



A Brief History of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

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Abstract

The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh has enjoyed a continuous existence as a corporate body since 1505. It may justly claim to be one of the oldest surgical corporations in the world. The Barber Surgeons of Edinburgh were formally incorporated as a Craft Guild of the city and this recognition is embodied in the Seal of Cause or Charter of Privileges which was granted to the Barber Surgeons by the Town Council of Edinburgh on 1st July 1505. The Seal of Cause is a remarkable document. It clearly established the role of the Incorporation of Barber Surgeons as a body concerned with the maintenance and promotion of the highest standards of surgical practice and this remains the prime purpose of the great international surgical brotherhood of the Royal College which has developed from the Incorporation. The Seal of Cause conferred various privileges upon the Incorporation, including the exclusive right of its members to practise surgery in Edinburgh and surrounding districts, but in return for these privileges, it imposed certain crucially important duties and obligations. The most important of these, which remains entirely appropriate to this day, is stated very clearly in the Seal of Cause, "that na maner of persoun occupie nor vse ony poyntis of our said craftis of Surregenie ... bott gif he be first frieman and burges of the samyn, and that he be worthy and expert in all the poyntis belangand the saidis craftis diligently and avysitly examinitt and admittit be the maisters of the said mcraft ... that he knaw anotamell, nature and complexion of euery member humanis bodie, and inlykewayes he knaw all the vaynis of the samyn ... for euery man aucht to knaw the nature and substance of euery thing that he werkis, or ellis he is negligent." From its earliest origins the College has been an examining body principally concerned with the setting and maintenance of professional standards. Another vitally important obligation laid upon the Barber Surgeons was that of ensuring that all who practise the craft should be able to read and write and this literacy requirement is the earliest of any comparable professional body.

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ISSN: 2051-7580 (Online) ISSN: ISSN 0482-3206 (Print)

Res Medica is published by the Royal Medical Society, 5/5 Bristo Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9AL

Res Medica, Volume 268, Issue 2, 2005: 55-56

doi:[10.2218/resmedica.v268i2.1030](https://doi.org/10.2218/resmedica.v268i2.1030)

A Brief History of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

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The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh has enjoyed a continuous existence as a corporate body since 1505. It may justly claim to be one of the oldest surgical corporations in the world. The Barber Surgeons of Edinburgh were formally incorporated as a Craft Guild of the city and this recognition is embodied in the Seal of Cause or Charter of Privileges which was granted to the Barber Surgeons by the Town Council of Edinburgh on 1st July 1505. The Seal of Cause is a remarkable document. It clearly established the role of the Incorporation of Barber Surgeons as a body concerned with the maintenance and promotion of the highest standards of surgical practice and this remains the prime purpose of the great international surgical brotherhood of the Royal College which has developed from the Incorporation. The Seal of Cause conferred various privileges upon the Incorporation, including the exclusive right of its members to practise surgery in Edinburgh and surrounding districts, but in return for these privileges, it imposed certain crucially important duties and obligations. The most important of these, which remains entirely appropriate to this day, is stated very clearly in the Seal of Cause. "that na maner of persoun occupie nor vse ony poyntis of our said craftis of Surregenie ... bott gif he be first frieman and burges of the samyn, and that he be worthy and expert in all the poyntis belangand the saidis craftis diligentlie and avysitly examinitt and admittit be the maisters of the said craft ... that he know anotamell, nature and complexion of euery member humanis bodie, and inlykewayes he know all the vaynis of the samyn ... for euery man aucht to know the nature and substance of euery thing that he werkis, or ellis he is negligent." From its earliest origins the College has been an examining body principally concerned with the setting and maintenance of professional standards. Another vitally important obligation laid upon the Barber Surgeons was that of ensuring that all who practise the craft should be able to read and write and this literacy requirement is the earliest of any comparable professional body.

The Seal of Cause recognised the importance of a thorough knowledge of Anatomy for the practice of surgery and in order that the Incorporation might maintain a high standard of anatomical knowledge amongst its members it was granted the right to have the body of one executed criminal per annum for the purposes of anatomical dissection. Having regard to the very strong religious, cultural and social prejudices against dissection of the human body, this was indeed an extraordinary dispensation. The Seal of Cause was confirmed on the 13th of October 1506 by a Royal Charter granted by King James IV of Scotland, arguably the most interesting and attractive figure of the entire Stuart dynasty. A man of many diverse accomplishments, his long and stable reign was for Scotland a brief golden age. King James was particularly fascinated by medical science and we have clear evidence that he was an enthusiastic practical surgeon and dentist.

