

The Bristol Dental Chair

Chris Stephens*

The only artefact of any historic significance held in the Bristol Dental School is a dental chair. It is of entirely wooden construction in which the height of the seat, back and headrest can be adjusted.



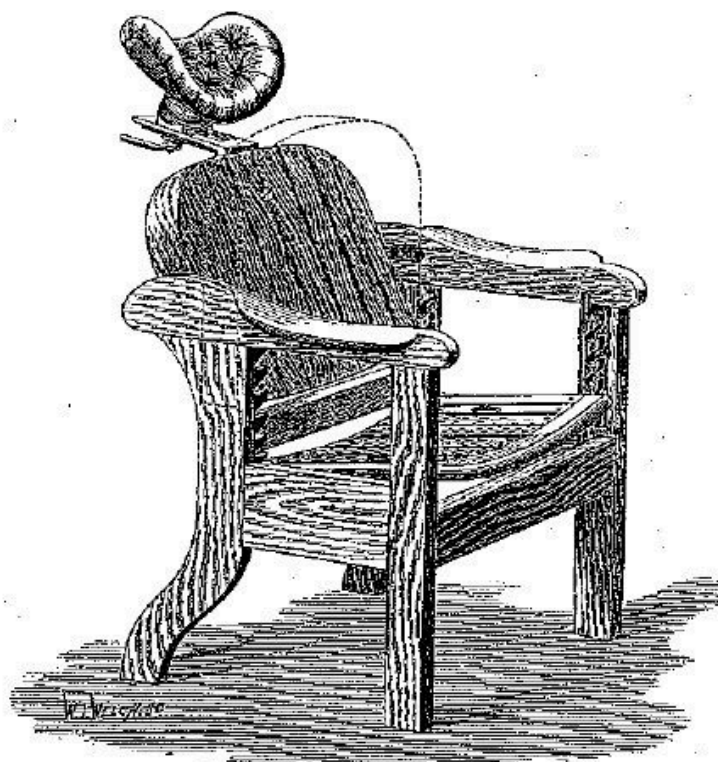
Quite when the chair was acquired and who bought it has been a matter for conjecture for some time as there is no record of its origin.

The Bristol Medical School was founded in 1833 and the teaching of medicine and surgery preceded both the establishment of the University College in 1876 and the passing of the first Dentists Act in 1878. Dentistry at this time was seen to be part of surgery and students would “walk the wards” at either the Bristol Infirmary or the General Hospital to gain clinical experience.

The Bristol General Hospital was the first to establish a post specific to dentistry when in 1874 the position of Surgeon Dentist was created and Thomas Cooke Parson elected to it. Six years later the General Hospital was also the first to establish a special department of dental surgery.

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The Bristol Infirmary (later the Bristol Royal Infirmary) continued to expect dental procedures to be part of the duties of the general surgeon until 1888 when it opened its dental department and appointed William Robert Ackland as their dental surgeon. Before he came to Bristol at the age of 25, Ackland had been Demonstrator of Practical Dental Surgery at the Dental Hospital of London which by this time had moved to Leicester Square. One of his colleagues there was the 42 year old Charles Sissmore Tomes F.R.S., son of Sir John Tomes, who was already an examiner for the LDSRCS Eng. It is interesting to note that in the year Ackland was appointed in Bristol Claudius Ash and Sons donated £500 towards the extension of the Dental Hospital of London ¹. Clearly the company had seen the commercial wisdom of supporting charitable institutions dedicated to dental education and it is just possible that they may have sponsored the Bristol dental chair.



	s.	d.
Chair as illustrated, supplied to the London Dental Hospital	170	0
Chair (Mr. Owen's) Improved—see page 44—In Birchwood, with Footstool attached, and Head-rest covered in Leather, as supplied to the Liverpool Dispensary	325	0
Hospital Chair, with simple movements, new form	92	0

NOTE.—The above prices are only to Hospitals and Charitable Institutions.

Figure 1 The Ash Dental Chair from their 1886 Catalogue

The BDA have a very similar chair in the museum collection dating from about 1860. The Bristol model does not appear in a 1860s catalogue but does in the 1886 Ash catalogue (Figure 1) which was made primarily for charitable institutions. The only difference is the more rudimentary head rest of the Bristol chair. This is clearly a replacement which is fixed rather crudely with a screw through the backrest. The improved chair mentioned in the advertisement above was probably the considerably more sophisticated model which had been exhibited by George Owen LDS RCS Eng of the North London Dental Dispensary at the meeting of the Odontological Society in December 1858 ².

According to tradition, the 1886 chair was retired from regular service at some point when the Bristol Infirmary's Dental Department was re-equipped and thereafter only brought into use at busy

¹ Smith E, Cottell B. *A History of the Royal Dental Hospital of London 1858-1985*, London: The Athlone Press, 1997. p 42.

