

BRITISH JOURNAL OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

Editorial

Sir William Bowman – 1816–1892

Sir William Bowman, 'the founder of British ophthalmology,' died on 29 March, 1892. Centenaries are admirable incentives to reflect on our famous forebears, to pay them homage, to allow our current struggles to recede into the perspective of time, and to let us indulge in a little humility while glowing in the awareness that we are all leaves on that ever-expanding tree of knowledge which was planted in the wasteland, somewhere to the east of Eden.

William was the third son of a Cheshire banker cum naturalist; he was fortunate to have been born in the year after Waterloo, when the uncertainties and travails of the long war could be forgotten; England was confident, powerful and buoyant, with pent-up energies, which erupted in every sphere. In young William's case the early desire to experiment led to a gunpowder explosion, which called for treatment by Joseph Hodgson (later president of the Royal College of Surgeons and founder of the Birmingham Eye Hospital). William was so inspired by this encounter that, at the age of 16, he enlisted as Hodgson's apprentice.

After working in Birmingham, he graduated to London, as demonstrator in anatomy, at King's College, taking advantage of a new microscope (the reward for his exact calibration of the cardiac orifices) to unravel the intricacies of human histology. These had to be gleaned from teased-out tissues, as seen by reflected light, since stained sections were not yet available. Thence followed a stream of publications, which also led him to a fellowship of the Royal Society at the age of 25, and of the Royal College of Surgeons three years later, and which have left his name as the label for various micro-anatomical structures and surgical instruments.

By the age of 30 he was elected to the staff of Moorfields, as one of the first British surgeons to devote his life to ophthalmology, and the first in England to make use of the ophthalmoscope which had been invented in 1847 by Charles

Babbage (the bicentenary of whose birth also falls this year); albeit this device was largely neglected until taken up by Helmholtz in 1851. It was during this year that he met, at the Great Exhibition in London, Von Graefe and Donders, who remained his close friends for the rest of their lives. Indeed, he was the first in England to perform the iridectomy for glaucoma, which Graefe had just proposed. Soon afterwards Florence Nightingale became his collaborator and lifelong correspondent, and he was able to keep her supplied with trained nurses during the Crimean Campaign.



Photograph kindly supplied by Moorfields Eye Hospital.

In 1880, as the established authority in England, he founded the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom, the rebus of his name appropriately crowning the coat-of-arms that was later granted to the Society, and thence to its successor, the College of Ophthalmologists, in the form of a symbolic archer. Each year his prowess is recalled in the tributes of successive speakers in the annual lectures that bear his name.

His life appears to have been unblemished, and sustained by a devout Christian assurance, which was shared by his large, supportive family, as were his wider interests in nature and in art. He was modest and abstemious, gentle and thoughtful in manner, quickly seizing the salient points of every case, yet very reserved, giving his opinion in a few decisive words; and he was meticulous in the work to which his life was dedicated. No clouds or disputes seem to have troubled his last years. He died in his home, near Dorking, and was buried in the neighbouring church of Holmbury St Mary, honoured by the whole world of ophthalmology, and an example to us all.

The details of his life and achievements are recorded in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supp 1, and were well described by Frank Law in the *Survey of Ophthalmology* (1975; 19: 302). Two engaging memoirs can also be found in Norman Ashton's Bowman Lecture, and his Presidential Address to the Society (*Trans Ophthalmol Soc UK* 1965; 85: 199 and 1980; 100: 1), with echoes of his boyhood, and reproductions of the elegant micro-anatomical sketches which Ashton had unearthed from the Moorfields records.

PATRICK TREVOR-ROPER