During the 16th Century the Incorporation met in the house of its Deacon but meetings were occasionally held in one of the aisles of St. Giles' Kirk and because of this the Deacon was sometimes referred to as the 'Kirk Maister'. The early records of the Incorporation are somewhat fragmented but the names of most of its early Office Bearers are recorded in minutes of the Town Council. From 1581 onwards, its records are complete. One of the most important landmarks in the early history of the Barber Surgeons is the Letter of Exemption granted to them by Mary Queen of Scots, the grand-daughter of James IV, on 11th May 1567. This notable document formally relieved members of the Incorporation from the obligation to bear arms in defence of the realm but obliged them to treat sick and wounded soldiers in the Queen's armies - and is the first formal statement anywhere of the non-combatant role of the army doctor.

Gilbert Primrose, who was elected Deacon of the Barber Surgeons on three separate occasions, was appointed Surgeon to King James VI of Scotland and when the King succeeded to the English throne, in 1603, Primrose went south with him and became Chief Surgeon to the Royal Household in London. Because of Primrose's prestige and the force of his personality, the status of the Incorporation of Barber Surgeons became progressively enhanced and, in 1583, it was formally recognised by the Town Council as the premier craft guild. Several members of the Incorporation gained wide experience of military surgery through service with various European armies during the Thirty Years War and many others later served in the Scottish Covenanting armies of the 1640s.

By the end of the 16th Century, a distinction had developed between the Barbers, who simply cut and shaved hair, and the Barber Surgeons, who also practised the more skilled craft of blood letting and other forms of surgery. The Surgeons gradually abandoned hair cutting and shaving, but frequent disputes arose between the two branches of the Incorporation concerning the rightful scope of their work.

During the first two centuries of its existence, the Incorporation of Surgeons admitted to membership those apprentices who had been trained for six years by master surgeons and who had given satisfactory service. A statutory fee had to be paid and the aspiring surgeon was required to produce his 'ticket' as a Burgess of the City of Edinburgh, but the most important condition of entry was the passing of an examination, conducted by the senior members of the Incorporation.

In 1647 the Incorporation acquired for the first time a permanent meeting place by renting three rooms of a tenement in Dickson's Close. Later, after joining forces with the Apothecaries, the Incorporation laid out in their grounds at Curriehill, the first Edinburgh Physic Garden. In this were grown all kinds of medicinal herbs which enabled the Surgeon Apothecaries to train their apprentices in the recognition of the plants which formed the basis of *Materia Medica* at that time.

By the end of the 17th Century, an increasing number of Edinburgh Surgeons had acquired a formal academic training in medicine and certain Physicians had begun also to practise surgery. The most notable of these was Archibald Pitcairne, who became Professor of Medicine in the University of Leiden where amongst his students were many Scots. He returned to Edinburgh in 1693 and joined the Incorporation of Barber Surgeons in 1701. The admission of Pitcairne and other 'Doctors' to the Incorporation did much to enhance its prestige and to establish surgery clearly as a reputable branch of medicine.

In 1695, the Incorporation was granted a new charter by King William III and Queen Mary, which confirmed the jurisdiction of the Surgeon-Apothecaries over the practice of surgery in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland. The charter also confirmed the Incorporation's responsibility for anatomical teaching and this prompted it to apply to the Town Council for more bodies for dissection. This was approved on the condition that the Incorporation provided an anatomical theatre. By 1697 "Old Surgeons' Hall", in High School Yards, was completed and the first public dissections took place in 1703.

