

Alexander Fleming

(1881 – 1955)

Alexander Fleming was born on 6th August 1881 near Darvel, Ayrshire and grew up on a farm. He moved to London when he was 13 and worked for a shipping company. In 1903, Fleming went to study medicine at St Mary's hospital. He later became a bacteriologist; someone who studies simple, tiny living cells called bacteria.

Some bacteria help us stay healthy, but some bacteria can also cause infection and disease. In France during the First World War, Fleming saw many soldiers die from infected wounds. As a result, he wanted to do more medical research to try to find antibacterial treatments.

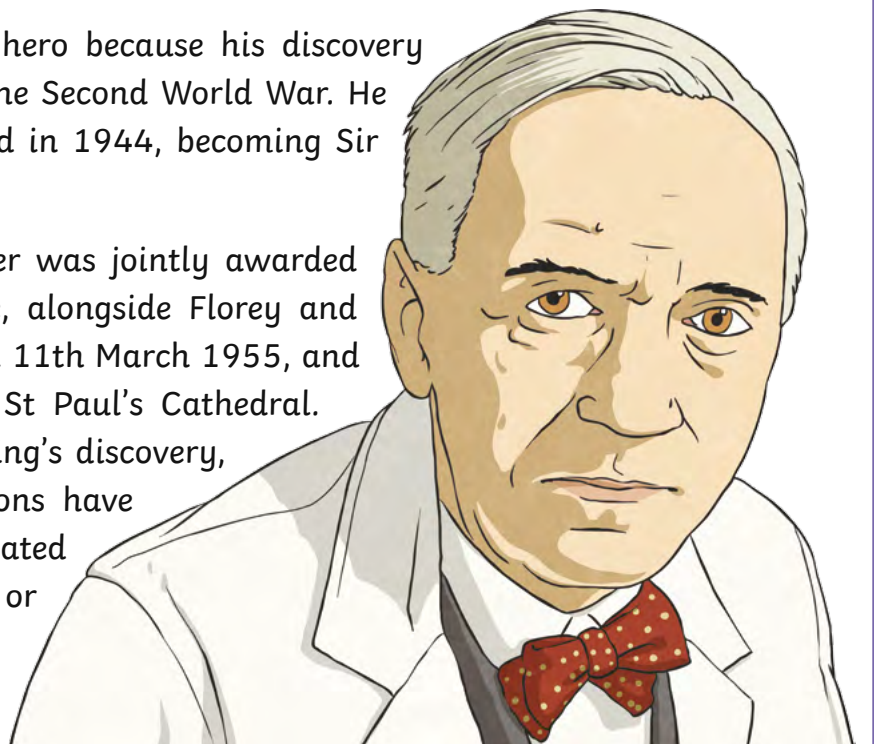
In August 1928, Fleming left a jar of mould in his laboratory before he went on holiday. He noticed that bacteria, which was a green-yellow colour, had covered the entire jar except for one area which remained clear. This was Fleming's breakthrough; the moment he realized that some antibacterial agent had stopped the bacteria growing. He later identified this antibacterial agent as a form of penicillin.

In 1939, two scientists, Howard Florey and Ernst Chain, investigated how to reproduce Fleming's penicillin. Their work meant that penicillin could go on to be produced in large amounts and enabled the first ever antibiotics to be made. Infections such as meningitis and scarlet fever could now be treated and many bacterial infections were eliminated.

Fleming was hailed as a hero because his discovery saved many lives during the Second World War. He was awarded a knighthood in 1944, becoming Sir Alexander Fleming.

For his work, Sir Alexander was jointly awarded a Nobel Prize in Medicine, alongside Florey and Chain, in 1945. He died on 11th March 1955, and his ashes were placed in St Paul's Cathedral.

Thanks to Alexander Fleming's discovery, some diseases and infections have been successfully treated for almost 80 years, or completely eliminated.



6. Who continued Fleming's work on penicillin?

7. From their work on penicillin, what could now be produced?

8. Why was Alexander Fleming's work so important in the past and today?