



Royal College of
General Practitioners

Architecture, Archive and Museum Collections



Introduction

Welcome to the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP). We are the largest Medical Royal College, with over 54,000 members (in 2024). Instituted in November 1952, we have outgrown four previous headquarters in London. The RCGP moved to the present Grade II* listed building in October 2012 and it has been the professional home of our members ever since. This booklet will give you more information about the heritage of the RCGP, from the building to the heritage collections.

A brief history of the College

A College is Born

The idea of a College of General Practitioners was first discussed in the late 19th century but appetite was small. It continued to be brought up over the next 70 years.

A particularly significant development to general practice was the introduction of the National Insurance Act of 1911. Under this act all eligible working males were placed on the 'panel' (or list) of a named general practitioner who received an annual capitation fee to provide for their general medical care. General practitioners then became responsible for the provision of primary health care within a national system funded by the state, which was much needed by general practitioners at the time. Only then were they given an assured income.

The 'panel' was only extended to everyone in 1948, on the introduction of the NHS. Prior to this, there was not a widespread form of health insurance. As the 1911 act was only for eligible working males, the rest of the family would still have to pay to see a doctor. They may have saved for this, may have simply not approached a doctor when needed, or sometimes simply did not pay.

In 1950 general practice was struggling with the demands of the newly established National Health Service. Matters came to a head following the publication of a critical report on British general practice, which painted a dramatic picture of demoralised doctors, hurried work, poor facilities and low standards. This report made it impossible for the medical establishment to ignore the crisis that was overwhelming general practice. The profession had to respond. It was against this background that a few influential general practitioners began to develop the idea

of a college. These doctors shared a belief that what was needed was an academic body to support good standards of practice, education and research, such as already existed in other medical colleges. Such a college, it was argued, could provide leadership for those many doctors anxious to work for better standards in general practice, and make it possible to attract young doctors of the highest quality.

In 1951, Dr John Hunt and Dr Fraser Rose published a joint letter in the British Medical Journal and The Lancet seeking support for a new college. The response from general practitioners throughout the nation was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Later that year Hunt, Rose and a small group of doctors met to form a 'Steering Committee'. At its final session in November 1952, nine months after its inception, the College of General Practitioners was legally constituted. Formal recognition of its status was enhanced in 1972 when the College was granted its Royal Charter.

The College, in 2024, reached over 54,000 members worldwide and works to promote high standards of clinical practice, education, and research throughout primary healthcare. General practice is no longer the 'cottage industry' it was in 1952. It is clear today that the National Health Service cannot survive without thriving primary care provision.

History of 30 Euston Square

The building

30 Euston Square was originally built between 1906 and 1908 as the headquarters of the London, Edinburgh and Glasgow Assurance Company, which specialised in providing welfare insurance for low income workers and their families. Its coat of arms stands prominently above the fireplace in the entrance hall. It was one of the first purpose-built office buildings in an area that at the turn of the century was primarily residential. The London, Edinburgh and Glasgow Assurance Company was taken over by the Pearl Assurance Company, a larger industrial life insurer which donated the building to the newly formed National Amalgamated Approved Society (NAAS) in 1912. Their First World War roll of honour can be seen in the main foyer on the left hand side of the fireplace.



Arthur Beresford-Pite

The first phase of the building was designed by Arthur Beresford-Pite (1861-1934), Professor of Architecture at the Royal College of Art. Beresford-Pite's original vision for 30 Euston Square was actually completed by another architect, W H Gunton, in 1932. The original 1906-1908 part of the building was granted Grade II* listed status by English Heritage in 1974.

Features

The original building is constructed of Portland Stone with slate roof. The 1932 extension is steel framed with stone cladding, hence the listing of the original building only. It is Greek revival in style with ionic columns adorning the front of the building.

The entrance hall is decorated with green and cream Daulton parian ware tiles. From around 1890 unglazed terracotta was supplanted by a glazed version – faience, and glazed brickwork which were easily cleaned, and not blackened by city smoke. The glaze also enabled a more colourful architecture.

The technique provided a low cost, fast and lightweight construction process as the faiencing was purely a veneer on a concrete base. It allowed a degree of craftsmanship to be visible which was applauded in the Arts and Crafts period.

