

## DR. JOHN COAKLEY LETTSOM (1744 - 1815)

John Coakley Lettsom was a quaker who was born in the Virgin Islands and came to England when he was six years old. He became an eminent physician and important philanthropist and reformer. Dr. Lettsom built a mansion, Grove Hill, in Camberwell, in which he lived with his family. Grove Hill had a museum, library and botanical garden as well as extensive formal gardens comprising around ten acres in all. Dr. Lettsom died in poverty because of a combination of his lavish spending (he imported vast quantities of exotic plants) and his generosity to all comers. Grove Hill was demolished about a hundred years ago, and the site, together with much of the original garden, now comprises Grove Park, a square with some 185 houses. A small parcel of the original gardens remains, Lettsom Gardens, which comprises about two acres. Lettsom Gardens is now owned by Southwark Council, and managed by the Lettsom Gardens Association, a committee of local residents.

The following points are particularly noteworthy:-

### *"Dr. Lettsom was one of the great pioneers of medical science"*

- ◆ He founded the Medical Society in London with the aim of improving standards of medical practice by organising meetings, lectures and reading facilities. The Society still exists today in Lettsom House, London W1 with the aim of promoting excellence in medical practice.
- ◆ Dr. Lettsom devised the first successful method of preventing the spread of typhus.
- ◆ He was one of the first physicians to accept Edward Jenner's inoculation against smallpox, in the face of great opposition, and he became an ardent advocate.
- ◆ Dr. Lettsom was involved in the foundation of the Royal Humane Society in 1774 to promote the practice of resuscitation. The methods used are similar to those used today.

### *"The name of Dr. Lettsom was found to be associated with every project for the public good"*

- ◆ In 1791, Dr. Lettsom founded the Sea Bathing Infirmary in Margate. Sea bathing was a fashionable cure at the time, and Dr. Lettsom was concerned that it should be available to the poor. The existence of this infirmary led to the creation of the first open air sanatorium.
- ◆ Dr. Lettsom founded the Aldersgate or General Dispensary to treat paupers both at its premises and at home - he was one of the first physicians to treat the poor at their homes. He devised a scheme for teaching on the dispensary out patients, much the same as that in use today. Dr. Lettsom also became the only doctor to treat the inmates of the debtors' prison in Wood Street.

### *"Dr. Lettsom was a leading horticulturist"*

- ◆ Dr. Lettsom imported many exotic species from around the world to his gardens, some of which are still standing, along with the descendants of others, in Lettsom Gardens today.
- ◆ Dr. Lettsom was instrumental in the introduction of the mangel-wurzel. He grew the seed himself and distributed large quantities to farmers both in England and abroad.