The Faculty of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh was established in 1726 and no one did more to achieve this than John Monro, who was Deacon of the Incorporation of Surgeons from 1712 to 1713. Monro's son, Alexander Monro (Primus), became Professor of Anatomy in the

University in 1719 and his brilliance as a teacher attracted students from all over the British Isles and even from the North American Colonies. He also played a notable part in the establishment of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. The University Faculty of Medicine and the Royal Infirmary were responsible for the rapid development in Edinburgh of systematic medical teaching on a sound scientific basis. Surgery, however, suffered from the effects of a lingering academic prejudice against what was perceived to be a manual craft rather than an intellectual discipline. Formal surgical teaching consisted of only a few lectures appended to the University course in Anatomy. These surgical lectures were delivered by two successive Professors of Anatomy, Alexander Monro (Secundus) and Alexander Monro (Tertius), the son and grandson of Alexander Monro (Primus), who were physicians without any surgical training. This was bitterly resented by the Incorporation of Surgeons and prompted certain of its members to exercise their historical right to teach surgery independently within the city. The energy and enthusiasm of these teachers more than compensated for the surgical deficiencies of the University Medical Course and certain of them, most notably Benjamin Bell and the brothers, John and Charles Bell (to whom he was not related) did much to establish Edinburgh's reputation as a centre of surgical teaching.

On 22nd May 1778, King George III granted a new charter whereby the Surgeons were incorporated anew under the title "Royal College of Surgeons of the City of Edinburgh". A further charter, granted by Queen Victoria in 1851, completed the severance of the College from the Town Council and changed its title to its present form.

By the beginning of the 19th Century, the Old Surgeons' Hall had become inadequate for the College. William Henry Playfair, the foremost Scottish architect of that era, was commissioned to design a building containing a meeting hall, Museum, Lecture Room and Library. The original plans are preserved in the College archives and the handsome furniture, designed by him for the College building, is still in use to this day.

In 1884, the Fellowship Examination was re-introduced after a gap of 33 years. From its inception, the examination flourished and the recruitment of candidates increased steadily. A considerable number of those were from overseas and soon many Fellows of the College were to be found in senior surgical posts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, India and in all other parts of what was then the British Empire.

In July 1905, the College celebrated the fourth centenary of its Incorporation and the most important occasion was the conferment of the Honorary Fellowship upon 36 of the world's most distinguished surgeons. These included Lord Lister, the acknowledged "Father of Modern Surgery" who had become a Fellow in 1855 and he is the only Fellow of the College ever to be awarded its Honorary Fellowship. 1955 marked the advent of the Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, which, under the Editorship of Sir John Bruce, rapidly achieved world-wide recognition. The first College meeting outwith Edinburgh was held in 1960. This has been repeated every year since then. Some years later, senior Egyptian Fellows invited the College to visit Egypt

and, in 1976, the first full scale College meeting to be held outwith the British Isles took place in Cairo and Alexandria. Further overseas meetings have been held all over the world. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was graciously pleased in 1979 to grant the College its sixth Royal Charter.

The form and content of the Fellowship Examination has been progressively adapted, without any diminution of standards, to changes in surgical science and practice and in accordance with changing patterns of surgical training.

In the last fifty years the number of candidates presenting for the Fellowship examinations has been steadily increasing. In 1999, approximately 7,000 candidates from a wide range of countries were examined. It is clear that the Fellowship diploma is prized worldwide as an internationally recognised criterion of sound surgical training. The appearance of an increasing number of candidates from European countries is a most welcome development. Since the first College examination to be conducted outside Edinburgh took place in Hong Kong in 1965 Fellowship examinations have been held in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Kathmandu, Yangon (Rangoon), Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras), Kuwait and Riyadh.

Today the College has over 14,000 Fellows and Members, of whom over 6,000 live in the UK, fulfilling the prime purpose of the College - the maintenance and promotion of the highest standards of surgical practice and surgical training.

Over the past 25 years the College has become increasingly involved in the provision of surgical education and the promotion of surgical research.

Today the College organises training courses, surgical skills workshops, seeks to promote patient-oriented research in clinical surgery and conducts full-scale scientific meetings both at home and overseas. It has developed SELECT, a distance-learning programme for Basic Surgical Trainees, and the recent establishment of its Faculty of Medical Informatics will undoubtedly facilitate the further rapid expansion of its educational role.

With the approach of its Quincentenary, in 2005, the College can take satisfaction from the fact that, in addition to setting standards through the award of its Diplomas, it is now also striving to provide the educational means whereby these standards can be achieved and maintained. To mark this Quincentenary, Dr Helen Dingwall is writing a new History of the College. This will be a record of how a local Craft Guild in the capital city of a small poor nation on the fringe of Europe developed over 500 years into a large international organisation of high repute, with a prestige and influence which transcend all political, ideological and ethnic barriers.

It will be a record of notable service to Humanity, of which all Fellows of the College can be justly proud.

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