



The RI: a medical history

As a new chapter in Oxford's development begins to unfold on the Radcliffe Infirmary site, Andrew Moss reflects on its glorious past

MORE than two centuries of outstanding medical achievement at Oxford's first hospital came to an end in January when the Radcliffe Infirmary closed its doors and the NHS handed the keys to the University.

Behind the imposing grey stone walls and along the endless corridors have walked some of the greatest brains and most original personalities of twentieth-century medicine, whose energy and determination claimed a worldwide reputation for the Infirmary as a pioneering and innovative hospital. As one doctor commented on the eve of its closure, wherever you went in the world, you never had to say the name twice. Its place in history was secure.

It all began when the immensely successful physician John Radcliffe (1652–1714), who had attended three monarchs with a mixture of skill and abruptness, left his fortune to Oxford: half to his old college (Univ) and half to be administered by trustees, principally to build a library. When the Radcliffe Camera was complete, there was more than enough left to build the Radcliffe Infirmary and the Radcliffe Observatory as well.

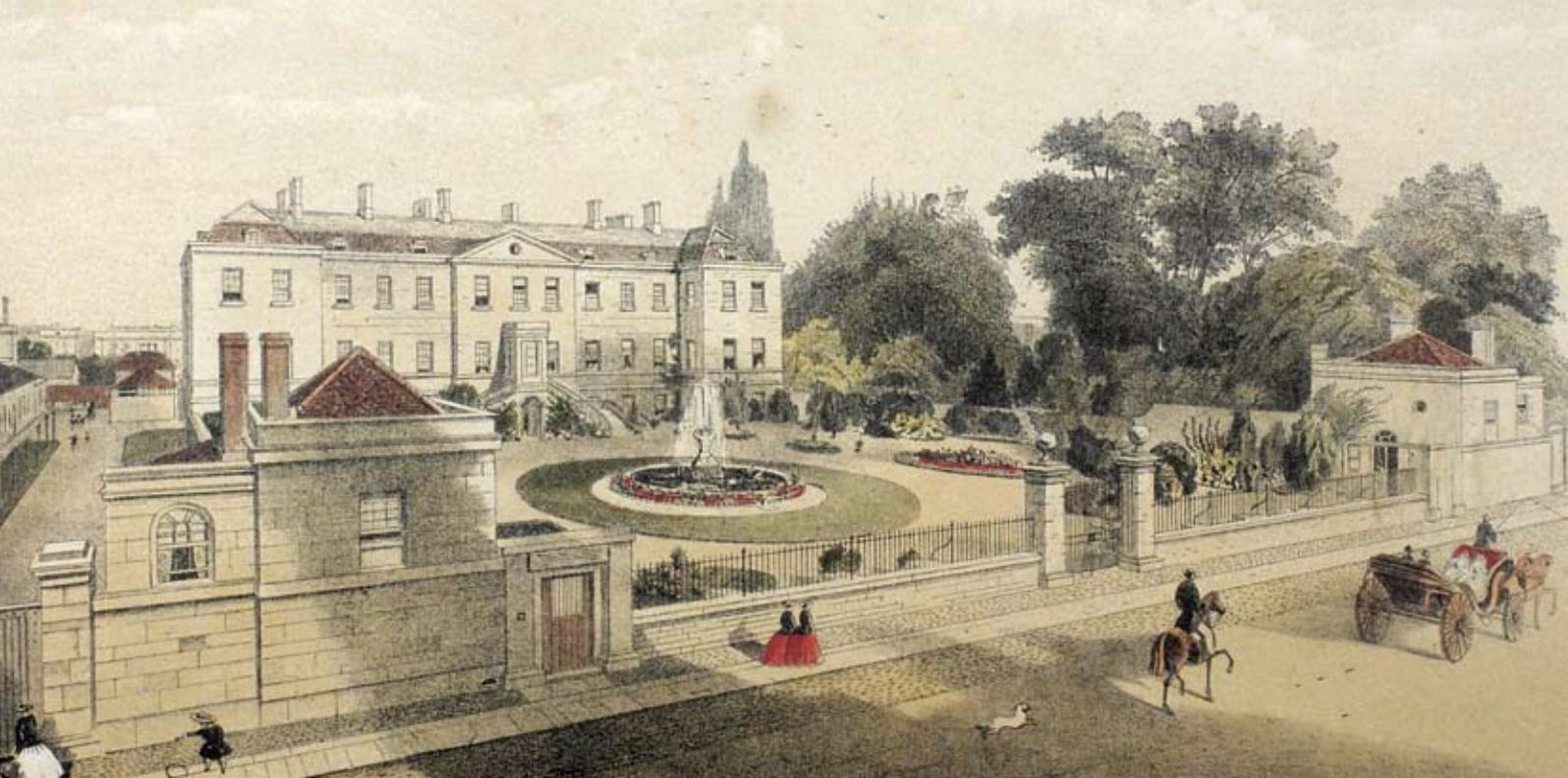
The hospital opened on St Luke's Day (18 October) 1770, operating under strict rules that provided for

