

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CHELTENHAM DISPENSARY

by *Daphne Doughton*

Cheltenham normally presents itself as 'The Health Spa', basking in the fame and fortune of the King's visit of 1788, which had the virtue of extolling 'The Waters'. A writer on 'The Medicinal Springs', of 1901 concludes '... there is no lack at Cheltenham for the materials for the making of a flourishing Spa, whilst the town itself presents attractions which can vie with those of any similar resort in this country'.¹ This picture may still be said to be true today.

The need for a dispensary has to be placed into the context of the period, whilst recognising there was a dispensary movement over several decades commencing in 1769 and stretching well into the nineteenth century. Paul Langford writes that before this date 'The story of the hospitals as told by contemporaries was not one of uninterrupted success. They were expensive to maintain and cumbersome to administer. They were also vulnerable to the winds of economic change and the whim of the subscribing public'.² All the same the eighteenth century hospitals were 'the first breath of the new hospital voluntary movement'.³ They grew in numbers with an estimated seventy-nine in the provinces by 1825.⁴

Cheltenham's Dispensary, generally regarded as having opened on 3 May 1813 for the relief of patients, arose as a forerunner, first, to a Dispensary and Casualty Ward, then to a General Hospital and Dispensary, before the later stages of becoming Cheltenham General Hospital, at Sandford Fields, demonstrating a natural progression from Dispensary to Hospital, 'indeed one often grew out of another'.⁵ The change in titles was not necessarily synonymous with the Institution's habit of moving sites in the earlier days. 'Progress has marked its career from the first; the premises used having been too small for the number of patients, it was successively removed to Winchcomb-Street, North-Street, the late Free Press Office, the Female Training School, High Street, until ultimately the noble building now termed 'The General Hospital', was erected'.⁶ The dispensaries of the period were generated to serve the sick poor, often in their homes for the seriously ill; the prospective Dispensary Assistant in 1813 had this in his list of work.⁷ In the growing industrial and provincial towns the dispensaries could be considered 'the first step towards the prevention of disease'.⁸

COUNTY DEVELOPMENTS

For the county of Gloucestershire, Stroud showed an early lead with a dispensary originating from 1750, with an account of it written by Paul Hawkins Fisher in 1871, explaining the dispensary as 'a Society for providing gratuitous medical advice, and medicine for the poor of the town and neighbourhood',⁹ attributed to Samuel Jones MD, the then resident physician of the dispensary. For Gloucester and the county in 1755 there was established the Gloucester Infirmary¹⁰ in Westgate Street, ahead of the 1861 opening in Southgate Street of a new building. Specific to this charity's foundation and endowment was the recognition that the Infirmary was 'for the cure of the sick and lame of any country or nation, who are destitute of the means of support, and unable to pay for their cure'.¹¹ Later the Lunatic Asylum was opened in 1823 at Horton Road,¹² although Dibdin writes that the subscriptions for the Asylum were started in 1793 and in the next year a purchase of land, near to the Infirmary, occurred.¹³

There is evidence that the sick and injured of Cheltenham were cared for at Gloucester Infirmary; a railroad worker fell and broke his leg in the High Street and was conveyed there immediately, whilst a little later in 1810, Mr. Minster, Surgeon 'gratuitously set

the bone' for a cooper, John Wilson, who had broken a leg and dislocated an ankle. He was then transported to the Infirmary.¹⁴ There were subscriptions sent over the years from the Cheltenham Parish Overseers of the Poor to benefit the Infirmary.¹⁵ As a result of a sermon at the Parish Church in September 1809, £57 17s 6d was the total collection, 'perceived' to reflect 'the feelings of the congregation',¹⁶ whilst boxes at the Pump Rooms when emptied in 1809, 1811 and 1813, contained money to benefit the Infirmary charity.