² Transactions of the Odontological Society Volume II, London :Cox and Wyman, 1861. pp 107-109.

times. This is likely to have been in 1902 when a dental operation room was provided and an Honorary Assistant Dental Surgeon appointed "to instruct students in dental mechanics". Munro Smith, a member of the consultant staff at the time reported that

*"The advantage of having a properly-equipped department, with expert dentists, and the many accessories necessary for tooth extraction, etc., was at once apparent, and the shrieks associated with this branch of surgery became confined to certain days."*³

The Dental School became a recognized entity within the Medical School in 1906. Theoretical teaching took place in the Medical School building, which was now part of the University College, but students were also required to attend the dental departments of either the Royal Infirmary or the General Hospital for their clinical work for which they paid an additional fee. There was always intense rivalry between the two departments and this continued until the two hospitals merged to form the United Bristol Hospitals in 1935.

A notable feature of the Bristol dental chair is the large number of names of past students carved on it. The earliest is "G Smith 1909" this could have been GH Smith who according to Saunders 1964 had obtained his LDSRCS Eng in 1904⁴. It suggests that by this time the chair was out of daily use since such vandalism would not have been risked otherwise. The regular addition of names though does not begin until 1930.



Figure 2 The earliest name carved on the Bristol dental chair

In 1910 clinical conditions and supervision were so bad in the dental department at the Bristol Royal Infirmary that the students there approached Mr. Dowling, Lecturer in Dental Anatomy and Physiology who was also the dental surgeon at the General Hospital. He invited them to move to the General Hospital and all but two accepted his invitation⁵. This defection and loss of revenue had the expected result, and the Bristol Royal Infirmary immediately engaged a full-time House Surgeon, so that constant supervision was provided. This may well have been Basil W Tyson 1911 (LDSRCS Eng 1911) whose name appears carved on the left arm rest. He could have been one of the two students who remained to complete their clinical work at the Infirmary.

During the first World War the number of dental students fell to just one in 1916⁶. The new wing at the Bristol Royal Infirmary (now known as the Edward VII Building) which had been opened by H. M. King George V and Queen Mary in 1912 was then occupied by the military⁷. The building was

³ Smith TM. *A History of the Bristol Royal Infirmary*. Bristol : J.W.Arrowsmith, 1917. p 392.

⁴ Saunders CJG. *The University of Bristol Dental School and Hospital*. Bristol :The Board of Governors of the United Bristol Hospitals, 1964, p 66.

⁵ Stoy P The Bristol Dental School 1874-1940. *Br Dent J* 1947; 82: 142.

⁶ Stoy P The Bristol Dental School 1874-1940. *Br Dent J* 1947; 82: 142.

⁷ Saunders CJG. *The United Bristol Hospitals*. Bristol :The Board of Governors of the United Bristol Hospitals, 1965, p 22.

returned to civilian use in April 1919 and the Conservation Room, Extraction Rooms, etc., were then transferred to this wing. There was now a large influx of students; 50 arrived in 1919 alone and by 1922 matters had again come to a head. An urgent meeting took place between the University Authorities, the dental students and the Working Committee of the Bristol Royal Infirmary "to discuss the insufficient number of Dental Chairs provided at the Bristol Royal Infirmary"⁸. The students claimed that the lack of chairs not only meant that they were being deprived of sufficient chairside work, but the patients suffered in that they were kept waiting for an hour or more or were sent away and asked to attend at a later date—which did not encourage future visits⁹. (Appointments were only introduced in the Royal Infirmary in 1943!) It would seem highly likely that the "Bristol Chair" was once again being pressed into use that this time which would account for the absence of other names from 1911 until 1930.

In 1940 the present Dental School was opened in Lower Maudlin Street, just across the road from the Royal Infirmary Dental Department. All clinical work was then carried out within the school. Phillip Stoy who was its first Dean (1940-47) could not recall seeing the chair nor did he know of any tradition of carving names on it¹⁰. This is explained by Gordon Denner Brown (BDS UBrist 1946)¹¹ who became a resident House Surgeon in 1947. He states that the chair was kept in the House Surgeons' room in the Bristol Royal Infirmary Old Building so unless you had been a house surgeon you would not have known of its existence. As far as he could recall it was already there in 1942. By then the tradition was well established and the chair carried at least a dozen names of former resident dental house surgeons at the Bristol Royal Infirmary.

In 1947 when the late Gordon Denner Brown added his name to the chair (Figure 3) he recalls that it was carved with a large rosehead bur and with a foot engine. At that time there were two dental house surgeons and one dental SHO, he served as both HS and SHO, but he could not recall if house surgeons were allowed to add their names or if this privilege was confined to the SHO.



Figure 3 Gordon Denner Brown's name carved in 1947 on the left arm rest

However looking at the names in date order it would seem that there are usually two if not three names for every year so it would seem that all were able to do so. As one would expect most of the names are carved on the back and seat, but also appear on the arm rests. (Two late names from the 1970s have been scratched on the head rest and have been added during the time that the chair has been kept in the dental school).

⁸ Saunders CJG. *The University of Bristol Dental School and Hospital*. Bristol :The Board of Governors of the United Bristol Hospitals, 1964, p 15.

⁹ Stoy P The Bristol Dental School 1874-1940. *Br Dent J* 1947; 82: 142.

