

History of Manchester Medical Society

In 1834, when the Manchester Medical Society came into being, there had already been 2 major revolutions in Europe, one of the French social system and one of English Industry which had included the development of steam, communication and canals. Even then there were concerns about patents that might well apply today in genetics:

“The time may come when nothing will succeed, But what a previous patent hath decreed, And we must open on some future day, The door of nature with a patent key”

From the England of Jane Austin to the England of Railways and Free Trade, the changes in society were huge. Cultural initiatives of the late 18th century had included, for example, the formation of the Manchester Lit & Phil Society in 1781. Thirteen of the Society’s 24 founders were medical men. For a physician to discourse on literature and philosophy was regarded a necessary professional accomplishment. In a previous century Gilbert, Queen Elizabeth I physician, had said “I look forward to the day when a physician without mathematics will seem as incongruous an idea as that of an educated man without Latin and Greek”. It might be now that “A physician without a computer will soon be as rare a phenomenon as one with a knowledge of Latin and Greek!” In the so called Age of Improvement or Enlightenment it was also quite common for medical men to discuss their patients in public and of the first 55 papers read before the Lit and Phil, 23 were medical.

The period 1830-1834 was momentous both nationally and locally. On Sep 15 1830 the first passenger railway, from Liverpool to Manchester, was opened in the presence of the Duke of Wellington and thousands of spectators. The Rt Hon William Huskisson, MP, former member of the Cabinet, made the fatal mistake of stepping down from his carriage during a temporary halt at Newton le Willows and was run over by Stephenson’s Rocket – an incident which cast rather a gloom on the festivities. Despite the attentions of Mr John Atkinson Ransome, Consultant Surgeon at the MRI, the patient died of his injuries. There were 3 generations of medical Ransomes, John Atkinson Ransome was one of the first Vice Presidents of the Medical Society, Joseph, his son, was a member of Council and Arthur, his grandson, President in 1876, John Atkinson, the grandfather was, incidentally, the great grandfather of J Arthur Ransome, the author of Swallows and Amazons.

1831 had seen the Reform Bill and the great cholera epidemic. In 1834, the year the Manchester Medical Society came into being, the Tolpuddle Martyrs were arrested for trying to establish an agricultural union and transported to Australia. The medical profession was not organized, not even in fact, defined. There was no distinction between the reputable practitioner and the quack until the Medical Act of 1858. Hospitals were then places of danger – it was safer to stay outside. Any fall in the death rate was probably due to improvements in hygiene and the environment. Out patient waiting lists were long – nothing new there then – and doctors were usually guided by their nose, it was said, rather than their scientific knowledge. John Wesley was probably right when he said “Cleanliness is next to Godliness”.

Education was inadequate though public libraries and book clubs were important for those who could read. Large private collections were status symbols. Yet in 1834 a third of

Manchester children had no schooling and for the majority of those who were able to attend “Dame” schools, which anyone could open, there was very little education. Dickens described them well. One of the schools in Manchester was kept by a blind man who heard his scholars read their lessons but was liable to interruption because his wife kept a mangle that he was obliged to turn! In the same year a Manchester doctor, with the unlikely Dickensian name of Grindrod, began a Juvenile Temperance Society and riots were recorded between Orange men and Catholics – nothing new there then either!

So it was against a background of public unrest, a recognition that education for both the masses and for the elite was important together with a medical profession desperately trying to organize itself, that the Manchester Medical Society came into being in 1834 – the same year, incidentally, in which Blondin the tightrope walker who later crossed the Niagara Falls, was appearing, aged 10, as the “The Little Wonder”. The juxtaposition of the 2 events is perhaps not inappropriate since the finances of the Medical Society have been a balancing act ever since!

A public meeting was held in the billiard room of the York Hotel in King Street on January 29th 1834, to form an Association, a Library and a reading room for doctors residing in the North West of England. Joseph Catlow, a general practitioner and John Walker, a surgeon in the Eye Hospital had lobbied 150 doctors with 230 direct calls, sometimes 2-3 times a day – no telephones then. The response had been mixed;

**“Dr Alexander will join if Dr Holmes does
Dr Holmes will have nothing to do with it.
Dr McGregor declined as he was not in the habit of
reading – except newspapers.
Dr White had gone to bed”**

76 gentlemen, who had signed a pledge to pay 2 guineas entrance fee and an annual subscription of 1 guinea, eventually attended and the Manchester Medical Society was founded with the Library as the core of its activities.