admissions and discharges once a week, set the wages of the matron at £15 a year (with a gratuity of £10 if she behaved well), described the work of nurses under the heading of 'servants' and excluded children, pregnant women and people with nasty infectious diseases, especially if they arose from moral indiscretion.

The hospital was a charity, built by people who could afford to pay for healthcare for the benefit of those who could not. Its early advances were mainly from benefactors such as Thomas Combe who built the chapel, his widow Martha who paid for the first children's wards, and the surgeon John Briscoe (1820–1908) who left his entire fortune to the hospital that was his life.

The beginnings of the effective partnership between the hospital and the University emerged in the person of Sir Henry Acland, Physician to the Infirmary for more than 30 years and Regius Professor of Medicine for nearly 40 (1858–94). Sir William Osler, author of the greatest medical textbook of the twentieth century, was attracted to Oxford as Regius Professor in 1905, bringing with him an infectious enthusiasm and a renowned skill in bedside teaching (see *OT* 17.3, p. 16).

TOP: John Radcliffe presents his (as yet unbuilt) hospital to the poor and sick: engraving from the *Oxford Almanack*, 1760



The Infirmary began to harness the advances of science, leading the way in the use of electricity for anything other than shock treatment and starting an X-ray department in a hut. After the First World War Oxford was one of the birthplaces of plastic surgery, led by the ebullient Lancastrian Tommy Kilner. It led a hand-to-mouth existence until William Morris, Lord Nuffield, stepped in with major benefactions and the Infirmary began its advance to international fame.

First came the maternity department in 1931, then the purchase of the adjoining Observatory and then, in 1937, the colossal generosity of the five Nuffield professorships in surgery, medicine, orthopaedics, obstetrics and gynaecology and anaesthetics. The latter was not a popular suggestion with the University, which considered anaesthetics to be a sort of craft involving tubes and pumps, but Morris was adamant and history has shown him right.

In 1941 the hospital was the first in the world to use penicillin in the treatment of infection. Years of laboratory work by Howard Florey and his team in the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology had at last produced penicillin in a form that could be injected into the system. The notes of the time reveal doctors' and nurses'

astonishment at how it transformed the outcome for patients for whom there had previously been no hope.

The post-war development of Oxford University Medical School, combined with the arrival of some very bright and energetic young doctors, meant that the Infirmary began to hum with the excitement of medical and scientific advances and the newborn NHS. It spread its wings into the Observatory site and by the mid-1970s was desperate for space.

When the John Radcliffe Hospital opened in Headington in 1979, it looked like the end. But the old Infirmary sprang to life again as a centre for specialist services such as neurosciences, ophthalmology and head and neck surgery, and into its empty spaces came research such as Sir Richard Doll's work on the links between smoking and cancer.

The clinical services and the research laboratories have carried their legacy into outstanding new buildings on the John Radcliffe and Churchill Hospital sites, while the old Infirmary looks forward to a new life as an academic campus.

Andrew Moss is a former head of public relations for the NHS in the Oxford Region. His book *The Radcliffe Infirmary* is published by Tempus Publishing at £12.99

Clockwise from top: engraving, 1860, of the hospital before the chapel was added; Sir William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) provided funds for the maternity department, opened by the Duchess of York on 22 October 1931; Sister Barbara Twining, who witnessed some of the earliest treatments with penicillin in the 1940s, adjusts a drip in 1950; the first five Oxford University medical students with the Regius Professor of Medicine, A G Gardner, in 1948