Medical History

Fifty Years in Tavistock Square

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

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Fifty years ago the British Medical Association moved from 429 Strand to Tavistock Square. On 13 July 1925 the new B.M.A. House, the Association’s fourth in London, was ceremoniously opened by King George V, accompanied by Queen Mary, “in the presence of perhaps the most representative gathering ever brought together in the name of British Medicine.” The contemporary report added: “No circumstance which could give honour to the occasion was lacking,” and “expressions of admiration for one of the finest modern structures of London were heard on every hand.”

Certainly the B.M.A. had acquired a property fit for a national professional organization of nearly 30,000 members and one which was also spacious enough for its needs. Particularly impressive was a great hall which would hold the Annual Representative Meeting, the central element in the Association’s democratic constitution. All around on that auspicious afternoon of 13 July was evidence of success and progress.

First Three Houses

When in 1871 the Association moved from the provinces to the Metropolis it established itself in a mere two rooms over the printers of the B.M.J. at 37 Great Queen Street W.C.2. No. 36 next door was taken as the office of the Journal (fig. 1). The membership then numbered 4403, the annual income was £5261, and the balance of income over expenditure £38. Under the strict business methods applied by the Association’s newly-appointed first general secretary the financial position improved. The B.M.A. decided to print the B.M.J. itself. Larger premises were therefore needed and were found in 1878 at 161A Strand, on the south side facing St. Mary’s Church. This became the first B.M.A. House (fig. 2). The upper part was occupied by the printing department, but there was a room capable of seating 30–40 persons for meetings of the Committee of Council (corresponding to the present Council) and a cubby hole on a landing for the use of the assistant editor on press days.

A progressive increase in membership and in the circulation of the B.M.J. soon made further expansion necessary. In 1886 £4500 was paid for the lease of 429 Strand, on the corner of Agar Street, and £5000 spent on altering and equipping the building to become the second B.M.A. House (fig. 3). In 1888 the lease of the two adjoining houses, Nos. 2 and 3 Agar Street,


FIG. 5—Great Hall, B.M.A. House, Tavistock Square, W.C.1.

FIG. 6—B.M.A. House, Tavistock Square, centre block and main entrance.

FIG. 7—Quadrangle, B.M.A. House, Tavistock Square, with memorial gates and statues.
was acquired for £3200, while in 1896 £750 was paid for the lease of Nos. 4 and 5 Agar Street. In 1894 the freehold of two small houses behind the main building had been bought for £4640. Eventually the freeholds of the houses in the Strand and Agar Street were also acquired. The total cost of this considerable site, the buildings on it, and putting them in order was £86 000. The B.M.A. felt itself securely housed.

Nevertheless, the reorganization of the Association in 1902, which created among other constitutional changes a number of standing committees, and the appointment in 1903 of a medical secretary and supporting staff strained the existing accommodation. The membership was then around 20 000. Room could not be found for the meetings of what had become a much larger Council, and these were held by the courtesy of the Metropolitan Asylums Board’s in its spacious board-room. The best way to solve the problem was to demolish all the buildings on the Strand-Agar street site and to build on it a new house specially designed for the B.M.A.’s needs. The bold decision was taken and demolition began at Easter 1907. Until the third B.M.A. House (fig. 4) was ready in November 1908 premises in Catherine Street, Strand, served as temporary headquarters.

Fourth House, Tavistock Square

Almost predictably the time came when the B.M.A. again required a larger home. By 1920 the membership was 22 600. More committees had been appointed and the day-to-day work had been increased by the advent in 1913 of the National Health Insurance scheme. The Association’s fine Library was growing bigger and the house in the Strand had no hall for large meetings such as the A.R.M. and the Conference of Representatives of Local Medical and Panel Committees. A search therefore began for yet another B.M.A. House. It ended in 1923 in Tavistock Square.

