

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S HOSPITAL

Welcome to the ancient and Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew. Ancient it must be acknowledged to be, having existed on this site for 864 years. However, although the Hospital has had a Royal Charter for the last four centuries, its original founder Rahere was not a king but a king's jester or minstrel who became a monk.

The Foundation

A medieval chronicle, now in the British Museum gives some details of Rahere and also describes the early years of the Hospital's existence. It seems that Rahere was of lowly birth but by his intelligence, charm and ready wit he gained entrance to the houses of city merchants, whence he progressed to those of the nobility and eventually to the Court of King Henry I.

The monk who wrote this medieval chronicle considered young Rahere's life to have been worldly and sinful. He explained at some length how Rahere gradually realized the error of his ways and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. There he fell ill and it is likely that he was cared for in a monastery dedicated to St. Bartholomew and situated on an island in the River Tiber. (This monastery is still active and was recently visited by the St. Bartholomew's Hospital Choir).

Rahere feared that he would die and in his distress prayed to God for forgiveness of his sins. He promised that if he recovered and returned safely to England he would found a hospital for the sick poor of the City of London.

Either in Rome, or possibly during his homeward journey, he had a vision of St. Bartholomew. The saint told him that his planned foundation must be built in Smithfield and dedicated to St. Bartholomew.

Rahere was true to his vision; he took holy orders and became an Augustinian monk. The king granted him land in Smithfield which Richard Belmeis, Bishop of London dedicated in March 1123.

At that time Smithfield, or Smoothfeld, was a flat marshy area outside the City wall, used mainly for jousting, fairs and horse trading. It was also the site of the City's gallows.

Rahere's popularity and influence with the King, courtiers and city merchants must have been considerable. Their support was such that the great priory church with its associated collegiate buildings and hospital were completed in only six years.

Rahere became the first Prior and spent the remainder of his life at the head of his foundation. He died in 1143 and was buried on the north side of the high altar in the priory church, where his tomb can still be seen.

One of the early benefactors of the Hospital was the wealthy and powerful Henry Fitz-Ailwin — first Mayor of London.

The Medieval Hospital

During the next four centuries the medieval hospital grew to become an important shelter for the sick poor and for foundling children. Gradually it was endowed with much wealth and valuable property and it became an institution of great social significance.

Occasionally great affairs of state impinged upon the quiet daily routine of the brethren and sisters who cared for its occupants. Thus on Wednesday, 12th June, 1381 Wat Tyler and his followers, proceeding from the sacking of the Temple and the burning of the Fleet and Newgate Prisons on their way to the Priory of St. John at Clerkenwell must have terrified the monks, nuns and patients as they passed in front of the Hospital.

The rebels had recently beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury on Tower Hill, had burnt the Savoy Palace of John of Gaunt and had plundered much of Lambeth and Southwark.

Three days later, on Saturday, 15th June, 1381 loyal citizens of London had rallied round the Mayor, Sir William Walworth and together with the fourteen-year-old King Richard II met the rebels here in Smithfield.

The Hospital brethren from their walls would have seen Walworth's dagger thrust which toppled Wat Tyler from his horse and then witnessed the courageous behaviour of the young king which probably averted a massacre.

According to a contemporary record the wounded rebel leader was carried into the Hospital and laid in the chamber of the Master. However, the Mayor came in and caused him to be brought out into Smithfield and beheaded.

The Reformation and Second Foundation

The monastic status of Barts changed abruptly during the reign of King Henry VIII.

Following the King's rift with the Church of Rome, the Acts of Dissolution of 1536 and 1539 bestowed on the Crown all monastic possessions. Thus the Priory of St. Bartholomew was suppressed and the Augustinians were driven out. Many of the buildings were subsequently demolished leaving only that part of the Church which we now know as the parish church of St. Bartholomew-the-Great. This is in fact little more than the chancel of the original priory church.

For several years the future of the Hospital remained uncertain. However, in 1546, largely as a result of sustained pressure by the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of the City of London, King Henry VIII signed an agreement, followed by letters patent of 1547.

granting to the City, and I quote:

“The Hospital formerly known as of St. Bartholomew and hereafter to be called the House of the Poore in West Smithfield in the suburbs of the City of London — of King Henry VIII’s foundation.”

This long and clumsy title was never used by the public but only in legal documents. However, it was not until the National Health Service Act of 1948 that this Hospital again officially became St. Bartholomew’s!

Of the five chapels in the medieval hospital, only one was retained. This, the Chapel of the Holy Cross, became the Church of St. Bartholomew-the-Less. The hospital precinct became, and still remains a City parish, with a Vicar who also holds the title of Hospitaller. The church is situated just within the Henry VIII Gate and parts of it date back to the 12th century.

When in 1546 the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty became the rulers of the Hospital, the four aldermen and eight councilmen who had previously been appointed to negotiate with the king became our first governors.