An arrangement was made with a Mr Boond to rent a room at 40 Faulkner Street, now covered by Piccadilly Gardens at a rent of £30.00 per year and Mrs Boond was appointed Librarian at £5.00 per year. On the 1st of October 1834 the first formal meeting was held. Dr John Hull, an obstetrician aged 73, and worryingly, for some of us at that age Mr President, referred to as “venerable” or “ripe”, was elected the first President. Earlier he had been President of the Lit & Phil. Originally apprenticed to a GP in Blackburn, Hull had completed his medical studies by cunningly selling his lecture notes to a wealthier student. The notes, incidentally, have been preserved in 12 quarto volumes in the Medical Library. Dr Hull, an obstetrician, was also a botanist and had published the definitive work on British flora in 1799. Interestingly a Dr Hull is mentioned in Mrs Linnaeus Banks’ novel “The Manchester Man” – but not as an obstetrician. That role in the novel is reserved for a Dr John Windsor, in real life a surgeon who introduced the stethoscope to Manchester and was President of the Society on 1859.

In 1835, 1 Year after the formation of the Medical Society, elaborate Articles of Agreement were drawn up to prevent its dissolution within 999 years and also – not surprisingly – to prevent hacks from the daily press attending meetings. On one occasion it had been reported, a frog alleged to have been passed per anum by a patient was exhibited though happily it had

been concluded by those present that the said frog probably had had prior claim to the occupation of the bedroom receptacle in which it was found.

The President in 1843 was William James Wilson, who was instrumental in founding the Eye Hospital and it was to him that Charlotte Bronte brought her father in 1846 to be operated on for cataract. Wilson, who was small, said "If the patient is tall I raise myself by standing on a book or two. In my own place I find old medical files serve the purpose very well".

To improve its accommodation the Society, including the Library, moved in 1845 to 2 rooms in the Royal Institution, now the Art Gallery, on Mosley Street, at an annual rent of £35.00. The Institution itself had been designed to spread scientific knowledge to the working man. After 9 years, 1854, notice was served on the Society to quit but there were no funds available for a move. Samuel Crompton, a Salford physician, saved the day and negotiated that the Society should become the Medical Section of the Institution and the Library should be handed over in Trust to the Institution and then, if necessary, to Chetham's Library. By 1856 the Society had plumbed the depths. Income was £26.15.6d and debts were £60.00. Only 6-9 members were attending the meetings. In 1859 an appeal to the general public for the preservation of the Library was raised but, it was recorded, "not one obolus, not one poor little duodecimo was received". When fortunes did eventually improve, the Library collection was completely reorganized and expanded by Thomas Windsor, son of the John Windsor I mentioned earlier. Thomas Windsor, an ophthalmic surgeon, was Honorary Librarian of the Society for 25 years from 1858-88 and President in 1866. He was a man devoted to books and literature. In a period of 8 years during his Librarianship, he increased the number of books from 2000 to over 12,000 at an average cost of 2/2d per volume and added 2000 volumes of his own. I recently bought a first edition of the Manchester Man previously owned by Thomas Windsor and containing a hand written letter to him from Mrs Linnaeus Banks making reference to Dr Hull's botanical work.

In 1872 when the Medical School amalgamated with Owens College and moved from Quay Street to Oxford Road, accommodation for the Medical Library was found in the Coupland Street Medical School. The move was effected largely through the initiative and enthusiasm of Thomas Windsor. There had, however, always been a subcurrent of criticism for his predilection for "old" books as opposed to "new" research books and trouble finally arose over the construction of open archways between the Library and the student's reading room. Windsor, who didn't like the open archways but did like his own way, resigned in protest, withdrew from medical practice before he was 50, and transferred his book buying skills and interests to the US Surgeon General's Library in Washington. Thomas Windsor's collection of "old" books and incunabula is now, of course, the envy of many libraries and contains books and manuscripts of the greatest value to both research worker and historian. The earliest dated work is 1480. Of special local interest is a book entitled "The Haven of Health" by Thomas Cogan, a practicing physician who was also High Master of MGS. Cogan evidently had an unusually good opinion of his pupils and left 4d to each of them in his will. Thomas Windsor died a bachelor in 1910 and instructed his executors to spend as little as possible on his funeral and invite no-one to it.

The first note in the Minutes about the admission of women as members occurs in 1884 with a request from Anna Dahms, the first woman to practice in Manchester, to use the Library. She was refused on the grounds that the Committee had no powers to grant such permission. An application by the second medical woman in Manchester, Helene Goldberg, was also refused in 1891. It was not until women were actually admitted as medical students in 1898

that the matter was seriously discussed. Even Catherine Chisholm, the first female medical student in Manchester was not allowed to use the Library until 1904!