The building in Tavistock Square was then little more than a shell.1 It had been built for the Theosophical Society in 1913 to the design of Sir Edwin Lutyens, R.A., but had not been completed by the start of the first world war in August 1914. During the war it had been occupied by the War Office Pay Department. After the war the Theosophical Society was unable to proceed with its plans and the building was left in the hands of the War Disposals Board. Despite the dilapidation the Council of the B.M.A. reported that the building “offers immediately the accommodation urgently required and will afford scope for all necessary expansion.”2 The A.R.M. authorized the Council to negotiate. By 1924 the B.M.A. had “bought for roughly £50 000 the lease for 200 years of a building which had cost something like £150 000 at a ground rent which was not excessive.”3 The cost of completing the building would be about £60 000. Moreover, the Bedford estate, the ground landlord, agreed that in due course the Association could extend its house forwards to the main road to give a continuous frontage on to Tavistock Square and Upper Woburn Place. The potential area was two and a half acres.

Work went ahead, under the direction of Sir Edwin Lutyens, on completing the structure and adapting it to the Association’s requirements. Owing to lack of money the Great Hall (fig. 5) was never wholly roofed in as Lutyens intended. Probably, and for the same reason, it never will be. A beautiful addition was the wrought-iron gates, also designed by Lutyens, placed at the entrance to the quadrangle as a memorial to the 574 members of the Association who had lost their lives in the first world war. The gates were opened and dedicated by Dr. Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, during the ceremonies on 13 July 1925. In the same year the B.M.A. opened its new Scottish House, No. 6 Drumshaughe Gardens, Edinburgh, which was enlarged two years later by the purchase of No. 7 next door.

EXTENSIONS TO HOUSE

In 1927 work was begun on the first of the extensions to B.M.A. House. The houses of Tavistock Place North, which then formed the approach road to the entrance gates, were pulled down and a new centre block built which converted the quadrangle into a closed court, containing the Memorial Gates, and fronting directly on to Tavistock Square (fig. 6). The new entrance was the gated archway still in use. The architect was Mr. C. Wontner Smith.

In 1938 work was started, under directions of the architect Mr. Douglas Wood, on completing the facade on to Tavistock Square and Upper Woburn Place by building wings to the north and south of the centre block. At the same time the Garden Court Wing, eventually to house the Library, was begun. This and the north wing (Tavistock House North) were completed in November 1938, but both were commandeered for war purposes and were not occupied by the B.M.A. until 1946. Work on the half-built south wing (Tavistock House South) was interrupted by the second world war and part of it was destroyed by enemy bombing in 1941. Building was restarted in 1949 and finished in September 1950. In 1954 statues representing Sacrifice, Cure, Prevention, and Aspiration, designed by Mr. James Woodford, R.A., were placed round a formal pool and fountain in the centre of the quadrangle as a memorial to members killed in the second world war.

In 1958 work was begun on a further wing, the East Wing, facing on to Burton Street at the rear of the main building. Finished in 1960 at a cost of £190 000, it provided valuable additional office space both for B.M.A. use and for letting. In 1961 the Library premises in the Garden Court Wing were modernized and largely rebuilt as a result of a generous gift from Lord Nuffield. This completed B.M.A. House as it is today, with the quadrangle (fig. 7) as the central feature.

ENDOWMENT FOR FUTURE

In 1962 the Association bought for £120 000 the freehold of all its property standing on the Tavistock Square site. For a cost of less than 20 years’ rental it became the owner of an asset of considerable value and one which provided a “rich endowment for the future.”4 By 1970 the loan raised to buy the freehold had been paid off.

Today, 50 years after the B.M.A. first took possession of it, the fourth B.M.A. House may no longer be called modern nor is it the cheapest of buildings to maintain. But it is homely and dignified and is admired. It also provided in 1974 a net income of £195 492 from rents.5 The Association indeed invested wisely in 1925.

References

1 British Medical Journal, 1925, 2, 137.
3 British Medical Journal Supplement, 1923, 1, 269.
5 British Medical Journal, 1962, 1, 626.
6 British Medical Journal, 1975, 2, 231.