

News, Notes and Queries

A NOTE ON THE ORIGINAL EPITAPHS TO THOMAS SYDENHAM

ON 1st September 1961 a new commemorative tablet in Westminster Abbey was dedicated to the memory of Thomas Willis (1621–75).¹ It is a replica of the original which was damaged during the last war. The epitaph of his contemporary, Thomas Sydenham, in St. James's, Piccadilly, was erased 150 years earlier and replaced in 1810 with a mural memorial tablet. Within a symbolic border of poppies, olive branches and a coiled serpent is this Latin inscription, probably composed by Sir Henry Hallford, President of the Royal College of Physicians in 1820²:

Prope hunc locum sepultus est
Thomas Sydenham
Medicus in omne aevum nobilis
Natus erat A.D. 1624
Vixit annos 65.

Deletis veteris sepulchri vestigiis
Ne rei memoria interiret
Hoc marmor poni jussit collegium
Regale medicorum Londinense A.D. 1810
Optime merito.

Near this place is buried
Thomas Sydenham,
Renowned as physician through all ages.
He was born A.D. 1624.
He lived 65 years.

The traces of his old burial place being erased,
That memory of it should not perish,
The Royal College of Physicians of London
Ordered this marble to be set up, A.D. 1810,
For his outstanding services.

Sydenham was buried inside the church, but his grave cannot now be identified. Nor are any records of his epitaph to be found as many documents were destroyed in an eighteenth-century fire in the vaults of the church, which was again damaged in 1940. There are, however, several proposed epitaphs to Thomas Sydenham in a manuscript notebook³ at the Bodleian Library, one of which probably graced his gravestone. Dr. W. A. Greenhill has edited some of the contents of this notebook in his *Anecdota Sydenhamiana* (1845), but the Sydenham epitaphs have, hitherto, remained unpublished. In his introduction, Greenhill mentioned that the writer of the manuscript professed to have been acquainted with Sydenham, but he offered no further suggestions as to his identity. Although these notes were not all written by the same person, some passages are in the handwriting of Dr. Charles Goodall (1642–1712), President of the College of Physicians in 1708, and one of Sydenham's closest friends. He was eighteen years younger than Sydenham whose writings he stoutly defended.

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Sydenham expressed his gratitude to his young supporter in this passage⁴ of his *Epistolary Dissertation* (1681):

Dr. Goodall was the friend who, when many men ventured to assert that I had done but little in the investigation and cultivation of medicine, threw himself in the way of my maligners, and defended me with the zeal and affection of a son towards a father.

After Sydenham's death Goodall intended to honour his friend's memory by editing his posthumous writings with a laudatory introduction. When searching for material he wrote this letter⁵ to Sir Hans Sloane in 1703:

Good Doctor, I fully purpose to publish some posthumous Works of my father and your good friend Doctor Sydenham, upon this account I waited upon his son to request him to supply me with what memoirs his father left. He told me that what he had were put into your hands, and that if you pleased he should be very willing they should be printed by me. This is therefore to request you to let me know whether you are willing to part with them that I may doe right to the Author now dead, as I honoured him whilst living.

As a result of this appeal, Goodall probably came into possession of the manuscript notebook of extracts from Sydenham's works to which he later added several notes in his own handwriting.

On the second page of this notebook are the Sydenham epitaphs written in bold copperplate handwriting. They were probably composed by his friends who sent them to his son to choose the most appropriate inscription. They were then copied, probably by an amanuensis, into the notebook which eventually came into Goodall's possession. Together with Goodall and Sloane, Sydenham's other close friends included John Locke (1632–1704), physician and philosopher, and Dr. John Mapletoft (1631–1721) who had translated Sydenham's *Medical Observations* (1676) into Latin. In appreciation Sydenham dedicated his major work to Mapletoft. He later gave up medical practice for divinity, and when Sydenham died, Mapletoft was the Vicar of St. Lawrence Jewry. He most likely contributed the most elegant composition as Ward⁶ described him as 'a very polite Scholar [who] wrote Latin elegantly [and] was a great Master of Greek'. We cannot be certain which of the following epitaphs⁷ was actually selected: they all proffer fitting tributes to the English Hippocrates. But with sufficient space, money and luck, the original may yet grace a memorial tablet alongside that to Willis in Westminster Abbey.

Hic Artis Medicae Lumen Decus Instaurator
Et Novus Hippocrates Sydenamius situs est.

Here lies Sydenham, the Light, Glory and
Restorer of the Art of Medicine, the new Hippocrates.