The above two stories of injured men being conveyed to the Infirmary are a reminder of the time and distance required, apart from the suffering, that would have inevitably been experienced during the journey there; for Wilson his journey was in a post-chaise. The problem of the distance was highlighted in 'An Address to the Inhabitants and visitors of Cheltenham' at the end of 1811, which reads 'as an additional argument in favour of such a necessity (a General Dispensary) that the distance from the General Hospital of the County, and the danger that attends the removal of patients, renders the advantages offered by that highly valuable establishment unattainable in many cases of external injuries and internal disease'. This came within a lengthy address, reasoning for the establishment of a Dispensary in the Town, 'for the relief of the Sick Poor, of which it is confidently expected the advantages will equal those which have attended similar establishments in other places'.¹⁷

EARLY PHILANTHROPY

The Dispensary in the town was one of several philanthropic institutions established to serve the poor of the period. The first was the Sunday Schools commencing in 1787, then came, amongst others, the School of Industry, labouring the first year 'under all the disadvantages ever attendant on such undertakings',¹⁸ to help the lower classes, starting in 1806 in a barn, with funds amounting to nineteen guineas.¹⁹

The call for a dispensary did not reduce the appeals for charity but rather added to the demands on the interested philanthropic for their money and practical help. There was recognition that in helping the sick, the poor and the pauper, this could lessen the demands on the Poor Rate. Three years after the erection of the new Poor-House in 1809 this was not so, because of the various debts that had been accumulated and the increased numbers of the poor, both inside and outside the house; measures were taken to remedy the 'alarming state of things'. There was recognition that 'the Poor Rates had been unusually high'.²⁰

THE CALL FOR A DISPENSARY

A letter had first appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 24 May 1810, which was written by 'Observer', entering into a dialogue on an existing proposition that an organ be purchased for the Parish Church and suggesting 'that the money now collected might go to a far better purpose ... which is, the Establishment of a Dispensary, for furnishing the poor with medicines and advice, gratis'. In the hope that this idea would be taken on, the person was offering a total subscription of five guineas which was double the amount to be given for the organ and organist! 'Observer' carried that concern that 'we shall not be found deficient in adding to the comforts and relieving the distresses of the poor and needy,' finally calling on the 'many Medical Gentlemen in the town' to give their aid, and 'to effect so desirable, laudable and humane a purpose'.

The call did not go unheeded, although more than a year was to elapse before a formal announcement or any other mention of the subject appeared in the press: this came on 28 November 1811. Anticipation was high in the *Chronicle's* statement, which spoke of the prospect of a speedy establishment of an Institution for the benefit of 'the Sick Poor of this Town, under the patronage of the Rt. Hon. Lord Sherborne, and the auspices of the Magistrates and many distinguished characters of Cheltenham'. A detailed account was promised and followed the next week adding that relief would be for 'the Sick Poor of Cheltenham and its vicinity'.²¹

Elsewhere in the *Chronicle* is to be found the Address where the reader is left in no doubt as to who the Institution was to serve; those suffering from 'the complicated evils resulting from a state of poverty, and the presence of those numerous diseases and accidents to which their situation in life renders them peculiarly liable'.²² The population was expanding with a proportionate increase of poverty, disease and accidents of the 'lower orders', when Cheltenham and the neighbourhood were flourishing. The intentions of the Committee were in their concern for the 'future condition of Society'; one way of helping was by affording practical relief and 'alleviation of the existing miseries'.²³ In the early years of the Dispensary this was illustrated by the provision of linen to assist the married woman in child-bed and in lending beds and linen to large families in 'cases of bad fever'.²⁴ apart from 'administering Advice and Medicines (gratis) to the sick poor, and promoting Vaccination'.²⁵

RAVAGES OF SMALLPOX

The apparent interval and somewhat obvious inactivity of the year 1812 before what is frequently termed the 'official establishment' and commencement of the Dispensary, may be associated with the ravages of smallpox. As a result vaccination rapidly became popular.²⁶ This disease, which in past years had been endemic in the county continued,²⁷ with vaccination from 1798 gradually taking the place of inoculation; 'the widespread dissemination of the practice enormously reduced the death rate not only in this country but throughout the civilised world'.²⁸ Cheltenham did not escape; it was reported in 1826 '... small-pox intrudes'²⁹ and the 1845 Hospital Report refers to 'the continuing visitation of the small-pox'³⁰ when the Board considered 'the general health of the town and neighbourhood'. Earlier the local apothecaries and the parish doctors were regularly featured receiving payments for their care of smallpox victims. For example, the apothecary Mr. Hinde was paid by the Vestry in 1770 for attending 'the poor in the smallpox last year'.³¹ Mr. Hinde with Mr. Hooper and Mr. Clarke were considered leading doctors and apothecaries in Cheltenham at the end of the century.³²

