

CELLAR WINES



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Historic blue plaque unveiled at Cellar Wines, Ripley, where pharmacist Kenneth White pioneered civilian use penicillin

Cellar Wines in Ripley played host last night to a memorable event which unveiled a prestigious, new blue plaque. Ripley Pharmacy on Ripley High Street, a former 15th century coaching inn, was bought by thirty-year-old chemist, Kenneth White, in 1943. It was here that White first made the wonder drug penicillin available to the public. The dispensary has had just four owners in 102 years, until it was bought by Cellar Wines in 2015.

The Mayor of Guildford, Councillor Gordon Jackson, unveiled the plaque, along with John Hutson, who had worked alongside White since 1944 and who continued to work at the pharmacy for fifty years. The event had a very good turnout, with guests including family members of Donald Green, who also worked with White.

Cellar Wines, an independent luxury brand provider, offering artisan spirits, boutique wines, a gourmet delicatessen and fantastic events, kindly sponsored the event. Cellar Wines were delighted to lay on a selection of their fine wines, cheeses and canapés from their delicatessen. The blue plaque now had pride of place on the wall outside the wine shop.

History behind White's achievements

Penicillin had been discovered in 1928 by Scottish scientist Alexander Fleming and the production of penicillin became a wartime priority but it was reserved exclusively for the Armed Forces: None was made available to the civilian population. For months, White had wondered what he could do to help the war effort. He followed the discovery of penicillin with interest and, not satisfied with the dictum "no penicillin for civilians," he resolved to do something about it. White's additional motivation to manufacture the drug came after he made a bet with a local doctor.

In a quiet back room of the now Grade II listed building, with its old-fashioned façade, timber frames and picturesque appearance, the ambitious young chemist defied the establishment to bring a medical revolution into the lives of ordinary people. To undertake the manufacture of penicillin, White needed a suitable strain of 'penicillium notatum'. He evidently did acquire one but how and when he did so remains unknown. In March

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1944, White wrote to the Ministry of Supply requesting a 'pure culture'. In July of the same year, he wrote to the National Collection of Type Cultures with a similar appeal: both requests were rejected. Apparently, an embargo had been placed on this particular culture to prevent scientists from other countries getting hold of it.

Apparently, White told a newspaper reporter that he had visited a large penicillin manufacturing facility and in all likelihood, he was secretly given a culture during his visit. In April 1944, using culture flasks, an ice-cream refrigerator borrowed from a local tea shop (after food rationing had rendered it redundant) and a great deal of resourcefulness and help from locals, White became the first civilian chemist to manufacture penicillin filtrate.

An article in The Daily Mirror, 3rd June 1944, reported:

Youthful, energetic, Mr. White leads a "double existence." In the day time he supplied the villagers with medicine; far into the night he worked in the dispensary at the rear of his shop to supply hospitals and doctors with free penicillin.

The early penicillin was not suitable for injecting so White made it into a cream. Perfecting his technique, by September 1946, White had acquired a special license to dispense penicillin injections. Supplies were soon available for local doctors, hospitals, nursing homes, veterinary surgeons and pharmacists.

Inevitably, the appearance of stories in the press about White's success with penicillin led to pleas from members of the public, desperate to obtain the powerful antibiotic for friends and relatives. His efforts are believed to have led to the treatment of a few score of patients and all the evidence suggests that he bore all the associated production costs himself and made no charge for the penicillin.

White's humanitarian spirit and Herculean efforts were also greeted with admiration by a number of drug houses. In recognition of his achievements, Glaxo Laboratories supplied him with growth medium in tablet form for cultivating penicillin. In February 1945, the Ministry of Supply sent White a coveted culture, a gesture tantamount to their bestowing official approval on his endeavours.

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White was continually attempting to improve his production facilities. White had attempted, without success, to obtain a licence under the terms of the Therapeutic Substances Act, 1925 to conduct research into penicillin. This was withheld during the war and finally granted in July 1948.

Working almost completely independently and unaffiliated to either a hospital, academic institution or research organisation, White succeeded in producing penicillin for the general public. Learning of the existence of a compound that had the power to alleviate human suffering, he determined to do what he could, with the limited resources available to him, to provide a much-needed antibiotic to as many people as possible. White continued making and supplying penicillin after the war had ended.



Cellar Wines:



The Old Cellar, High Street, Ripley, Surrey. GU23 6BB. UK

Open Tuesday to Saturday, 11am – 8pm

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