



The Royal College of Pathologists

Pathology: the science behind the cure

Object 26: Blossom the cow



What is it?

Blossom was a Gloucester cow, famous for being the animal used by physician Edward Jenner in his discovery of vaccination against smallpox. Smallpox is a contagious infectious disease caused by the Variola virus. It caused millions of deaths worldwide until its eradication in 1977.

History

Jenner worked in the Severn Vale in the late eighteenth century. He noticed that milkmaids exposed to the mild viral infection cowpox rarely caught smallpox. He took material from the cowpox pustule on the hand of a milkmaid and introduced it to scratches on the hand of an eight-year old boy. The boy developed a mild illness typical of cowpox but did not develop smallpox when exposed to the virus on several occasions.

Pathology

Vaccination (named after the Latin word 'vacca', which means 'cow'), against smallpox was widely adopted following the publication of Jenner's work. The discovery was critically important in the understanding of disease prevention as it introduced the concept that one disease could be prevented by exposure to another. Virologists, microbiologists and immunologists have developed over twenty vaccines against different diseases, saving millions of lives every year.

Find out more

The best place to learn more about Jenner is in his house in Berkeley, Gloucestershire, which has been turned into a fascinating museum. To find out more visit the [Jenner Museum website](#).

If you're in central London you can see a statue of Jenner in Kensington Gardens (near the fountain in the Italian Gardens). Visit the [Royal Parks website](#) to plan your visit.

Blossom's hide is on display at St George's Medical School in London where it is mounted on the wall of the library.