*Σειδνάμιος Φάος ἦν Μερόπων, καὶ Ἔθνεα πολλὰ
Σώζετο, καὶ Νεκρῶν ἦν σπανὶς εἰν αἰδῆι*

Sydenham was the light of Mankind, and saved many Races;
In Hades there was Scarcity of Dead.

Hic Jacet
Vir egregius Thomas Sydenhamius M.D.
Fidus et felix Naturae Interpres,

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Cultor Medicinae expertus & sincerus
Morborum statim Periodis redeuntium
Sedulus et curiosus Indagator
Variolas praecipue, etiam truculentissimo more feraliter saevientes
Facili Regimine Primus docuit Cicurare:
Dolendum quod tam cito Pede
Claudicans licet ad Mortem properavit:
Cujus jam Currum sequitur, qui de eâ olim
Tot insignes et Felices egit Triumphos
Obiit
Decemb. Anno Salutis.

Here lies
That outstanding man Thomas Sydenham, M.D.
Faithful and successful Interpreter of Nature
Expert and sincere Practitioner of Medicine
Watchful and inquiring Investigator
Of Diseases which return at fixed Periods
With his easy Regimen he First showed how to Tame
Smallpoxes in particular, then raging like a beast in a most cruel way:
We must mourn that with such swift Steps
Though limping he hastened to Death
Whose Chariot he now follows, though once over Death
He won such signal and happy triumphs.
He died
December year of our Salvation.

Siste Viator & agnosce Beneficium
Nam Superstitium profuerit Vitae qui hic jacet Mortuus
Thomas Sydenhamius M.D.
Qui Artem Medendi novis superstructam Fundamentis
Instauravit, Ornavit, Auxit,
Et quam mira Sagacitate invenit Methodum
Felicissima Praxi stabilivit;
Quam non ad Pompam et Fastum Medicamentorum Faragine;
Sed ad Sanitatem aegrorum acri Iudicio et simplici Apparatu Exercuit
Sic Morbos superavit & tandem Medicorum Individiam
Pertinacius Malum
Si plura nosse cupias Scripta Lege,
Quae multis vitam dabunt longiorem
Auctori Immortalitatem
Obiit &c.

Halt Traveller and acknowledge your Indebtedness
For he who lies here Dead will have aided the life of those who
survive him
Thomas Sydenham, M.D.
Who Restored, Adorned and Enlarged
The Art of Medicine, building it up on new Foundations:
As with wondrous Sagacity he discovered this Method
So with most happy Practice he Established it
Which he exercised
Not for Pomp and Display by a Farrago of Medicaments
But for the Health of the sick by his keen Judgement and Simple
Apparatus

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Thus he overcame Diseases and at length too the Envy of Doctors
A more obstinate Evil
If you desire to know more Read his Writings
Which to many will give longer life
And to their Author Immortality.
He died . . .

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6. WARD, JOHN, *The Lives of the Professors of Gresham College*, London, 1740, p. 277.
7. MS. Rawlinson, c. 406, ff. 2-3, Bodleian Library.

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KENNETH DEWHURST

AN EARLY COTTAGE HOSPITAL

The Beginnings of the West Herts Hospital

As I have lived near the West Herts Hospital for all my life and it is well over seventy years since first my father took me there to visit a little boy patient (T.B. hip I think), I shall not hesitate to use my memory and tradition when I cannot get written references.

Sir Astley Paston Cooper, surgeon to King George IV, had been spending an increasing amount of his time at Gadebridge, his country house, which lies to the north of Hemel Hempstead. In A.D. 1825 he took the home farm into his own hands, and devoted still more of his attention to country occupations. Tradition says that he was so plagued by people seeking his professional help that he resolved to found a hospital to bring the situation under his own control.

However that may be the *Herts Mercury* of Saturday, 5 August, 1826 carried this item:

We have great pleasure in stating that the gentry and inhabitants of Hemel Hempstead meet this day at the Town Hall in that place to take into consideration the propriety of establishing an infirmary for the town and neighbourhood.

Sir Astley Cooper Bart., the Rev. J. B. Mountain, Henry Campbell White Esq. and the Rev. B. Cooper are the principal advocates of this benevolent undertaking.

This is followed on 12 August by:

It is with no ordinary feelings of gratification we announce to the public the establishment of the West Hertford Infirmary, an institution well calculated to alleviate the sufferings of such of our fellow creatures who have not the means to procure it otherwise.

It is one of those excellent institutions, in this land of benevolence, that bless the giver at the same time that it diminishes the aggregated misery and disease of those who receive its benefits.