

A History of the Harveian Society of London

The foundation of the Harveian Society of London in 1831 came about in the following way: Dr John Lettsom (founder the Medical Society of London in 1773) had opened the first dispensary in London in 1770 to provide basic medical services to the poor; by 1868 there were more than forty such dispensaries in London. The Western General Dispensary in Marylebone, part of this expansion, opened in January 1830. The boardroom of this Dispensary was used for medical meetings. On September 12th 1831 a group of twenty doctors, dedicated to improving their knowledge and advancing medical science, decided to form a society, which they called The West London Medical Society. The title was changed to The Harveian Society of London on September 26th 1831 and the first meeting was held at the Western General Dispensary (adjacent to what is now the eastern end of Westway) on October 3rd, 1831. The first Presidents were the two consultant physicians to the Dispensary – Dr Anthony Todd Thompson MD (1778-1849) and Dr Marshall Hall MD.FRS (1790 – 1857). Meetings of the Harveian Society continued at the Dispensary until the end of 1831 and then moved to several sites before settling at The Medical Society of London's home (Lettsom House) in February 1951, where the meetings are held today.

The list of Presidents of the Harveian Society (up to 1980) has included many famous names, such as Marshall Hall (1831), Thomas Hodgkin (1841 and 1846), Sir Henry Thompson (1860), Hughlings Jackson (1886), Sir D'Arcy Power (1908), Lord Horder (1931), Sir Cecil Wakeley (1932), Sir Zachary Cope (1941), Arthur Dickson Wright (1955 and 1957) LS Penrose FRS (1967), A Lawrence Abel (1972), and Sir Cyril Clarke (1978).

The annual Harveian lecture was initiated in 1875; the first lecture was given by Dr Sibson on Bright's disease. Other lecturers up to 1971 (without titles etc, and excluding Presidents) have included Almroth Wright, Berkeley Moynihan, Bernard Spilsbury, Francis Walshe, Lionel Whitby, Geoffrey Keynes, John McMichael, Russell Brain, Ernest Chain, Jan Waldenstrom, Francis Crick,, Peter Medawar, Julius Comroe, Howard Florey, Andrew Huxley, Christian Barnard, Joseph Needham, Arthur Koestler, Douglas Black, and John West.

The Laws of the Society were first printed in 1832 and have been amended at 20–30 year intervals ever since. The Society remained exclusively male until 1956, when women were allowed to attend meetings as guests, only becoming full members in 1964 under the Presidency of Dr D Geraint James.

A great supporter and generous benefactor of The Society was Sir George Buckston Browne FRCS (1850–1945) (Fig 1a). He qualified from University College in 1872 (having won medals in anatomy, chemistry, surgery and midwifery) with membership of the Royal College of Surgeons, but never took the University degree. He became personal assistant to Sir Henry Thompson (past President of the Harveian Society), an eminent urologist with the largest private practice for prostatic surgery in London. Sir Henry Thompson was distinguished socially, a connoisseur, an artist and a famous host; George Buckston Browne acquired these traits from his mentor, eventually taking over Sir Henry's private practice. Private practice urology made up his professional life; he never held a hospital appointment. Two of his distinguished patients were Robert Louis Stevenson and George Meredith. He retired in 1909.

After the death of his son, only grandson and wife, Buckston Browne devoted his time and money to University College Hospital, the Royal College of Surgeons, and other medical institutions, one of which was the Harveian Society. He was finally elected a Fellow of the

Royal College of Surgeons in 1926 and he was created a Knight of the Bath (KB) in 1934. The reason, in part, for this recognition was that he bought Down House (Charles Darwin's home in Downe) in 1927 and, after refurbishment, presented it to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (who, in turn, gave it to the Royal College of Surgeons in 1953); it now belongs to English Heritage. Buckston Browne built a research farm for the College in the grounds at Down House, and endowed an annual Buckston Browne Dinner for the College.

