicine.

Given the profound impact of vaccination on world health, the present Jenner Museum is a very modest establishment with a status and public recognition disproportionately small when set against the epoch-making discoveries it commemorates. It was here that Jenner collected together the case histories that convinced him that infection with cowpox afforded protection against smallpox and conducted his pioneering experiments with vaccination demonstrating that the inoculation of cowpox (taken from an infected milkmaid) conferred protection against smallpox. Here, Jenner wrote his famous An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae, or Cow-Pox, and published it in 1798 at his own expense. This launched vaccination into mainstream medical practice, first in England and then across the world, Jenner continued to promote vaccination from his home at the Chantry until the end of his life, describing himself as “Vaccine Clerk to the World.” This building is truly the birthplace of vaccination and the right location to celebrate Jenner’s invention.

The first Edward Jenner Museum (1968) was located in the cottage Jenner left to James Phipps, the recipient of the first vaccination. However, following a successful fund-raising appeal, in 1980 the Chantry was acquired by the Jenner Trust to become the Edward Jenner Museum of today. The museum houses many objects linked to Jenner’s life and legacy and an extensive and growing archive on the history of smallpox. Today, the museum represents a uniquely important heritage on many levels. The Chantry is a window on the life and times of this intriguing historical figure, Jenner was a true polymath: a country doctor, Fellow of the Royal Society (appointed for his research in ornithology, not vaccination), naturalist, geologist (he discovered one of the first dinosaur fossils), poet, musician, pioneer balloonist (he successfully launched a hydrogen balloon in 1784), and more. In addition to the Chantry, the gardens contain another important monument to Jenner’s work, the thatched building Jenner called “The Temple of Vaccinia” (also listed as a Grade II* structure), where he vaccinated the poor for free.

Key to the significance of the Jenner Museum is its role in providing balanced advocacy of vaccination. It contains excellent learning and research resources that could be offered on a wider and longer term basis. The museum strives to make Jenner’s heritage both accessible and meaningful to all and provide for a broad range of visitors from many different communities and backgrounds, as well as many thousands of people around the world who visit the museum’s website at http://jennermuseum.com.

Edward Jenner is a British scientific hero, but one whose achievements should be celebrated worldwide. He has been credited as saving more lives than anyone else in history. The continuing existence of a viable museum will ensure that this great legacy is protected for current and future generations. The objectives of the museum trustees are to complete the restoration of the Chantry and its grounds to their former glory at the peak of Jenner’s varied career, to bring the museum up to 21st century standards, to reinterpret the historical content of the museum and make this more widely accessible for modern audiences, and to improve the quality of the learning experience for visitors to the Museum (including students), whether in person or online. At present, the Chantry is incompletely restored and, with very old buildings, the maintenance of the existing structures is a continuous and expensive activity. The rules for the maintenance of Grade-II listed buildings are rigorously enforced in the UK and, indeed, maintenance is obligatory and must follow strict guidelines. However, the Temple of Vaccinia has been fully restored, thanks to support from the Country Houses Foundation of the UK.
The museum is operated as a registered charity. Income is obtained through admission charges, events, a busy educational program for schools, its shop and the provision of conference facilities. Financial support is obtained from charities and commercial organizations in the form of grants and donations. Needless to say, the upkeep and maintenance of Edward Jenner’s house itself, its artifacts, the provision of a valuable educational resource and the museum service are costly. At the end of March 2013 the trust can record many successes continuing to provide a full portfolio of services in keeping with its charitable purposes. However, it operates at a deficit, thus depleting reserves and is also challenged by the need for major refurbishment of its estate and the modernization of the presentation of Edward Jenner’s life and legacy. It has at most three years to balance its budget and put in place a new capital program and endowment appeal, as it did when the trustees first acquired and partially restored the Chantry in 1979.

The museum trustees are of the view that operational expenditure is now at the minimum that can meet the trust’s charitable obligations. If the trust accounts are to break even in the next two years, then it must double its income from grants and donations. Currently, the focus is on promoting a Corporate Patrons Scheme and a planned program of specific grant applications through the next financial year. The trust is fortunate in the generous support of the British Society for Immunology, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Merck Vaccines, and is grateful to many other sponsors. The Edward Jenner Vaccine Society (www.edwardjennersociety.org), a recently formed society for vaccinologists, hopes to collaborate with the trust to perpetuate the memory of Dr. Edward Jenner. The primary aims of the Edward Jenner Vaccine Society are to:

(1) Promote biomedical research and collaboration in vaccines (“to advance the science”)
(2) Promote growth in the field of vaccinology (“to develop interest in the field of vaccinology and to mentor the next generation”)
(3) Provide education and ongoing opportunities for professional interaction among members (“to promote collaboration”)
(4) To honor and promote the memory of Dr. Edward Jenner and the Jenner Museum

Fund raising is challenging and particularly so in current economic circumstances. The museum trustees need support from around the world from those who share their aspirations for Edward Jenner’s heritage and legacy. Contributions can be made at http://jennerMuseum.com/ through the “donations” link, or directly at the URL http://goo.gl/Gm88Ff. If, as individuals or through an organization, readers are interested in supporting the trust and its objectives, then please contact the trust using contact details given on the museum’s website or email Dr. Tim Wallington at timothy.wallington@gmail.com or Professor Andy Morgan at andy.morgan@bristol.ac.uk.

References


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