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History of ophthalmology

Dawbeney Turberville – a seventeenth century ophthalmologist

Next year will see the tercentenary of the death of Dawbeney Turberville, one of the earliest documented English ophthalmologists. The epitaph on his tomb in Salisbury Cathedral states 'He so much excelled as an oculist that he alone was known and celebrated in every part of the world, whose fame, more lasting than marble, will never perish'. Born at Wayford in Somerset in 1612, he entered Oriel College, Oxford in 1631 and was admitted bachelor of arts in 1634. After service on the Royalist side in the English Civil War he entered ophthalmic practice, initially in his home town but moved to London around 1655. He left the capital around 1660 because the air pollution affected his health. For over 30 years he practised at 17 the Cathedral Close and the house and rooms have changed little since his occupancy. His practice in London and Salisbury became well known and in 1660 Turberville received an Oxford 'doctorate in physick', on the strength of his reputation, at the personal request of the Chancellor of the University, the Marquis of Hertford. He was not required to submit a thesis or to give a lecture series.

On visits to London, Turberville treated the daughter of the Duke of York (later Queen Anne) and Samuel Pepys, the famous naval administrator and diarist. Pepys's diary records his treatments with various eye medicaments, pills, blood letting, and tube spectacles. He also describes a meeting at an alehouse in the Strand in July 1668 where four doctors, including Turberville, dissected eyes from sheep and oxen. After this meeting he recorded his surprise 'that this Turberville should be so great a man, and yet to this day has seen no eyes dissected, or but once'. One of Turberville's most grateful patients was Walter Pope, professor of astronomy at Gresham College, London between 1660 and 1687. He received treatment in 1686 and wrote 'Turberville ... him, to whom, under God, I owe my Sight, a blessing, in my opinion, equal, if not preferable, to Life it self,

without it. It was he who twice rescued me from Blindness'.

The 1685 *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* contain three letters from 'the great and experienced Dr Turberville of Salisbury ... containing several remarkable cases in Physick, relating chiefly to the Eyes'. Several unpublished handwritten letters are also held in the Royal Society library. The case reports include a man in Salisbury 'who had a piece of Iron or Steel, stuck in the Iris of the Eye; the Person was in very great pain, came to me; I endeavr'd to push the Iron out with a small Spatula, but could not; I then applied a Loadstone to it, and immediately it jumpt out'. Pope suggested that Turberville's skill was in 'knowing when the connate Cataract is fit to be Couchd, in having a steady Hand, and skill to perform that Operation, to be able to prevent or at least, remove the pains which usually follow, and sometimes kill the Patient: But to reduce fallen and inverted Eye-lids to their proper place and Tone, to cure inveterate Ulcers, and Inflammations of a blackish colour, requires a consummate Artist. Hic Labor, hoc opus est'.

Turberville attracted patients from all over Great Britain, France, and America. One unfortunate lady came from Jamaica and was treated successfully in Salisbury, only to die of smallpox in London. The numerous patients coming to Salisbury benefited the inns and private houses and were a common sight, with bandaged eyes - 'Hoodwink People' - making their way to the Close. Many were recognisable, as treatment regimes included the shaving of the head and taking tobacco. Turberville continued to practise well into old age. He died on 21 April 1696 at the age of 84 years. While some later writers consider him a charlatan I concur with the view of the American medical historian Charles Snyder that, by the standards of his time, he was a competent ophthalmologist, an honourable man, adequately trained, and occasionally imaginative.

HUGH F THOMAS
Salisbury, Wilts