In 1928, Buckston Browne endowed for The Harveian Society the Buckston Browne Prize (£100) (for an essay based on original work) and Medal in memory of his son, killed in the First World War; it is awarded every three years. The first dinner for members of The Harveian Society was held in 1856, and in 1928 Buckston Browne endowed an annual dinner for members which continues to this day, and is commemorated with the Buckston Browne cup (Fig 2). This fund was substantially increased in 1944 by a bequest from Lt-Colonel Sir Norman Gray Hill, Bart, MC (1894-1944). Gray Hill had a distinguished military career in the First World War (Military Cross and Bar). He qualified at the London Hospital in 1923 and became a paediatrician, specializing in rheumatic heart disease. He was killed on active service in 1944 and buried in the military cemetery in Catania, Sicily. He was a keen amateur archaeologist. In 1948, in recognition of his bequest and in his memory the annual dinner was renamed the Buckston Browne Gray Hill Dinner

The Society has celebrated Harveian anniversaries with special symposia. The centenary of the Society in June 1931, the tercentenary of Harvey's death in June 1957, the 400th anniversary of Harvey's birth jointly with The Royal College of Physicians in 1978 and the 400th anniversary of Harvey's graduation from Padua University in April 2002 at the University of Padua and in London in June 2002.

In 1954 the Society established the William Harvey Memorial Prize open to students at the William Harvey Grammar School; later the Folkestone Grammar School and Kings School, Canterbury were included. Annually the Society also provides charitable travel bursaries to medical students from a fund established by Dr Joseph Lister Boyd in 1982. This provides financial assistance for overseas electives. An additional Travel fund was established to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Society and this fund was expended in total in 2016 and 2017 providing financial assistance to junior staff at the William Harvey Hospital in Ashford, Kent. All recipients of bursaries are invited to attend a meeting of the Society and present the results of their electives.

The Society has a small library of the works of Harvey, biographies, Harveian lectures and related subjects. The Society owns a number of pictures of Harvey and his family, a terracotta statue of Harvey (Fig 3) and a bust (Fig 4).

Today the Society has about 200 members and meets monthly throughout the academic year, with a dinner followed by a lecture, occasionally a debate. The programme is chosen by the President who chairs the meeting wearing a chain of office (Fig 5) There is an annual meeting in June at Folkestone, William Harvey's birthplace, when members parade along the Lees (the seafront at Folkestone) in academic dress, with the Mayor of Folkestone, town councillors and representatives of the Harveian Grammar School, Kings School Canterbury and the William Harvey Hospital, to lay a wreath at the statue of William Harvey. A Harvey Lecture, supported jointly by the Harveian Society and the Royal Society of Medicine, takes place each June at the RSM. The Society holds a Christmas Party at Lettsom House in December.

Figures:



Fig 1 portrait of Sir George Buckston-Browne by William Logsdale (1928) (oil on canvas)



Fig 2 The Buxton Browne Cup - Inscriptions:

The Annual Buxton Browne Dinner
of
The Harveian Society of London
was founded by the donor
in memory of his only son
Lt.Colonel George Buxton Browne DSO
who fell aged 43 in the Great War
1914 – 1918

This cup was presented to
The Harveian Society of London
by
Rt.Hon. Lord Riddell
at its Buxton Browne dinner, 9 June 1932



Fig3 Statue of William Harvey by C.B. Birch ARA (1886) in terracotta. He is holding a heart in his left hand, with a deer at his feet.

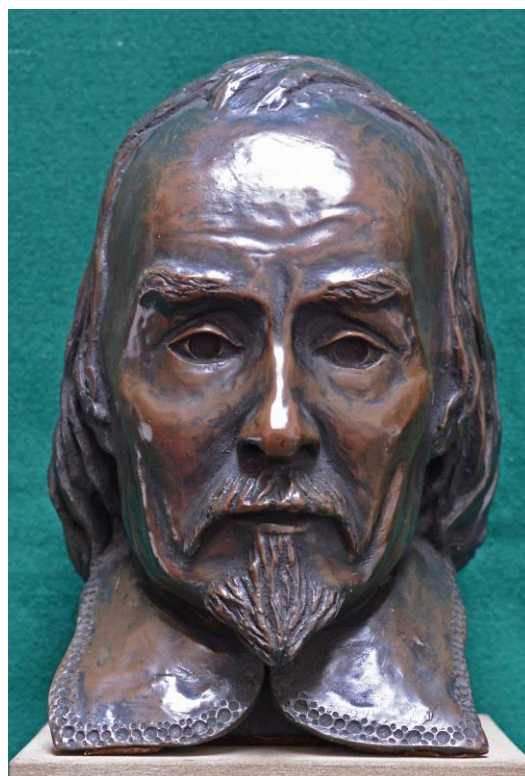


Fig 4 Bust of William Harvey presented by Peter Schurr FRCS (President 1975-76)



Fig 5 Medallion worn by the President at meetings. presented by F.W. Cock MD FSA (President 1906) in memory of F. Cock MD MRCP (President 1876)