These gentlemen made a major contribution to the health and welfare of the poor in late eighteenth century Cheltenham. Vaccination continued unabated into the new century and conspicuously as the Dispensary became established and extended to meet increasing demands on its services. From these humble beginnings succour was offered and solace given, as well as the medicinal remedies of the day. Later, William Wood in 1806 and Charles Segar in 1807, who as both apothecary and surgeon working for the Parish, were able to 'charge in addition' for attending smallpox victims as well as delivering pregnant women and setting broken bones...³³ This work and the payment of the medical gentlemen continued, whether the vaccination was performed by the Parish doctor or 'free gratis' to the cases at the Dispensary, besides that of the 'private practitioners'.³⁴ The evidence of the need for vaccination became one of the main objectives of the Dispensary in 1813 and in 1811 the word was incorporated into the proposed title of the intended institution.

From several sources it is clear that Dr. Edward Jenner, (1749-1823), gave free vaccination at Alpha House. The place was also affectionately termed 'The Pest House'.³⁵ This is confirmed by G. Arthur Cardew who worked as a medical student in Jenner's surgery at Alpha House, St. Georges Road.³⁶ John Godding also wrote of Jenner the philanthropist, 'using this house ... on Bayshill ... for the purpose of gratuitous vaccination', noting that public prejudice had led to the alternative title (The Pest House); but Dr. Jenner wanted another building in which he could vaccinate the poor and the December 1811 Dispensary initiative included this amongst the institution's objectives. From a home in Lower High Street, Jenner moved to 8 St. Georges Place;³⁷ he apparently

separated his vaccination activities from his residence. In fact he offered land in April 1811 when the *Chronicle* recorded 'Dr. Jenner nobly manifested his zeal in the cause of humanity, by having most liberally offered to give a piece of ground to erect a Vaccination Institution in this town'.³⁸

THE MEDICAL CONNECTION

Thus in the first proposals of 1811 for the local Dispensary there was the obvious interest and association of Dr. Jenner. The next proposal recommended 'that the Institution be denominated the Gloucestershire Vaccine Institution and Cheltenham Dispensary', continuing 'that it be adapted solely to the uses of the needy sick of Cheltenham and its immediate vicinity, exclusively of the Parish Paupers who are under the care of the medical Parish Officers'.³⁹

In short the proposals for the Dispensary included the support of Members of the Vaccine Association, their President, Dr. Jenner and Dr. Boisragon, Dr. Christie, Dr. C. Parry, Mr. Newell, Messrs. Wood and Lucas, Mr. Seager - physicians and surgeons of Cheltenham offering their services gratuitously. This group of medical men were later to be identified in the original Medical Committee of the official establishment, formed on 6 March 1813, with the addition of three colleagues, Mr. Fowler, Dr. Jameson and Mr. Minster, but without Dr. Jenner himself. Three days later at the second meeting, this time held at the 'Rooms', (the first was held at the Saint Mary's Church Vestry), included in the general business was a 'Trial by Lot' to elect the physicians and surgeons for the ensuing year; as a result the appointments were given to Dr. Jameson, Dr. Parry, Mr. Newell and Mr. Seager. Soon after, in January 1814, the results of a further election appear, which would be the forerunner to future practice at the annual general meetings; the names were (physicians) Dr. Boisragon, and Dr. Christie, (surgeons) Messrs. Wood and Minster.⁴⁰

There is clear evidence that the role of the medical gentlemen to the masses of poor in the town had also been important for the past two to three decades; in the reports of the Vestry, 'a Doctor for the parish of Cheltenham' would be appointed annually and for 1793 he was paid a 'Sallory of Eighteen Pounds, Eighteen Shillings', to attend every person that the present Overseers shall think proper to recommend as fit objects to be attended'.⁴¹ The exemptions to this main function for which he received additional payments were 'Broken Bones, Smallpox, Lioning Woomon'. Thomas Minster was the appointee for that year, then again in 1799, 1802, 1805, 1811 and 1816. In 1799 he had a five shilling fee (25p) for each poor person he inoculated at a time when the children who had not had smallpox were 'listed' for the purpose of inoculation.⁴² Besides this he was 'superintending the poor' in his medical capacity, which would bring him into a close working relationship with the Overseers of the Poor.

