

“Westminster Hospital 1719-1948”*

By John Langdon-Davies.

WE HAVE BEFORE US a book of some 274 pages recording the history of the Westminster Hospital from which we learn that in January, 1716, four men sat down in St. Dunstan's Coffee-house to discuss their concern over the sick poor of Westminster: Henry Hoare (whose picture appears in the early pages of the book), William Wogan, Robert Witham and Patrick Cockburn; but the author does not wish his readers to think that this discussion led to what, to-day, we call a hospital. A hundred years had to elapse before sufficient technical knowledge could provide a centre for scientific healing; but the four friends launched an appeal for funds to start their new venture, and their good works commenced only to find that in April, 1716, the funds were exhausted.

By December, 1719, further sums had been subscribed and Dr. Alexander Stewart (or Stuart) having undertaken to be physician to the Infirmary, a Mrs. Jane Alden was engaged as Matron at £6 a year. The next move was to find a house suitable for their requirements, and after meeting certain disappointments, a house was found in Petty France, previously occupied by a tallow chandler, at a rental of £22 per annum.

From that small beginning, through extracts from the early Minutes, we learn of the hospital's first patients and the equipment gradually procured. In June, 1720, Dr. Stewart set out to buy a Bath Tub at the cost of four guineas!

After two months' work there had been 30 cases—15 in-patients and 15 out-patients. Nine had been cured (six suffering from ague, two of obstruction, and one of scurvy); one died, two were discharged incurable, suffering from asthma and dropsy; 12 were still in the Infirmary suffering from sciatica, scurvy, palsy, hysterical colic, scorbutic rheumatism, strain, carious bone in knee, dropsy, ague, a degree of leprosy, a scrophulous case, evil in the head and consumption, and one old woman of 80 had died with St. Anthony's Fire.

One reads entranced of the early struggles of the hospital, and of the rules drawn up for the easier running of the institution.

By 1733, the Charitable Society responsible for the hospital split in two, and St. George's Hospital sprang from the body of Westminster with a large proportion of the subscribers and entire medical staff; the old Westminster Hospital had the task of building up again in newly acquired premises in Buckingham Gate.

Sir John Colbatch was the first physician to offer his services to the new hospital, and it is assumed that the treatment given to patients in the hospital was somewhat like this:—

“Take an ounce of Jesuit's Bark finely powdered the Common Green Copperis and Jamaica pepper of each of these a Quarter of an Ounce. Bruise the Copperis and powder the pepper—then mix it well together in four ounces of Mollasses—and let it be took in the following manner. The Quantity of a Nuttmeg for a Man or Woman—and a Haisell Nutt for any Child—3 times a Day—but be sure let the fitt be off, when taken, otherwise it will do no good, drinking always after such a dose a large Cup of White Wine or Ale—half of this Quantity generally cures which must be taken—the Whole has always found Infallible, if the Stomach is thought to be foul, a Gentle Vomit overnight is Advisable and to begin the Medicine next Morning—

“This was Sir John Colbatch's precept and by God's blessing has had most wonderfull success.

“Note the patient must take care of cold to soon.”

With the author, we too, find it hard to think of Westminster as an isolated marsh amidst the undomesticated river; it is equally hard to picture its inhabitants in their

daily lives 200 or even 100 years ago. One word sums up the life of nine out of every ten people who clustered in the ever-growing clots of human existence in the narrow alleys, the rotting mansions, the hovels on the wharves, and that word is Filth. Everything in connection with their daily life was filthy.

We go on to learn of the great use of gin as a way of escape into a better dream world. Beer was also largely consumed tea and coffee being too dear to buy.

Three pints of beer a day was the ration for Westminster Hospital patients of either sex during the eighteenth century.

In 1741, Roman Catholics were excluded in all circumstances from the Establishment of Incurables, and none was employed as servants, and no priest might visit the wards.

In 1834, Mr. George James Guthrie put before the Westminster Hospital Board a proposal for founding a Medical School to be run in connection with the Hospital, but the plan was defeated, and so no Medical School was attached to the building in Broad Sanctuary, but in 1840, the first steps were taken which were eventually to lead to the foundation of the Westminster Hospital School of Medicine.

Most interesting photos appear throughout the book, one particularly attractive being nurses in uniform 1879 and 1952.

In 1874, a start was made to establish a Training School to improve the quality of the Trained Nurses, and a permanent establishment of seven Day Ward Sisters and 12 Day Nurses, one Night Superintending Sister, and six Night Nurses was to be provided, and up to 25 probationers to be accepted.

The medical staff gave their instruction for the care of the patients to the Ward Sister and the Lady Superintendent was responsible for such directions to be strictly carried out.

Time went on, and the hospital became too small for the amount of work it was now able to carry out and so in 1935 the President, the Prince of Wales (now the Duke of Windsor) laid the foundation stone of the new Hospital, which we all know is situate overlooking St. John's Gardens.

For many years Sir Bernard Docker was the most generous Chairman of the Board of Governors, and is affectionately referred to as the Second Founder of the Hospital, but with the advent of the National Health Services Act he ceased to act in that capacity.

The author proudly refers to the Surgeon and members of the Medical and Nursing Staffs for the services rendered to his late Majesty, King George VI, and also refers to the Outline of the Hospital's History written by Mr. Walter G. Spencer, Surgeon and Consulting Surgeon to the Hospital from 1887—1940, whose charming wife, until the time of her death, was a forceful supporter of Ethel Gordon Fenwick's pioneer work for State Registration of Nurses.

Nurse pioneers could always be sure of a welcome in their lovely house in Portland Place.

A very admirable book with charming illustrations and excellent print, but we feel we must pause to refer to the actual facts in relation to the triumph of the passing of the Act for the State Registration of Nurses.

The author writes:—

“It was during the difficult years when Westminster Hospital seemed to be experiencing an irresolvable crisis that the Nursing Profession grew to maturity. In 1916 when the Clapham controversy was at its height, the College of Nursing was founded and, largely through its efforts, the Nurses' Registration Act of 1919 ended a 30 years' struggle to make nursing a public profession.”

Concerning the movement for the State Registration of Nurses, does the author realise that the pioneer of that movement, Ethel Gordon Fenwick and her band of pioneer colleagues, had worked for over 30 years in this cause when the College of Nursing was formed, and at that time it seemed inevitable that State Registration of Nurses must come?

* John Murray, Albemarle Street, London, W. Price 21/-.

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