

Discover History – Victorian Surgery

For the October talk Surgeon Harding explained how surgery was carried out Worcester Infirmary in the late Victorian era. Paul was the only one who turned up in fancy dress as he dressed as the Victorian Surgeon. Over 90 people turned up to hear his fascinating talk. Discover History do a walk round Worcester on the history of medicine through the centuries. The Cathedral had a very good medieval infirmary run by the monks, which had very good toilets that were 'flushed' when the river flooded.



After the reformation most of the infirmaries were destroyed and proper



hospitals did not re-appear until the 18th Century. Worcester Infirmary was built in 1771 in Salt Lane (Castle Street), which is now part of the University Campus and includes a museum about the Infirmary. This was a state-of-the-art infirmary that many other cities followed when building their own. Sir Charles Hastings was the first head of the hospital, he was one of the first to recommend the use of stethoscopes and he looked at public and occupational health where he did a report on the slums of Worcester. Sir Charles also was the founder

of the British Medical Association and this was founded in Worcester.

The best surgeons were the ones who had served abroad with the military in India and the Crimea for example. Most surgeons were trained in the theory with a little practical experience and those that served abroad had lots of practice. Good surgeons should be able to amputate a limb in under one minute. Senior surgeons would demonstrate procedures in a theatre with tiered seating for the junior doctors/surgeons.

It wasn't until the 1860s that senior surgeons realised that cross contamination was killing patients. Prior to this they would put on an old coat to work in that was covered in blood and dirt from previous operations. Joseph Lister realised that they were dying and recommended that surgeons wore clean clothes and washed their hands between patients. The BMA was the place to share best practice or new improved ways of doing procedures.



By the Victorian era body snatching was no longer required following the Anatomy Act, which allowed the use of bodies from the workhouse to be used for dissection. A lot of surgeons would not use anaesthetics, as most types had bad side effects, some such as Chloroform would relax the body so much that they could not wake them afterwards, Ether could explode when in contact with the gas lights and Nitrous Oxide made the patient laugh and even get up during the procedure.

Paul showed us a number of tools used by the surgeons and explained how many of them were very similar to Roman ones found in Pompeii.

Surgeon Harding then went through several procedures, which we will not go in to too many details here for obvious reasons, including:

- relieving pressure on the skull by drilling a hole in the head (trepanning),
- removing bullets when someone has been shot,
- Amputation of an arm or a leg.



Paul told us about one famous surgeon, Robert Liston, who prided himself with his speed of doing amputations over, maybe, his accuracy! In one incident he amputated an arm but then found in his speed he had also taken off 3 of the fingers of his assistant! In another where he was demonstrating in front of a large crowd in a theatre, he declared that he would amputate the leg of his male patient in under one minute and told the audience to get out their pocket watches to time him. This was a full leg amputation, which he completed in well under a minute but then found he had also removed a couple of extra parts that maybe the man wanted to keep! A gruesome tale to end on.

The lovely ladies of the church produced a wonderful array of cakes, as usual, and we now have had to split the audience going to refreshments as there are too many for one queue. There are 2 drinks tables with a large table of cakes in the middle.

