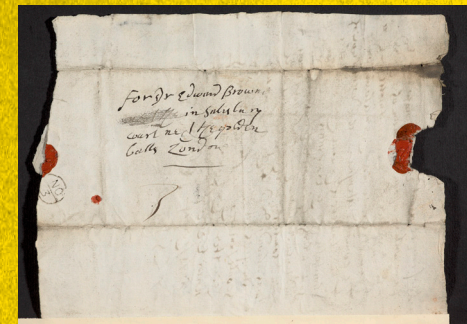


## Letter from Thomas Browne to Edward Browne, 8 May 1678

The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (MS Rawlinson D.108, fol. 85v)



In this letter, addressed to 'Dr Edward Browne in Salisbury Court next the Golden Balls London', Sir Thomas Browne shares news about the books he has recently bought, the progress of his patients, and rumours concerning the Franco-Dutch war (1672–8). He also writes about the hearts of strangled persons, directing Edward to both public dissections and recent books, and about the use of leeches as a cure for earwax. Over 100 of Thomas' surviving letters were written to Edward.

## Norfolk Chronicle, 12 September 1840

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"To this favor we must come at last."

On the occasion of an interment, which recently took place in the chancel of St. Peter's Mancroft church, in this city—the workmen employed to prepare the new vault, broke with a blow of their pick-axe, the lid of a coffin, which proved to be that of one, whose birth and residence within its walls conferred honour on Norwich of the oldest time—the once celebrated and still by his writings well known SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

This accidental circumstance afforded an opportunity of inspecting the remains. The bones of the skeleton were found to be in good preservation, particularly those of the skull. The brain was considerable in quantity but changed to a state of adipocere—resembling ointment of a dark brown hue. The hair of the beard remained profuse and perfect, though the flesh of the face, as well as of every other part, was totally gone. With respect to the conformation of the head, we are informed that the forehead was remarkably low, but the back of the cranium exhibited an unusual degree of depth and capaciousness.—The coffin plate was of brass, in form of a shield, and bore the following inscription:—

Amplissimus Vir  
Dns. Thomas Browne. Miles. Medicus  
Dr. Annos Natus 77 Denatus 19 Die  
Mensis Octobris, Anno Dni. 1682. hoc  
loco in domo, Corpore Spagy-  
rici pulvere plumbum in aurum  
Convertit.

For the accuracy, in every respect, of the above copy, we can safely vouch, since it is carefully taken from an actual impression of the engraving on the plate.—Not so, however, as to the "doing into English," which is here subjoined merely for the use of "readers in general."—Whether the last two lines of the original latinity were meant to predict an alchemic transmutation, or to express a hy-

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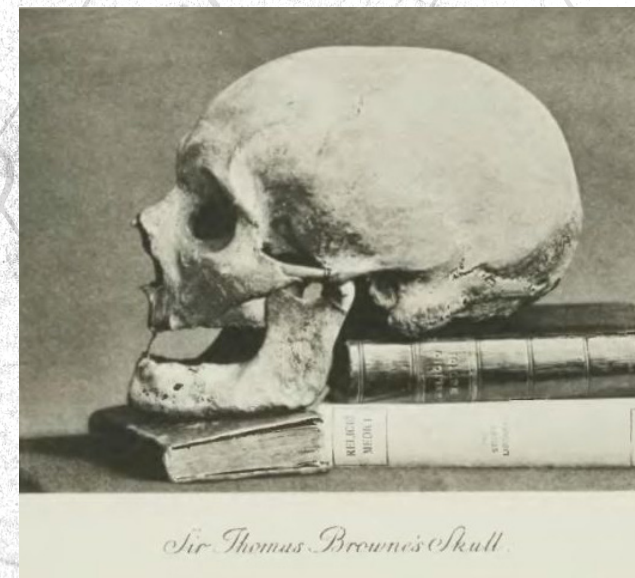
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When Thomas Browne's body was accidentally exhumed by workmen in 1840, his brain was found to be in a state of 'adipocere' or 'grave wax'. This fatty substance, produced in the decomposition of animal tissue, was first described by Browne himself in *Hydriotaphia* (1658): 'In an Hydriocall body ten years buried in a Church-yard, we met with a fat concretion, where the nitre of the Earth, and the salt and lixivious liquor of the body, had coagulated large lumps of fat, into the consistence of the hardest castle-soap; whereof part remaineth with us.'

## 'But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?' – (*Hydriotaphia*, or 'Urne-Buriall', 1658)

Thomas Browne's coffin was accidentally disinterred in 1840, by workmen digging a fresh grave in St Peter Mancroft, Norwich. The skull was removed, probably by the sexton, a cast was made, and it was sold to a local doctor. Willed to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital on his death in 1847, it remained on display in the hospital museum for the rest of the century, during which time it was visited by the physician William Osler. The Norwich surgeon Charles Williams measured the skull in 1894, noting: 'The forehead is remarkably low and depressed; the head unusually long, the back part exhibiting a singular appearance of depth and capaciousness'. Williams also photographed it around this time and made a fresh cast from the earlier one, which was presented to the Royal Society of Medicine on his death in 1907. In 1921, following repeated requests from the vicar of St Peter Mancroft, Browne's skull was returned to his grave.