The glazed hollow units were hand cast in moulds or carved in clay and heavily glazed, then fired. It was particularly popular in North America (New York City and Chicago) where pollution was a particular issue. In the UK the use of faience externally was increasingly popular, however, it was rarely deployed internally on the scale seen at Euston Square.

The mosaic in the entrance hall features the 12 zodiac signs. This was designed by Beresford-Pite and restored by Gary Drostle in 2010-12.

Post-war history

The passing of the National Insurance Act in 1946 and the subsequent introduction of the National Health Service meant that approved societies such as NAAS were no longer needed and ceased to exist in 1948. 30 Euston Square was taken over by the Government and had various uses including by the Department of Health and Social Security. The building passed back into private hands in the 1990s but was virtually unused from that time until its purchase by the RCGP.

30 Euston Square today

The building lay empty for many years and required massive refurbishment. Plans for its redevelopment were drawn up by the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2010. The architectural practice, Tilney Shane was appointed and worked closely with the RCGP to design a 300-seater auditorium, 41 study bedrooms and a purpose-built examination centre with 42 rooms. The RCGP took up residence in October 2012.

Today it is still the headquarters and professional home of the Royal College of General Practitioners with the building used as a combination of member and office space for the College as well as a commercial events space. In 2024 part of the ground floor was redesigned by Kathy Tilney following the closure of the on-site café during the covid pandemic and is now a welcoming space for members.

The Heritage Collections

Archive

The College archive has existed since the inception of the college in 1952.

The archive documents the initiatives and struggles of pioneering doctors who have developed the profession as we know it today.

The archives are split into two broad collections, those relating to the College and our special collections. The College archives date back to the establishment of the College and continue to the present day. The special collections consist of material relating to the speciality of General Practice, dating back to the early 19th century, and to individual general practitioners. For example, we have archives relating to James Mackenzie, William Pickles, Fraser Rose, John Hunt and John Fry to name just a few.

The Oral history collections date back to the 1970s and through various projects over the years, such as NHS 70 and Covid Stories has continued to be kept up to date.

Museum

The College also has a large heritage collection of medical equipment and other items. The museum collections date back to the early days of the College and have developed over the years to give a fascinating insight into the development of general practice through medical objects. The museum collections date back the 17th century with the majority of material being 19th and 20th century.

There is an excellent collection of doctor's bags, a selection of 19th century medicine chests, early microscopes, midwifery and obstetric equipment and a wide range of instruments covering various disciplines from surgery to gynaecology to pathology amongst others. We are actively collecting, particularly looking for more contemporary material.

Historic book collection

The College has a small but interesting collection of several hundred rare or historic medical books, originally started from member donations. Much of the collection helps chart the College's history, being particularly strong in works by or about GPs. However, it also stretches back much further than general practice has been officially recognised as a branch of medicine, with volumes as old as 1656.

Examples of some of the books in our historic book collection include William Smellie's Anatomical Tables, 1754 and Pierre Pomme's Compleat History of Druggs, 1712.

Access to the heritage collections is by appointment only. Any enquiries should be sent to heritage@rcgp.org.uk



Exhibitions at the College

Art in the College

The College has long had an association with art and has held various art exhibitions over the years.

In 2012 the College purchased two pieces of art from Pharmacoepia, which consists of GP Dr Liz Lee and artist Susie Freeman. Armour is based on the prescribing record of one of Liz's patients, Mr Brittain. By the age of 77 he had smoked for 50 years, suffered two heart attacks and was being treated for hypertension, cardiac failure, COPD, arthritis, indigestion, depression and insomnia. The artwork is made of 80 denier nylon monofilament, similar to fishing line, which is knitted on a hand operated industrial knitting machine. Enclosed in rows of tiny mesh pockets are just over 16,000 individual pill cases. Jubilee is a wedding dress showcasing 6,279 contraceptive pills. Allowing for two breaks to have children this would provide contraception for a woman from the age of 22 to 50 years old.

Other permanent artworks which can be seen around the college include watercolours by John Horder, portraits of all the College's past presidents and the bronze heads of Prince Philip and [Prince] King Charles amongst others.

Exhibitions:

The College aims to regularly change the museum displays within the college to showcase both the fascinating material held by the heritage collections as well as to demonstrate the history of both the college and general practice and to inspire future generations. Past exhibitions have included celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the College, Migrants who made the NHS, Life in the Doctor's Bag and Women at the Heart of General Practice.