In January 1900, Owens College had given notice to terminate the existing agreement because, surprisingly, the Society was in credit but, after some financial negotiation, an agreement was finally reached. Owens College became the University of Manchester in 1904. The Medical Society agreed then to donate 70% of its income to the Library and the University agreed to pay £200.00 per year, later increased to £500.00 in 1920, for the purchase of books provided they remained the property of the University. Finally, in 1930, the Medical Library was formally handed over to the University with certain financial provisions and an agreement that the Library would be managed by a University committee containing 3 representatives of the Society. This became the Faculty Library Committee.

Ernest Bosdin Leech, was President of the Society in its Centenary year 1934. He founded the Manchester Medical Collection – a unique archive of Manchester medical books and manuscripts, later added to by EM Brockbank (President in 1923). Bosdin Leech presented the Presidential badge. His uncle, Daniel, a descendant of John the Leech, doctor to the Black Prince, had been President in the Society's 50th year and John the Leech's Coat of Arms is incorporated in the badge. It was also due to Bosdin Leech's efforts that the name of one Job Hindley was perpetuated on the door of the old M3F ward in the MRI. Job Hindley was a working man who had lost his right hand at work in 1826 and walked to the Infirmary for treatment. He subsequently amassed, in the humble occupation of tripe-dresser, modest sum from which the Infirmary benefited – the grateful appreciation of a working man for services rendered. The Centenary meeting in 1934 concluded with a dinner at the Midland Hotel. The then youthful BBC had allocated 15 minutes of precious wireless time for the toast to the Medical Society. The speaker, Lord Crawford, managed it in 2 (!), much to the consternation of the BBC. Albert Ramsbottom, Professor of Medicine, whose motto was "Never let medicine get the upper hand of you", was persuaded to put his head, as it were, in the lion's mouth, and stand in for the remaining 13 minutes. Ramsbottom, a Lancastrian by name and by action, was President in 1929.

In 1950 the Society was reorganized by amalgamation of its 5 foundation sections, Medicine, Surgery, Pathology, Anaesthetics and Odontology. Wilson Hey was President that year but the final outcome of the arrangements at the Inaugural meeting attended by over 300 Fellows, the Lord Mayor, the Vice Chancellor and the Presidents of the RSM and the Royal College of Surgeons was due largely to the efforts of William Brockbank, son of EM Brockbank and President himself in 1955. Both were great supporters of the Medical Society and William remained Honorary Archivist long after his retirement.

The extended University Arts Library merged with the John Rylands Library, Deansgate in 1972. The early medical books and manuscripts were housed there in 1976 and the 19th century collection moved to the basement of the University Library in 1977. By 1981 all the medical books, apart from those in the Stopford building, which opened in 1973, had been moved into the new University Library and the old Library in the Coupland Street building was finally closed. The John Rylands University Library was officially opened in 1982 by HM the Queen. The incorporation of the Medical Library had not been universally popular – many missed the old self contained atmosphere and the dedicated staff. In 1982, however, the Society moved into a suite of rooms in the main Library building, a fair exchange it was thought by most Fellows, for the single room in the old Medical School.

A generous bequest of £55,000 in 1963 by Professor Telford, President in 1932, changed the fortunes of the Society despite the vicissitudes of more recent years. An annual Telford Lecture was established from the interest and the capital placed in the hands of 3 capable Trustees.

To establish and sustain a Society for over 175 years needs individuals with enthusiasm, sincerity, a sense of vision and tradition and not a little of good public relations. The Reverend Sydney Smith was once heard to conclude his evening prayers with the words “Now Lord I’ll tell you an anecdote”. There have been many eminent men and women associated with the Manchester Medical Society. Johann Sebastian Bach Stopford, the only President and Vice Chancellor who couldn’t read a note of music. He used to say that he only knew it was the national anthem when everyone stood up! Geoffrey Jefferson whose pocket watch, it was rumoured, only registered days and weeks. Wilson Hey, declared by himself as the last of the surgeon princes, (though some might dispute that) boarding the 42 bus outside the MRI in his surgical gown to operate at the Christie. John Wilkinson whose service to the Medical Society extended over 60 years until he died at the age of 101. He never tied a knot in his tie, he claimed so it wouldn’t wear out. Fergus Robert Ferguson, removing a policeman’s helmet in Piccadilly and attending Court in anonymity as Robert Ferguson. Poole Wilson, the imperious GU Surgeon, “Crystal clear Sister”. Eric Gray, Sam Oleesky, the quintessential general physican, always with a penetrating question from a deceptively somnolent position. Peter and Judith Adams, the only married Presidents – Judith indeed only the second woman, after Catherine Chisholm, to occupy the Presidency. That was until October 2014 when Professor Jenny Shaw become the third female President of the Society.