The variety of reasons and excuses offered emphasizes the fact that in a large number of cases there has been a complete failure of communication between the maternity patients and the hospital as regards simple obstetric education. In many cases the patient herself may be at fault through indiffcience and apathy regarding the weekly childbirth classes. Nevertheless, the hospital staff—both medical and nursing—must take some of the blame for failing to realize how little knowledge many women have of the fundamental principles of childbirth. With large antenatal clinics it is all too easy to make a quick obstetrical assessment and to reassure the patient without providing any time for simple discussion. Too little attention is paid by the hospital staff to these many social problems which frequently arise, and all too often we assume that the patient herself will make the first inquiry. The reluctance of obstetric patients to attend instruction classes is well known, but the alternative of the explanatory booklet does not appear to be sufficient to safeguard against the occasional and unnecessary B.B.A.

While better appreciation of these problems will reduce the number of cases occurring, it may also be advisable to plan admission of patients with previous B.B.A.s to hospital in the last four weeks of pregnancy either to await the spontaneous onset of labour or to be induced. In this series 10 of the 100 patients had had previous B.B.A.s.

MEDICAL HISTORY

Birthplace of Thomas Willis

Sir CHARLES SYMONDS,* F.R.C.P.; WILLIAM FEINDEL,† F.R.C.S.(C.)

Every medical student has heard of Willis on account of the arterial circle that bears his name. Comparatively few know that he was the author of a work on the anatomy of the brain and nervous system that was a landmark in the history of medical science (Willis, 1965). Fewer still are aware of his achievements in the field of clinical medicine. In his observations and deductions he was often so far in advance of his time that it is only with the passage of years that their value has been revealed (Hierons, 1967).

Of his methods he wrote: "After I had not found in Books what might satisfy a mind desirous of Truth, I resolved with myself to reach into living and breathing examples ; and therefore, sitting oftimes by the Sick, I was wont to search out their cases, to weigh all the symptoms, and to put them, with exact Diaries of the Diseases, into writing ; then diligently to meditate on these ; and then began to adapt general Notions from particular events."

Clinical and pathological observations, together with his knowledge of the circle, led him to the surmise that, even though both internal carotid arteries should be occluded, the circulation of the brain might be preserved through the vertebrobasilar channels, a surmise that has now been proved correct by angiography. He gave the first description of the disease now known as myasthenia gravis. He noted that an intermittent pulse was not invariably associated with a bad prognosis. He gave the first clinical and pathological account of emphysema. After describing epileptic seizures he concluded that they arose from "explosions" in the brain. This followed from his supposition that nervous energy, though derived from the bloodstream, had its origin in the brain, from which it irradiated through the spinal cord and peripheral nerves. He went further than this in suggesting that there was a barrier between blood and brain, allowing only the passage of those smallest particles that were essential to the swift performance of the nervous function.

These are but a few examples of his powers of observation and imagination. That he was one of the greatest of British physicians is now generally admitted. He may justly be regarded as the founder of neurology, for he coined that word to mean "doctrine [teaching] of the nerves."

Tombstone in Westminster Abbey

He was buried in Westminster Abbey, and the following note gives an account of the location and renewal of his tombstone, and of a recent visit to his birthplace.
Thomas Willis was born in the village of Great Bedwyn in Wiltshire on 27 January (Symonds, 1960). The year of his birth is variously given as 1620 or 1621, this being explained by the entry of his baptism in the church register which we examined. The date was 14 February of the calendar year of 1621, but the ecclesiastical year of 1621 did not begin until 1 April.

In 1958 we were able to locate the tombstone of Thomas Willis in Westminster Abbey, the inscription on which had been so worn down by the feet of many generations of visitors to the Royal Chapels that few of the letters were legible. A group of his admirers from Canada and the United Kingdom had the stone replaced. The authorities of the Abbey were able to inform us that the original tombstone was of a black Belgian marble. A supply of this was obtained, the original lettering inscribed, and the stone unveiled on 1 September, 1961, following a brief service by Canon Fox of the Abbey (Feindel, 1962).

Birthplace

One of us (C. P. S.) lives in the village of Ham, Wiltshire, 5 miles (8 km.) from Great Bedwyn, and learnt by chance that the house where Willis was born survives. The present owner, Mr. Sherwill Thomas, kindly brought him a cutting from the Gentleman's Magazine of December 1798, with a plate on page 1013 showing the house (Fig. 1). After referring to it as "The house in which that illustrious physician, Dr. Willis was born," the legend states, "It stands in a street, or lane, called Farm Lane, at the North-east end of the town, and is remarkable for its antique appearance, being almost overgrown with ivy, and having a cylindrical stone chimney to which another of brick had been added." It goes on, "There is a print of the Doctor in the house, said (by the old woman who lives in it) to have been left there by his grandson, Browne Willis, the Antiquary, who frequently visited it."

On 10 April of this year, together with Dr. Francis McNaughton, we visited the house. It stands exactly as shown in the engraving, with the distinctive twin chimney clearly identified. Only the ivy is gone from the wall (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 1.—Drawing of the birthplace of Willis, 1798.](image)

![Fig. 2.—Photograph taken in April 1969.](image)

We were hospitably received by Mrs. Sherwill Thomas, wife of the present owner, who was able to tell us something of the history of the house and of the village. Great Bedwyn, prosperous in the days of the wool trade, once had a population of over 2,000. This declined rapidly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and has since remained at about 800. Old maps show the house as Ivy Cottage, but the name was later changed to The Castle. Mrs. Thomas told us that archaeologists who had explored the property believe the house to have been originally a small monastic building erected in the fifteenth century, probably destroyed by fire. The present edifice was evidently built from the remains of the old structure. This is suggested by some of the massive oak beams as well as by the large dimensions of the first- and second-floor sections of the chimney and its two great fireplaces, all of which seem too big for the size of the present house. The line of the plastering on the chimney (seen in both Figures) is taken also to indicate the higher level of an earlier roof. There are two floors, with three rooms on the lower and two on the upper floor, one of which is a large bedroom where Thomas Willis was probably born.

References