Thomas Minster, along with other names in rotation, was the Parish doctor appointed by the Easter Vestry and is a worthy name to document, for his services to the sick poor of Cheltenham. His services as either Surgeon Apothecary or Surgeon are evident over the years to include his election as attending surgeon at the Dispensary and his offer of assistance led to his being appointed to the Medical Committee in 1813. He is listed under the 'Medical



Edward Jenner, 1951, from W.R. LeFanu

Men of Cheltenham during the nineteenth century'; he died about 1858 at Pittville.⁴³ The parish doctor, with the Overseers of the Poor responsible for the Poor House, came into daily contact with the masses of sick and indigent, seeking help and assistance; the Vestry in 1813 gave recognition to this work, by minuting their thanks on this occasion to Messrs. Wood and Lucas, the then surgeon apothecaries, 'for their great attention to the poor',⁴⁴ an exceptionally generous gesture in contrast to the usual general thanks.

BENEFACTORS

Charity allowed the sick poor to obtain tickets for admission to the services of the Dispensary; the benefactors had 'the right of recommendation, and other privileges ... according to the sums subscribed'.⁴⁵ The larger the sum the larger number of patients a donor could commend; with a gift of twenty guineas the person could become a governor with voting rights and eligibility to serve on the general committee. These matters were reflected in the proposals in 1811 and carried through in 1813, with Dr. Charles Parry playing a prominent role, helping with his knowledge of the hospital at Bath towards the formation of the Institution's Rules and Regulations. Dr. Fosbroke, writing in 1826, attributes the first proposals and first code of regulations to his friend Dr. Parry of Bath and also referred to him as the 'chief founder' of the Cheltenham Dispensary.⁴⁶ Year by year the work of the Cheltenham Dispensary was reviewed against the available funds⁴⁷ at the public Annual Meeting held in January; a notice to the effect would appear in the local newspaper⁴⁸, with the official report later presented and frequently the attraction of editorial comment.

The charitable were relied upon to help in a variety of ways. This remained so throughout the century and caused Ruth Hodgkinson to write, 'The dispensary system has been accused of shifting the burden from the whole of the community and imposing it on the charitable few'.⁴⁹ Certainly this was not the case for Cheltenham, in the earlier decades of the century with patronage to the fore, there came assistance from 'different classes of society ... (forgetful of all private and party considerations) persons of the most discordant political and religious principles are uniting in the cause of suffering humanity'.⁵⁰ Benevolence made its demands, evident not only in the town's institutions, but also in such very basic provision of soup kitchens, clothing and fuel. 'The poor frequently wanted nourishment as well as medicine ...' said Dr. Thomas (a Physician to the Dispensary) in his support of The Cheltenham Benevolent and Anti Mendicancy Society, at its fourth Annual General Meeting in 1831.⁵¹

THE DISPENSARY OPENS

With the Dispensary doors open, the work was under way on that first Monday, 3 May 1813, 'for the relief of Patients'.⁵² Earlier at the Vestry-Room meeting, those present were happy that there had been 'the offer of a most commodious house for the purposes of this Charity'. Then an agreement was soon made with the Proprietor, and recognition was given, 'that a principal difficulty being removed (by this offer) ...' of a house in Winchcomb-Street, being secured to use as a Dispensary.⁵³

The Institution flourished over the years and in the 1860s, Goding quoted from Sir George Ballinghall, considered a medical authority on hospital building in several continents. When considering the H design of Cheltenham's hospital at Sandford Road, he wrote 'It is one of the neatest, most commodious, and compact Little Hospitals with which I am acquainted; ... a good example of how much may be done in the way of hospital building with a very moderate sum ... erected for £7,695'.⁵⁴

There is considerable evidence that in the early decades of the nineteenth century Cheltenham was keeping abreast on a provincial basis in making provision for the poor, as seen by the inauguration, growth and maturity of the Dispensary and the Hospitals which were to follow.