¹⁰ Personal communication January 1996

¹¹ Personal Communication January 1996

The original tradition seems to have ceased in the early 1960s. This might have been for several reasons but most probably because it was moved sometime in the 1960s to the Dental School. Quite why I have been unable to discover but by then shortage of space was once again acute in the Royal Infirmary and so the House Surgeons' room may well have been lost at this time. Since then the chair has lived at the top of a little used back staircase, seldom frequented by students and remote from any dental hand piece and engine.

Table1 Names which have been carved on the Bristol dental chair. Those shown in bold and underlined are identified as house surgeons on the lists of Bristol Dental Hospital Staff for 1940-1960 given by Saunders 1964¹².

Name as it appears	Other information
G Smith 1909 B W Tyson 1911	(See text) (LDSRCS Eng 1911)
1930s	
Pickles 1932 (See Note 1) REES 1934 LL Jonathan 1935 (DJ)Dymond 1935-36 <u>J W E Snawdon</u> (See Note 2) Les Scull 1936 CL Read 1936-37 CA Blanden 1937-38 FPE Ewens 1938 AA Grant 1939	(LDS UBirm 1931) (?J D Rees LDSRCS Eng 1933) (not found in Dentists Register) (LDSRCS Eng 1935) (BDS UBrist1935) (LDS UBrist 1935) (LDS UBrist 1936) (BDS UBrist 1936) (not found in Register) (BDS UBrist 1939)
1940s	
<u>Donald Davis 1940</u> <u>R B Stiles 1940-41</u> <u>DH Buckland 1941</u> PB Carey 1942 <u>P M Nicholas 1942</u> HB Doubt Ralph H S Shipway RM Sharp 1944-6 J W B Kay 1944 <u>H Lester Leech 1944-45</u> JFV Woolley 1945-46 TW Beer 1945-46 <u>AFJ Smith 1946</u> <u>(RJ) Brownlee</u> <u>LG Denner Brown 1946-7</u> <u>TC Hughes 1947</u> <u>PJ Sheldrick 1947</u> <u>J Fishpool MDCCCXLVIII</u> <u>LK Walden 1948</u> <u>LM Lloyd 48/49</u> DC Berry (See Note 3)	(not found in Register) (LDS UBrist 1940) (LDS UBrist 1940) (BDS UBrist 1941) (BDS UBrist 1942) (LDS UBrist 1943) (LDS UBrist 1943) (LDS UBrist 1941) (LDS UBrist.1944) (LDS BDS UBrist1944) (LDS UBrist 1945) (LDS UBrist 1944) (LDSRCS Eng 1939) (BDS UBrist 1947) (LDS UBrist 1946) (LDS UBrist 1947) (BDS UBrist 1946) (LDS UBrist 1947) (BDS UBrist 1947) (LDS UBrist 1947) (BDS UBrist 1946) (LDS UBrist 1947) (BDS UBrist 1947) (LDSRCS Eng 1948, BDS UBrist 1949) (LDS 1949, BDS 1950 UBrist)

¹² Saunders CJG. *The University of Bristol Dental School and Hospital*. Bristol :The Board of Governors of the United Bristol Hospitals, 1964, pp 32-33.

1950s

GD Pameley 1950

AH Chivers 1950

M Bernstein

Ruth Yearn

JS Cooper 1950 (See Note 4)

GD Everard 1951

P D Wood 1951

J A W Taylor 1951

IL Busbridge 1952-54

BF Mahle 1953

Sati P Chatterjea 1953-55

John E Bowerman 1954

Balbir Singh 1954

Philip C Smith 1955

W (B)Senior

GW Goodman 1957

W.A Morgan

RS Young 1959

NA Raja 1953

(LDS UBrist 1949)

(LDS BDS UBrist 1950)

(BDS UBrist 1950)

(BDS UBrist 1950)

(BDS UBrist 1950)

(LDS UBrist 1951)

(not found in Register)

(LDSRCS Eng 1951)

(LDSRCS Eng 1952)

(BDS UBrist 1952)

(LDSRCS Eng 1953)

(BDS UBrist 1953)

(Not found in Register)

(LDSRCS Eng LDS UBrist 1954)

(LDSRCS Eng 1955)

(BDS UBrist 1957)

(BDS UBrist 1959)

(LDS UBrist 1959)

(LDSRCS Eng 1953)

1960s

DK Stables 1961-63

M MacGregor

M H Platt 1963

(BDS UBrist 1961)

(BDS UBrist 1961)

(BDS UBrist 1962)

Undated and unidentified names

Sellin

Forsyth

Dowland

FI Lt O F Brown

DC Sa

(?JF Sellin LDSRCS Eng 1927)

(?W Forsyth TD BDS UBrist 1930)

(?ER Dowland LDSRCS Eng 1931)

(LDS ULeeds 1935)

(???)

NOTES

1. Later Lecturer in Dental Surgery
2. Later Lecturer in Oral Surgery
3. Later Professor of Dental Surgery
4. Later Lecturer in Dental Prosthetics