

Richard Wiseman: the best known English surgeon of the 17th century

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of Richard Wiseman, acknowledged to be the best known surgeon in this country in the 17th century. His authorship of the surgical textbook *Several Chirurgical Treatises* gave him the well-deserved reputation for being regarded as the father of English surgery.

Surprisingly little is known about Richard Wiseman's background and birth. There is a record in the church register of St. Andrew Undershaft, London, of a Richard Wiseman, son of Thomas and Elizabeth Wiseman, being christened on 31 December 1620.

Nothing is recorded concerning his childhood and early education, but Wiseman's subsequent writings reveal that he was well taught and was fluent in Latin. In fact, all potential surgeons were examined in their knowledge of Latin before starting their professional studies.

The first evidence of Wiseman's training as a surgeon appears in 1637, when Wiseman, aged 17 years, was apprenticed by the Company of Barber Surgeons to a Richard Smith, surgeon of Little Britain, near St. Bartholomew's Hospital, for a period of 7 years. This was completed in 1644, 2 years after the Civil War had broken out between King Charles I and the parliamentary forces. In 1641, Richard Smith joined the King's service as surgeon in the north of England and was probably accompanied by his apprentice. This would account for Wiseman joining the Royalist cause during the Civil War.

By 1645, Wiseman was serving as a surgeon to the Royalist forces, and we know from his textbook that he had considerable experience of treating soldiers with combat injuries during this time.

In February 1646, Wiseman accompanied Charles, Prince of Wales, as surgeon, as the Prince escaped to the Scilly Isles, then to Jersey, then France and then to Scotland, where Charles was proclaimed King after the execution of his father. The Royalists were finally defeated by Oliver Cromwell at the Battle of Worcester in 1651.

Charles made his escape to France and exile, but Wiseman was captured and transferred to prison in Chester. Even in prison, Wiseman continued to treat the wounded of both sides of the conflict. After a few months, Wiseman was freed, made his way to London and, in 1652, received the Freedom of the Company of Barber Surgeons and a license to practice, setting up as a surgeon at the Old Bailey.

Between 1654 and 1657, he became a surgeon in the Spanish navy, serving in Spain and the West Indies. Returning home, he set up in surgical practice in King's Street, Covent Garden, then regarded as the centre of the medical establishment. Although never appointed to the staff of a hospital, he was consulted widely by the leading physicians and surgeons of the day.

After the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, the monarchy was soon restored. In May 1660, Charles II entered London and, the following month, appointed Wiseman as his Surgeon in Ordinary. The following year Wiseman was promoted to King's Surgeon, with a salary of 40 pounds per annum.

In 1663, Wiseman was admitted to the Court of Assistants of the Company of Barber Surgeons and then, in 1665 he was elected Master of the Company.

In 1676, Richard Wiseman published his major work, the *Several Chirurgical Treatises*. In the introduction, he stated that his book 'is not for the old practitioners but for the young men who have their principles and maxims of chirurgery yet to choose.'

The treatises comprise tumours, ulcers, diseases of the anus, gunshot wounds, fractures and venereal diseases. Sadly, there are no illustrations. In each section, Wiseman discusses anatomy, pathology, aetiology, diagnosis, prognosis and management. He then records his

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How to cite this article:

Ellis H. Richard Wiseman: the best known English surgeon of the 17th century. *Br J Hosp Med*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.12968/hmed.2020.0386>

own observations, of which there are over 600 cases from his vast civilian and military practice. The book runs to 577 pages.

Shortly after the publication of his book, Wiseman's health rapidly deteriorated. In July of that same year he wrote his will and travelled to Bath for treatment and to take the waters. On 20 August he died suddenly and was buried at St. Paul's, Covent Garden, next to the grave of his wife.

Richard Wiseman is rightly regarded as the father of British surgery. His career spanned the period of change from surgeons trained in military practice to those brought up in civilian life, with formal lectures, dissection and clinical apprenticeship.

His *Several Chirurgical Treatises* was the first English surgical textbook of its kind, documenting 600 case reports and including failures as well as successes. Wiseman's book was still on sale, unrevised, 70 years after its first publication and the death of its author. The book also marks an epoch in British surgery, between the days of the Elizabethan surgery and the dawn of modern scientific surgery, as represented, in particular, in the practice and writings of William Cheselden and Percival Pott.

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