Following the refoundation, these governors began to appoint recognized physicians and surgeons, the latter being liverymen of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company.

One of the physicians, Dr. Roderigo Lopez attained great distinction and in 1586 was appointed physician to Queen Elizabeth. Unfortunately he was subsequently accused (possibly falsely) of attempting to poison the Queen. At his trial in Guildhall evidence was produced that he had received money from King Philip of Spain. This, together with his foreign origin and an unfortunate reputation for being skilled in poisons sealed his fate and he was found guilty of treason.

Lopez was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in 1594 and to date is the only member of the Hospital Staff to have ended his life on the gallows. His name is included on that plaque in Guildhall which records details of famous trials held there.

If Lopez was our most infamous physician, one of our most famous was Dr. William Harvey who discovered the circulation of the blood. He was appointed to the staff in 1609 and during the 35 years that he served the Hospital, his brilliance as a physician, researcher and teacher brought great fame to St. Bartholomew’s.

William Harvey was physician and friend to King Charles I. During the Civil War his devotion to the king caused him to leave London and for a time he lived in Oxford, which was the royalist headquarters.

At the end of the 17th Century Barts consisted of an irregular collection of

hospital buildings situated in a maze of alleyways and small squares. Much of the property was constructed of timber, lath and plaster, some of which had fallen into disrepair.

Many of the wards opened directly onto these alleys and the two 17th Century wooden figures which can be seen on either side of the fireplace were hospital signs. They were placed outside the wards reserved for sick or wounded soldiers and sailors.

Rebuilding

The governors of that period initiated a re-building programme which began in 1702 with the construction of the gatehouse through which you entered the hospital today. It was erected at a cost of £580 and was flanked by new tenements which were let to provide the hospital with a regular income.

James Gibbs, who had previously designed the churches of St. Martin in the Fields and St. Mary-le-Strand as well as the Radcliffe Camera at Oxford and the Cambridge University Senate House, was appointed architect.

He designed four elegant buildings in the classical style to surround the Hospital Square. These were built between 1730 and 1769, beginning with the North Wing which contains this Great Hall.

Full details of the costs can be found in the archives and it is interesting to note that the account for this lovely ceiling, done by John Baptiste St. Michele amounted to £160. This included £4 — 4s. 5d. for colour washing and gilding.

The Governors decided that the names of subscribers should be recorded on the walls of the Great Hall and no doubt you will have noticed that these lists contain the names of many members of the Courts of Aldermen and Common Council.

William Hogarth was a Governor and he painted the magnificent murals which you saw as you ascended the staircase to this Hall. It is said that his models for the figures grouped round the Pool of Bethesda were patients whom he had observed during his visits to the Hospital.

Further major expansion of the Hospital next occurred in the Victorian era, with the construction of the Outpatients' Hall, Resident Staff Quarters, Pathology Block, Library and other Medical College buildings.

In the 1930's it was decided that modern wards and operating theatres were needed and the King George V Block was built. The original intention was to preserve the facade of James Gibbs' South Wing but unfortunately this collapsed and an entirely new building had to be erected.

During the Second World War the Hospital suffered considerable air-raid

damage. The Medical College buildings were largely demolished and the Clerk's House at the western end of this wing was gutted by fire. This house was beautifully restored in the 1960's but reconstruction of the Medical College buildings was not completed until 1980 when they were opened by the Queen during the mayoralty of Alderman Sir Peter Gadsden.

View Day

In 1551 the Governors instituted an annual inspection of the Hospital and this continued throughout the ensuing centuries. It became known as View Day and gradually took the form of a ceremonial procession of the Governors, led by the Beadle and with the Clerk, Steward and Matron in attendance. In each ward the Steward recited the names of the patients present, who were asked whether they had any complaint to make about their treatment. The Ward Sister and Physician or Surgeon in charge were also asked if they were satisfied with the nursing and medical care. In more recent times View Day also became the annual open day when former patients, nurses and doctors revisited Barts.

When in 1948 Barts was taken over by the National Health Service the Governors were allowed to continue to run the Hospital.

However, in the N.H.S. re-organization of 1974 the Governors were abolished and the Hospital came under the direct control of the Local Health Authority. At that time it was feared that View Day would be lost. Fortunately someone remembered our ancient links with the mayoralty. The Lord Mayor was approached and he agreed to View the Hospital. It was a great success and for the past twelve years successive Lord Mayors, accompanied by a Sheriff have visited the wards and afterwards joined the Hospital Staff and guests for tea.

In the time available today it has been possible to give only the briefest outline of our long history and I realize that I have said nothing about the Medical College and the history of medical education here at Barts.

However I hope that I have shown that although Barts enjoys a world-wide reputation and has an international role in modern medicine and surgery, it is above all the City of London's Hospital.