As well as these exhibitions smaller displays can be found around the college, including in the members lounge on the ground floor.

Tours of the college

Tours of the College can be booked in advance. Tours are led by volunteer College Custodians so availability is determined by availability of the volunteers.

If you would like to become a volunteer heritage custodian or are interested in a tour please contact

heritage@rcgp.org.uk

Location

Royal College of General Practitioners
30 Euston Square, London NW1 2FB



Timeline of important college dates



1951

Rose/Hunt memorandum
to the Lancet and the
BMJ suggesting a College
of general practice

1954

First James Mackenzie
Lecture

1948

NHS launched
5th July

1952

College of General
Practitioners
is formed 19.11.1952

1960

Journal of the
College of
General
Practitioners
founded

1946

NHS Act

1952

Steering Committee
meeting at
7 Mansfield Street

1958

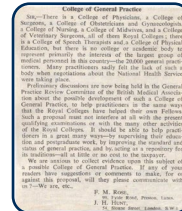
Headquarters at
41 Cadogan Gardens

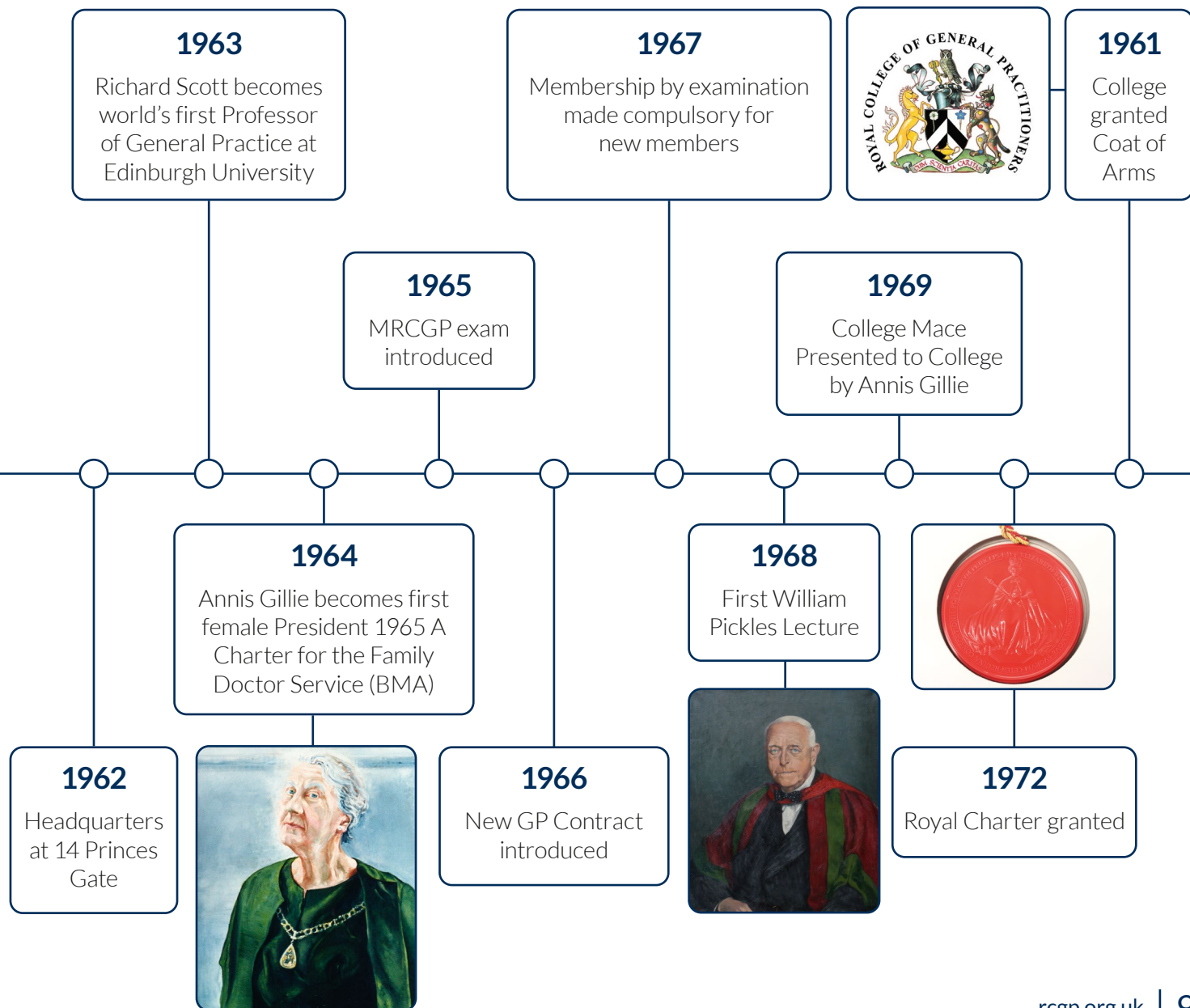
1950

Collings Report published
in the British Medical
Journal and Lancet

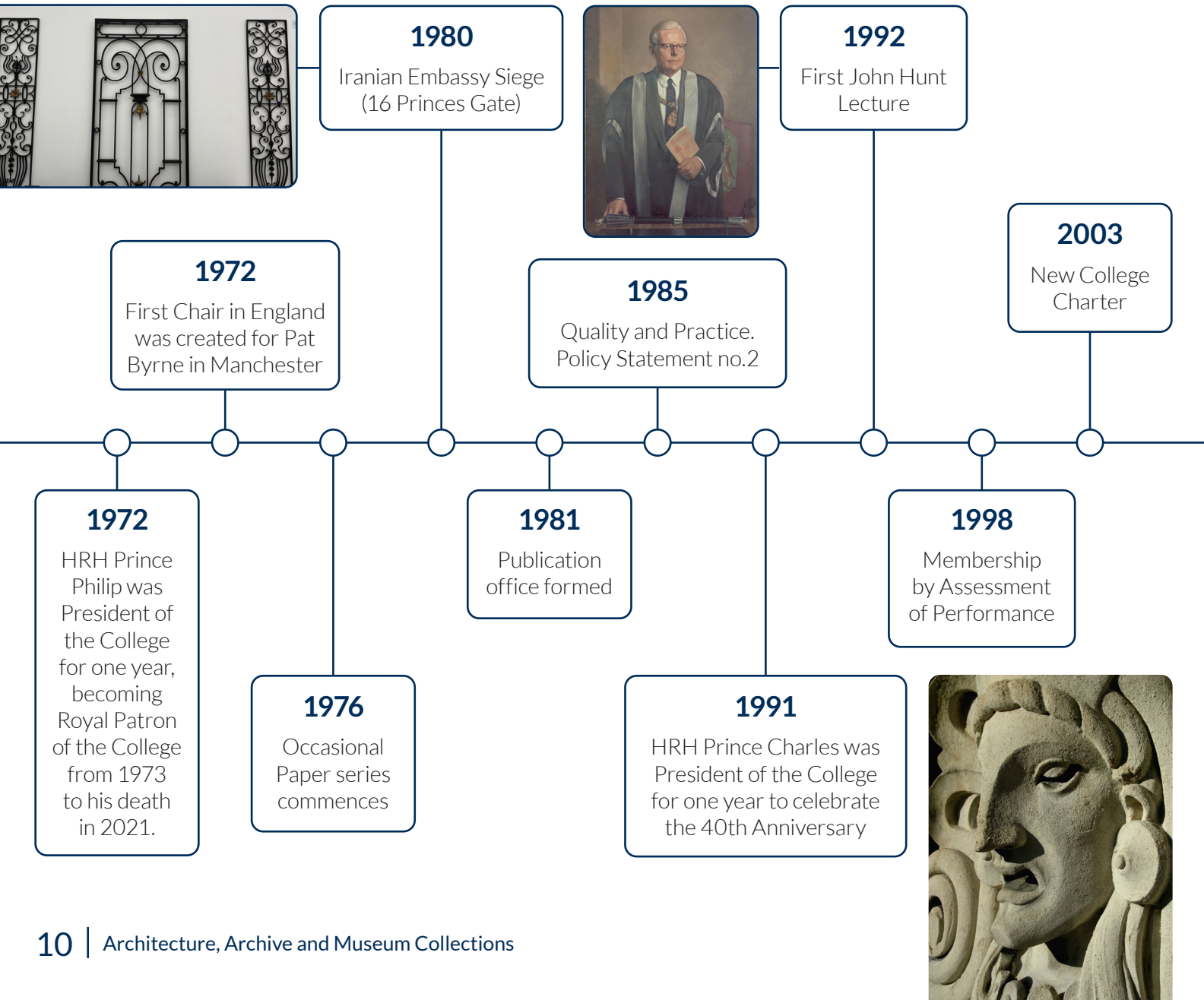
1953

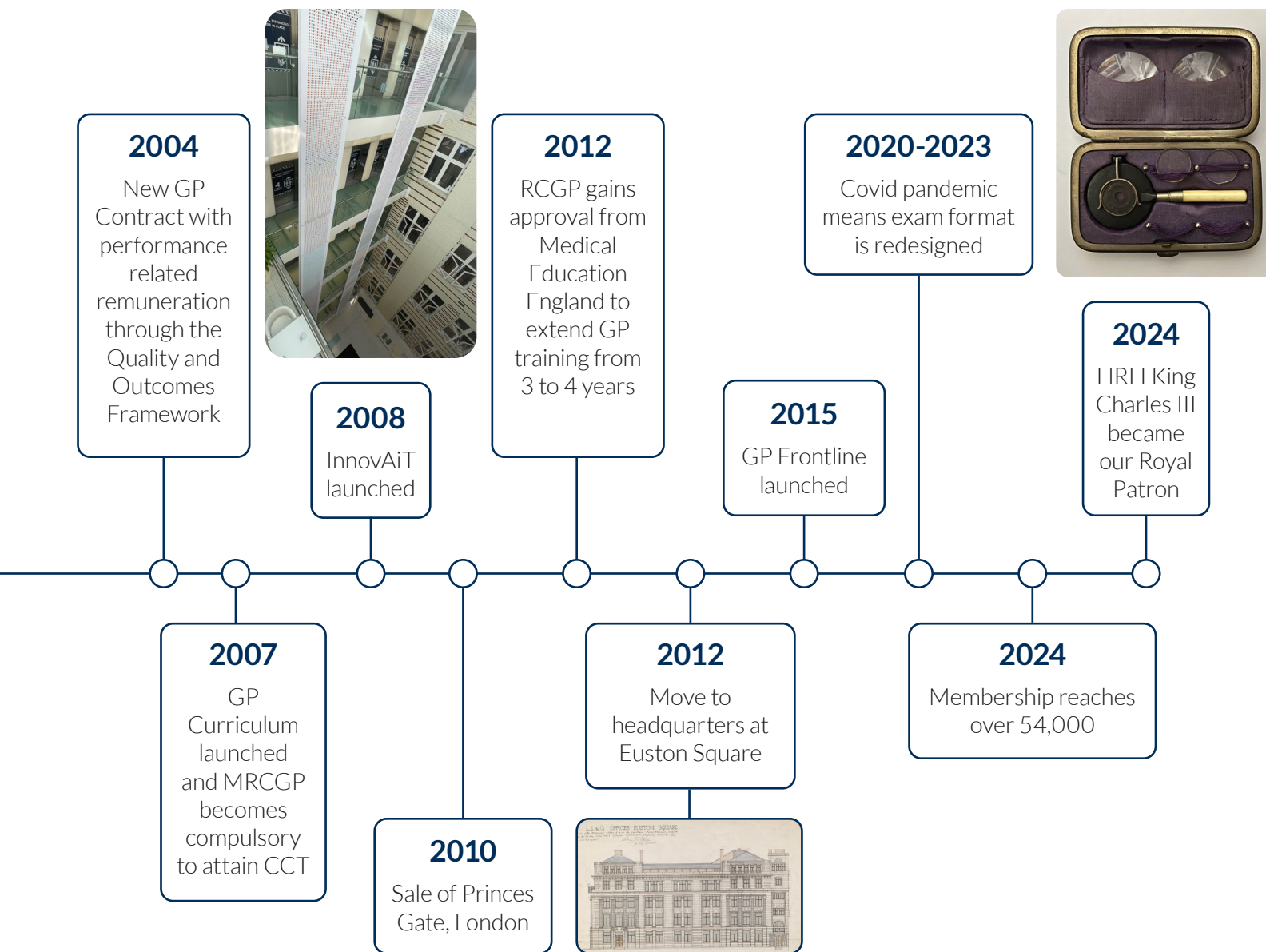
Office 54 Sloane Street,
meetings at Apothecaries Hall





Timeline of important college dates







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