

The GWR Company Doctors

A Bonfire Night prank led to a tragic accident and swift action from the Great Western Railway's company doctor. George Money Swinhoe had been in the job just 12 days when he was called out to the market hall adjoining the Mechanics' Intuition on the evening of November 5, 1859.

A group of enterprising boys had constructed "a cannon loaded with fireworks" which they had set off in the market to give the stall holders a fright. However, the high jinks turned to tragedy when a nine year old girl suffered such severe leg injuries that Dr Swinhoe had to amputate the limb on the scene.



Park House, a spacious yellow brick residence overlooking the GWR Park, was built for the railway company doctor in 1876. However, in the early days of the company's presence in Swindon the medical officer's situation was far more precarious.

In 1846 medic Stuart Keith Rea was the doctor most frequently called to accidents at the works. His terms and conditions of employment were put on a more secure basis with the creation of the GWR Medical Fund in 1847.

In a letter to the GWR directors, which set the Medical Fund ball rolling, Gooch explains Dr Rea is frequently "not paid at all from the inability of the injured man to do so."

With the doctor called to the Works at least once a week, Gooch makes a suggestion "that they will give Mr Rae (sic) £30 per year to take them all, or what is nearly the same, to give him his house free of rent."

Not quite as generous as the £50 and free accommodation that the London and North Western Railway Company paid their doctor at Crewe, which Gooch refers to in the same letter.

Dr Rea moved into a three storey former shop on the corner of London Street and High Street (Emlyn Square), which was to be home, surgery and dispensary.

By all accounts Stuart Keith Rea, brother of Work's Manager Minard C. Rea, was a popular, hard-working doctor. Unfortunately his career was cut short when he died in 1848 from tuberculosis, contracted while attending patients suffering from the disease.

The second GWR doctor was Charles Whiston Hind. At the time of the 1851 census he was living at 12 London Street with his brother Frederick, a surgeon's assistant and Elizabeth Wallace, their housekeeper.

Edward Rogers, a surgeon and apothecary living with his family at 28 Reading Street, just round the corner from Dr Hind, and was presumably his assistant. Dr Hind continued the crusade against poor sanitation in the Railway Village and it was his initiative that saw the free issue of limewash for the railway cottages in the battle against disease. Dr Hind resigned after ten years of working under very difficult conditions.

The third doctor to hold the title of GWR Medical Officer at Swindon was George Money Swinhoe. At the time of the 1861 census George and his wife Maud were living at 4 London Street with their ten month old daughter. By 1871 another five children had joined the Swinhoe family and ten years later, in their home in Church Place, there were 12 aged between four months and 20 years.

In 1886 George Swinhoe had been in the job for more than 25 years. His long time partners in the railway practice were doctors William Hose and John Madden Bromley.

During the last decade of the 19th century the railway works at Swindon was reportedly the largest in the world with more than 10,000 employees, all of them members of the Medical Fund.

The accident hospital register for the 1890s records an eclectic range of cases. In the summer of 1894 Fred William Walker, 21 of New Swindon, employed in the saw mill suffered a bullet wound to his arm "removal under chloroform, brandy."



Widowed George Money Swinhoe lived in Park House until his death in 1908. His family had long since dispersed, apart from George Rodway Swinhoe who became Chief Medical **Superintendent** to the GWR Medical Fund Society, District Consultant Surgeon to the GWR Company and Certifying Factory Surgeon.

George Rodway Swinhoe's death at Park House on November 10, 1929 ended a family association with the GWR Medical Fund spanning seventy-five years.

Today the elegant Park House is divided into office space.