## 'A cabinet of rarities': the curious collections of Sir Thomas Browne 30 January – 27 July 2017

### Curators

Dr Harriet Phillips, Dr Claire Bryony Williams, Beth Wilkey

### Contributors

Royal College of Physicians; Norfolk County Council; Cambridge University Library; Bodleian Libraries, Oxford; St Catharine's College, Cambridge; Grant Museum of Zoology, University College London; British Library; University of Oxford; Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford; Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum; Royal Society of Medicine; New York Public Library; Natural History Museum

With thanks to: Queen Mary University of London; Arts and Humanities Research Council

Free entry

Royal College of Physicians, 11 St Andrews Place, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE

Usual opening hours: Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm, please note that opening times may vary – check online before your visit.

@RCPmuseum #ThomasBrowne

Library, Archive and Museum Services  
Tel: +44 (0)20 3075 1543  
Email: [history@rcplondon.ac.uk](mailto:history@rcplondon.ac.uk)  
[www.rcplondon.ac.uk/thomasbrowne](http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/thomasbrowne)

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Location: 5-minute walk from Great Portland Street and Regent's Park underground stations; 10-minute walk from Warren Street underground station.

## 'A cabinet of rarities': the curious collections of Sir Thomas Browne 30 Jan – 27 Jul 2017

An exhibition exploring the extraordinary Sir Thomas Browne – collector of rarities, debunker of myths, and inspiration to writers and doctors alike.

Free entry



Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82) was a doctor, writer, collector and polymath with an insatiable curiosity. He lived through a century of political and intellectual revolutions, with his eyes and his mind wide open.

At his home in Norwich, Browne spent nearly 50 years observing his patients, his collections of plants and animals, and the world around him. He cultivated his garden, and transformed his home into a sprawling ‘cabinet of rarities’.

Browne’s extensive correspondence with his son Edward records his observations and experiments. Both were well travelled; Thomas offered advice on where Edward should visit and what he should do, while Edward returned stories and descriptions of places and things that he had seen.

Thomas Browne is perhaps best remembered for his writing. He had a gift for describing and explaining what he witnessed and learned. His most successful book, *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (1646), went through seven editions in Browne’s lifetime and was translated into five languages. Browne also made significant contributions to the developing vocabulary of science, coining words including ‘electricity’, ‘coma’ and ‘medical’.

[www.rcplondon.ac.uk/thomasbrowne](http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/thomasbrowne)

A team led by Professor Claire Preston at Queen Mary University of London are editing *The complete works of Sir Thomas Browne* for Oxford University Press, including for the first time all his letters and notebooks. It is our hope that, by bringing this exhibition to the Royal College of Physicians – where Thomas Browne was a fellow and where his son became president – Browne will be restored to the company of his peers, the ‘community in learning’ to which he wholeheartedly belonged.

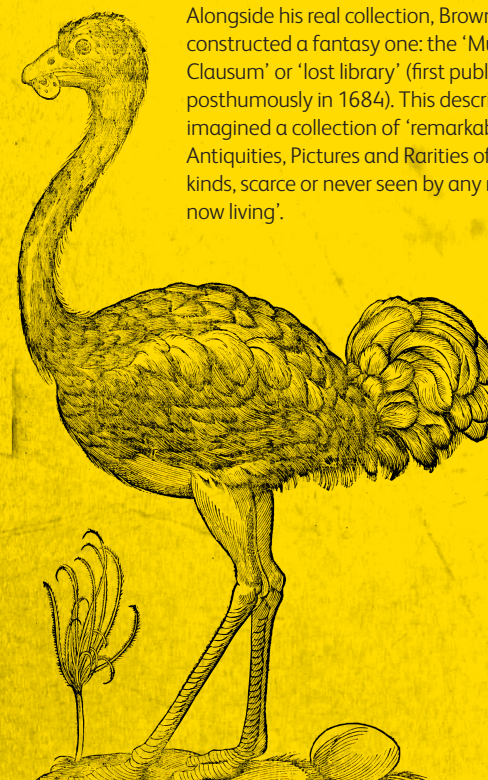


## Browne’s personalities

### Collector

Browne was a passionate collector. His home was filled with a wide variety of plant and animal life, as well as books and historical artefacts. He took a keen interest in an ostrich kept by his son Edward, and the two exchanged notes and drawings as they debated the best way to keep the bird alive through an English winter.

Browne’s vast and various collections were in constant flux, as objects and samples flew back and forth between fellow enthusiasts. Alongside his real collection, Browne constructed a fantasy one: the ‘Musæum Clausum’ or ‘lost library’ (first published posthumously in 1684). This description imagined a collection of ‘remarkable Books, Antiquities, Pictures and Rarities of several kinds, scarce or never seen by any man now living’.



### Physician

Browne received the best medical education of the age. He studied at Oxford, Montpellier, Padua and Leiden universities, where he absorbed the importance of empirical observation and experiment, and studied botany, dissection and the recent theories of the circulation of blood.

He developed a lifelong interest in culture and custom – observing that culinary and ritual habits varied across Europe – as well as a fascination with urine and diseases of the skin.

### Writer

Browne was catapulted to literary fame in his mid-thirties, when an unauthorised, pirated edition of his book *Religio medici* (‘The religion of a doctor’) was published in 1642.

Browne went on to write his widely successful myth-busting opus, *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (1646), as well as meditations on a range of topics, from death to gardening and the significance of the number 5. Other subjects that inspired his writing were the Anglo-Saxon language, burial mounds, falconry and cymbals.

In turn, Browne inspired many well-known literary figures. In the words of Virginia Woolf: ‘Few people love the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, but those who do are of the salt of the Earth’.

