Medical History

The Hamadryad Hospital Ship for Seamen, 1866-1905

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In February 1866 the Mayor of Cardiff, Mr Watkins, convened a meeting to discuss an extension to the Glamorgan and Monmouth Infirmary and Dispensary. New wards would provide accommodation for patients with infectious diseases and ill seamen. Nevertheless, the meeting was surprised to hear that Dr Henry Paine, the medical officer of health, had already negotiated the loan of HMS *Hamadryad* from the Admiralty. Dr Paine believed the most suitable accommodation for unwell seamen was a ship, and it was this belief that led to the establishment of what later became known as the Royal Hamadryad Hospital for Seamen. For 82 years it was one of only two hospitals devoted to the free treatment of seamen of all nations and during its first 39 years was housed in a ship. It had many similarities to the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital¹: both hospitals were devoted to the care of a single occupational group, and their location in ships is probably unique.

Proposal for a seamen's hospital

Dr Henry Paine (fig 1) was an enterprising medical officer of health who fully participated in the careful documentation of public health in Cardiff during the nineteenth century. When he retired, in 1888, his successor claimed that during his 48-year reign he had been responsible for a remarkable reduction in the town's death rate, saving over 15 000 lives and £3 483 000. One of the many projects to which he devoted considerable energy was establishing a hospital for seamen. During the winter of 1865 he persuaded local shipping interests to support the project. No doubt the threat of further outbreaks of cholera was influential in persuading them that a hospital ship would provide some protection by isolating cases, especially among seamen.

The scheme was opposed in some quarters by those who preferred an extension to the existing infirmary. The editor of *The Cardiff Times* "feared that Dr Paine's plan must fail. Those who regard the ship scheme but as a very doubtful experiment will also desire that as soon as possible that experiment shall be fairly tried in order that the postponed extension of the Infirmary may either be entered upon or definitely abandoned."² He left no doubt as to his opinion of Dr Paine: "It is only to be regretted that he should have mixed up in his own mind the detail with the principle and committed himself just as strongly to the having the hospital in a ship as to the giving hospital relief at all." A more balanced view came from the correspondence columns of *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, where a "Friend to Jack Tar" thought that the creation of a hospital ship and the extension of the infirmary were not mutually exclusive and that the infirmary could be supported by the town and the *Hamadryad* by the shipping interests. "Do not drag

FIG 1—Dr Henry James Paine, MD, MRCS, the first medical officer of health in Cardiff (1854-87) and founder of the Hamadryad Hospital Ship.

through the streets of the town and allow to fester in the midst of it *all the diseases of the world*."³ It was thought that there would "be more chances of an old or young salt's cure, floating in this hollow oak, with old mess mates about him, and the Union Jack wavering o'er him, than there would be in the most perfectly fitted ward in any infirmary."

The ship

HMS *Hamadryad* was the third ship of that name, but it had had a very different history to that of its predecessors. The first *Hamadryad* was a 36-gun Spanish frigate initially called the *Ninfa*. She was grounded in Conil Bay near Cape Trafalgar and made a prize that was purchased by the Admiralty for use in the Mediterranean Fleet as an armed transport; she sank close to Algiers. The second *Hamadryad* was another captured Spanish frigate, the *Matilda*, which remained in active service until 1813, when she was sold for £2610. The third *Hamadryad* was built at Pembroke Dock between 1819 and 1823 for £24 683 but never saw active service. Laid up at Devonport until 1866, orders were given for her to be broken up, but a month later arrangements were completed for her conversion into a seamen's hospital ship for use in the Port of Cardiff.

She was fitted out at a cost of £1414 to receive between 60 and 65 inpatients, with facilities for a doctor, his medical staff, a matron, and her nursing staff. When the ship arrived at Cardiff she was grounded on wasteland known as Rat Island (figs 2 and 3)—an area that subsequently grew into Tiger Bay.

FIG 2—The Hamadryad Hospital Ship, grounded at Rat Island, Cardiff.

FIG 3—The Hamadryad figurehead, now preserved at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

Finances of the hospital ship were provided by voluntary contributions of two shillings for every 100 tons of registered shipping. This was collected from owners, captains, or their agents at the docks office. With the income from the increased tonnage passing through the rapidly expanding Cardiff docks, the hospital soon had a healthy surplus, and in 1876 returned a donation of £100 from the rival infirmary. The annual expenditure of the hospital committee was generally less than £2000. Funds came solely from voluntary contributions, and it is estimated that from 1866 to 1905 the town was saved £60 000.

In 1871 a wooden annexe was built close to the hospital to provide bunks for up to 40 patients with infectious diseases and for several years this remained the only centre in the city for treating infectious diseases.

Patients

The hospital was opened on 1 November 1866, and patients who were seamen or passengers from the ports of Cardiff, Barry, or Newport were admitted. Patients from Cardiff who had infectious diseases were also treated on the ship and later in the adjoining wooden annexe. The first surgical superintendent was Mr Vavasour of Sandford. In his first year he treated over 400 inpatients (fig 4). Because of the increase in shipping the number

of patients rose steadily throughout the existence of the hospital ship (fig 5). By 1897 over 10 000 patients were treated each year. In reviewing the effect of treatment that year Dr Hughes, the medical superintendent, reported only 17 deaths out of 379 inpatients. Nine of these were from natural causes and eight from accidents. The death rate of $4\frac{1}{2}\%$ was only half of that seen in the London general hospitals. He believed that this reflected the admission of relatively unfit seamen with minor complaints rather than more effective treatment. He also noticed a pronounced decline in the number of cases of scurvy and dysentery owing to the improved diet and sanitary conditions aboard ship.

