

The foundation of Westminster Hospital, the first voluntary hospital in London

For centuries, only two hospitals existed in London to give succour to the poor sick of the metropolis – St Bartholomew's in Smithfield and St Thomas's in Southwark. Both were monastic foundations. This year marks the 300th anniversary of the foundation of the first voluntary hospital in London, Westminster Hospital, in 1719. The event is to be celebrated by a memorial service in Westminster Abbey on 23 May.

At the beginning of the 18th century, London was rapidly growing, with a population of about 674 000 people. The expansion was especially to the north of the town. Westminster's crowded streets were clustered around the Abbey and the old Palace of Westminster. The western boundary of London was marked by Horseferry Road, which led from the north down to the horseferry, the first crossing of the Thames beyond the old London bridge.

The citizens of Westminster for the most part lived in crowded conditions in tenements on either side of narrow streets. The ground was low-lying and subject to frequent flooding from the overflowing Thames. The area was notorious for the infective fevers – including malaria, typhoid and typhus. The crowded buildings were noted for tuberculosis in all its manifestations. To help deal with the many sick poor of Westminster, four charitable men met at St Dunstan's coffee house on Fleet Street in July 1716 – the Reverend Cockbull, a local cleric, a Mr Witham, a tavern keeper, Mr William Wogan, a writer, and Mr Henry Hoare, a banker, whose father had established Hoare's Bank. These men set out to collect money to relieve the sick poor of Westminster.

At a historic meeting of the now enlarged committee on 16 December

1719, a subscription list was drawn up 'for procuring, furnishing and defraying the necessary expenses of an Infirmary', and a matron was appointed. The first physician had already been named, a Dr Alexander Stuart, a graduate of Leiden University, who had spent some time as a naval surgeon. A house in Petty France was leased in March 1720 at a rent of £22 per annum and a sign affixed, which read: 'Infirmary for the Sick and Needy'.

The first patient to be admitted, on 12 May, was a man suffering from 'evil in the joints and scurvy'. He was discharged on 8 June and 'returned thanks to the Society for his cure'. No doubt Dr Stuart's sea-faring experience played a part in this successful outcome.

In 1724, the first consultant surgeons were appointed: William Cheselden, famous for his skill as a lithotomist, Claudius Amyand, serjeant surgeon to King George I, and John Douglas, who was to introduce the suprapubic operation for bladder stones. In that year, the hospital had the second of its six moves, this time to Chapel Street, today the site of New Scotland Yard. In 1733 came a crisis; a majority of the medical staff decided to move to a more salubrious (and decidedly wealthier) site, a house at Hyde Park Corner – and founded St George's Hospital.

Two years later, in 1735, the remaining staff transferred the site of Westminster Hospital (its title now changed from 'Infirmary') to Castle Lane, at the corner of Buckingham Gate, and it was to remain here for a century.

In 1834 came the fourth move, to a prestigious site, with 106 beds for in-patients, at Broad Sanctuary, immediately opposite to Westminster Abbey. It has now been replaced by the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. It was the first Westminster Hospital building to be built from scratch as a hospital.

What of the teaching of medical students? At Westminster, in 1737, three 'cubs', as medical students were then called,

were allowed to each surgeon, and these numbers gradually increased. The students received much of their teaching from private medical schools run by the consultant staff. Human dissection was carried out at these schools and this was confined to the winter months; the rapid putrefaction of the cadavers in the summer heat made dissection too dangerous. A trivial cut while dissecting might lead to serious infection or even death.

In 1840 the Board of Governors resolved that 'The Institution should have a School of Medicine attached to it under the name of the Westminster School of Medicine' and 30 students were enrolled for the 1849 session.

In 1885, the school moved to a custom-built accommodation in Caxton Street, and here it was to remain until the next move in 1938.

By the 1920s it was obvious that the further expansion needed could not take place on its present site and in 1933 a new site became available on either side of St. John's Gardens in Horseferry Road – once the western boundary of London at the time of the first Westminster Hospital.

The splendid new hospital, medical school and nurses home was opened by King George VI on 20 April 1939.

Within months, World War II broke out; the new hospital passed through its baptism of fire, being damaged by bombs and a V1 rocket on several occasions, as well as playing a vital part, with the other major London hospitals, in dealing with the heavy casualties of the Blitz.

The last move came in 1989. St Steven's Hospital in Chelsea had been pulled down and a splendid new hospital and clinical school erected. The old Westminster Hospital and School are now luxury apartments. 1989 corresponded with my own retirement from the staff as Professor of Surgery, so I never had the pleasure of working on the final site of this splendid old medical institution. [BJHM](#)

Conflict of interest: none.

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