J. BARON, M.D.	} Gloucester.	T. HUGHES,	} Stroud.	
C. B. TRYE,		W. W. DARKE,		
R. FLETCHER,		*S. SNOWDEN, M.D.		
G. B. DRAYTON,		*S. HUMPAGE,		
C. COOKE,		W. FRY,		} Dursley.
J. WILTON,		H. JENNER,		} Berkeley.
JOS. MILLS,		J. C. HANDS,		
D. COX,		*J. TERRETT,		} Tewkesbury.
T. WASHBOURN,		*W. DILLON,		
W. WASHBOURN,		*W. S. EVANS,		
H. C. BOISRAGON, M.D.	*R. LOVESY,	} Newent.		
C. PARRY, M.D.	*R. FILKIN,	} N. Gloucester Militia.		
*T. NEWELL,	*O. W. BARTLEY,	} Nailsworth.		
C. SEAGER,	*J. COOPER,	} Wotton-under-Edge.		
W. WOOD,	*T. JENNINGS,	} Cheltenham.		
*E. HUMPAGE,	*T. SKEY,	} Sunday's Hill.		
*S. CAMBRIDGE,				

† Unless in a case of extreme necessity; for example, the Small-Pox breaking out among persons who have never had that disease, where no Vaccine matter can be obtained.

N.B. We are authorised to add the names of those Gentlemen to which the asterisk is prefixed, though we have not yet had an opportunity of collecting their actual signatures.

Waller, Pillen, Gloucester.

List of Medical Practitioners in the County of Gloucester resolved to promote vaccination, 1811. Courtesy of the Glos. Record Office D 303 C1/53b

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12. Ian Hollingsbee: text; *Gloucester's Asylums, 1794-1988*; devised by Christopher Morris, Curator, Gloucester Folk Museum, 1988, p 1.
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22. Ibid. The increasing population: see *The New and Improved Cheltenham Guide*, Wood and Cunningham, Bath, 1812, p 17
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Theatre Royal, Cheltenham.

AMATEUR PLAY,
For the BENEFIT of the DISPENSARY,
UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF
Most of the Distinguished Characters of Cheltenham,
AND
Patrons of the Institution.

The Profits resulting from the Performances of this Evening, are to be devoted to the enrichment of the Funds of the Cheltenham Dispensary,—an Institution, meriting, from its utility, and philanthropic tendency, the warmest support of the Benefactors, whose aid, on this occasion, is respectfully solicited.

SATURDAY Evening next, Feb. 5, 1814,
will be presented, the admired Tragedy of
DOUGLAS.

Raising money for the Dispensary.
Source: *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 3 Feb, 1814.

45. *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 15 Dec. 1811.
46. Rev. T.D. Fosbroke, op. cit, p 209.
47. *Annual Report ...* GRO HO 3 8/1-20, 1832; is one example of dependence on monies from the Annual Sermon of Churches and Chapels.
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Ref. no. 15 Hospital. Ref. no. 21 New Hospital.

p 46 discloses that a 'Branch Dispensary', belonging to the General Hospital exists close to the Belle Vue Hotel.

Steven Blake and Roger Beacham, *The Book of Cheltenham*, 1982.

This book helpfully gives three illustrations as follows:- p 108 The Dispensary, 1825, p 109 The General Hospital and the Dispensary; High Street 1839. p 109 The General Hospital, Sandford Road, c1890.

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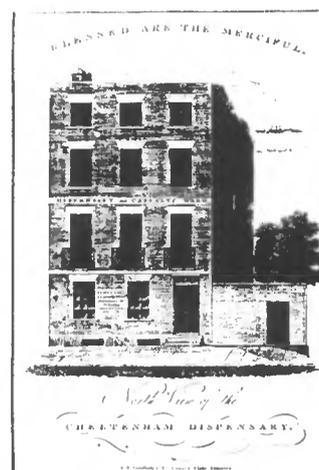
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318 High Street, Cheltenham 1822-1826