FIG 4—Patients aboard the hospital ship. On admission every patient had a warm bath and hair cut. They were then issued with regulation hospital clothing. No patient was allowed to sit on his bed without permission.

FIG 5—Number of patients treated either as inpatients or outpatients at the Hamadryad Hospital ship between 1866 and 1905.

Hospital staff

Hospital staff included a medical officer, hospital sergeant, nurses, a cook, and stewardess. The medical officer resided on board, and his practice was restricted to the ship's patients. Despite the unusual surroundings, his medical duties differed little from those of his contemporaries. He visited his patients at least twice daily and followed the professional advice of the honorary staff. In addition to these medical duties he was expected to supervise the cleanliness and ventilation of the wards, collect penny deposits on medicine bottles, prepare wills, and arrange burials.

The hospital sergeant was responsible for day-to-day manage-

ment of provisions and supervision of cleaning and nursing duties. The hospital committee considered that they could not "too strongly impress upon him the necessity of politeness to all visitors" whom he was expected to escort around the ship.

Only the chief nurse was required to read. All nurses were responsible for the cleanliness of the wards, and at night one of them kept watch and reported any change in a patient's medical condition to the resident medical officer. As the *Hamadryad* was a wooden frigate nurses were to stop nails being driven into any part of the wards and to prevent smoking or the carrying of naked lights. The upper nurse looked after the half-ports, which were opened only with the permission of the medical officer. Nothing was to be thrown out of these ports or passed in to patients through them. The rules applying to the social life of nurses were strict. They were allowed ashore only for the night when leave was granted and had to return by 6 am in summer or 7 am in winter.⁴

The cook, who had to "be clean in his person, and keep the galley and cooking utensils in perfect order and cleanliness," was expected to present a sample of his cooking at each meal to the medical officer for inspection.

By 1897 the inadequacy of the accommodation on the ship was recognised. Deterioration in the structure of the ship and defective sanitation compared poorly with that in the Union

Hospital. During its 30 years, however, 173 000 patients from all over the world were treated on the ship: 1285 had fractures or dislocations, 1384 wounds, and 2098 chest infections. Of the 1182 fever cases, many came from the town itself. Alderman Beavan, the Mayor of Cardiff, convened a meeting to discuss the best means of celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria and suggested that a permanent seamen's hospital should be built. It was opened on 29 June 1905 and as the Royal Hamadryad Seamen's Hospital continued to provide free medical treatment for seamen until 1948, when it was incorporated into the National Health Service.

I thank Dr Ralph Marshall and Mr Paul Crompton for help in preparing the illustrations.

References

- ¹ McBride AG. *The History of the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital at Greenwich*. Greenwich: Seamen's Hospital Management Committee, 1970.
- ² *Cardiff Times* 1866 March 2.
- ³ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* 1866 March 9.
- ⁴ "Hamadryad" *Seamen's Hospital Rules*. Cardiff: Lewis and Williams, 1868.

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Pages from a diary

ELSTON GREY-TURNER

In the autumn of 1943 the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards (of which I was the medical officer) was in reserve in Algeria after the North African campaign and the capture of the Italian islands of Pantelleria, Lampedusa, and Sicily. We were suddenly selected for an unusual mission. The commanding officer was ordered to take half the battalion east to a secret map reference near Tunis. We drove at high speed through well-remembered places: Souk-el-Arba, Beja, Gascap Hill, Coldstream Hill, Medjez-el-Bab, Furna, and Massicault. At the ordained rendezvous, a military police officer gave the CO further sealed orders to proceed at full speed to another secret destination, which we reached in the evening. My diary recorded:

4 December 1943. We surround a "white house" where certain big chiefs (?Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin) are to meet shortly. We are to take incredible security precautions. The regimental aid post is in the cellar of a house. It is lovely to be in Tunis again, warm, by the sea.

The "white house" was a large and beautiful villa at sea level on the Gulf of Tunis. It was completely hidden on the landward side but was overlooked by another villa (where were battalion headquarters and one company), by an old fort in which Major Henry Green and his company were established, and by a tented camp, where the rest of the battalion was quartered. The whole area was completely enclosed by two barbed wire entanglements, heavily guarded by the battalion. The main gate was manned by American military police. Off shore, a naval picket boat cruised up and down.

Petersham, Surrey

ELSTON GREY-TURNER, MA, MD, formerly Secretary, BMA

My diary again:

6 December. Carthage. This is really the most delightful change and rest. I'm sitting on the balcony of our villa in the afternoon sun looking over the blue Gulf of Tunis. Beneath me is the lovely villa we are to guard. On the right is Henry Green's fort. In the distance is the dear old Zaghuan,* and over the gulf are Hamman Lif and the Kournine.† It is tremendous joy being back here.

This morning, after seeing the sick, I went with the ambulance into Tunis with a patient, and bought large quantities of fruit, wine, etc for the battalion. Tunis looked as full as ever, but not so gay.

Lovely heat at midday. I'm running a sweepstake on who comes to the white house.

To dinner came the two American colonels in charge of security here. Very charming and sensible senior American officers.

The sweepstake was a huge success, although some of the fifty-odd runners (such as the Emperor of Japan) were considered to be outsiders.

Arrival of President Roosevelt

7 December. D day. Lovely hot morning. I have a bathe each day before breakfast, very refreshing though cold.

At about 1400 the battalion mounted all the guards and the airfield party reported there for duty. At 1530 three big planes flew in escorted by 16 fighters. At 1600 the notables arrived at the white house in a fleet of cars. We identified President Roosevelt, his son, General Eisenhower, and Mr Hopkins.

There were a lot of callers at the white villa on this lovely moonlit evening.

*The highest mountain of Tunisia, visible from many of the battlefields.

†Another mountain.