The Great Campaign

The failure of previous attempts to provide a Benevolent College for the Medical Profession makes the eventual success of John Propert and his committee all the more extraordinary.

Their campaign may be likened to that of the Anti-Corn Law League in the few years around 1850 in its energy and its grand design. And yet the College as envisaged was different from all previous proposals in three significant ways: it was restricted in its aim to establish one Medical Benevolent College only, rather than the group of colleges proposed in the 1840s; it was limited to a Benevolent College, and included no element of the provident or insurance scheme that had failed before and it was characterised by the energy and organisation of its projectors. It is obvious, when one looks at the minutes and other records of the Society, right from the first meeting, that it was well-organised, thought through and under effective leadership.

The 'poor Welsh Apothecary,' as Mr. Propert was fond of, rather antithetically, calling himself, possessed all the qualities necessary for the undertaking - perseverance, determination, inexhaustible resources, and a good temper. I do not doubt that the large and liberal hospitality with which he was constantly welcoming his supporters also played some part in his success, for it is easier to work in a good cause when its friends occasionally assemble for social intercourse and are able to exchange views elsewhere than in the boardroom, under the controlling influence of a chairman. The first meetings that I attended were in the Hanover Square Rooms, at that time the chief locality for first-class concerts in London, and now converted into a club. This must have been about 1852, and the faces I chiefly remember, besides that of Mr. Propert, were those of Mr. Clifton, and his son the architect and builder of the College, Dr. Jonson, Dr. Sibson, and Mr. Tudor Davies, a young barrister and subsequently Imperial Commissioner in Shanghai. These, like Mr. Propert, have all departed this life. I apprehend that, apart from Mr. Propert's special qualities, he was fortunate in seizing the right moment for initiating the movement. The Medical Profession was at that time in a state of fermentation, preparatory to the important changes which were effected by the Medical Act of 1858, and many of us felt that the plan proposed by Mr. Propert was one that would bind us more together, and by enabling us to combine for a great common object involving benefits to the whole profession, advance interests that concern, indirectly, the general public, nearly as much as the members of the profession itself.


The Medical Benevolent Society appears to leap ready-made into history, which probably means that there had been many previous, unofficial, meetings. The first meeting recorded in the Council minutes is on 4th July 1851, when 28 members of the profession met at the Hanover Square Rooms, accepted Mr. Propert's offer of his own house for Committee Meetings and appointed a Committee to draw up an appeal. Already the group included The Earl Manvers, who would become the first President, Henry Tudor Davies, who would become the first Hon. Secretary, Dr. Graham of Epsom, who would provide the land and of course John Propert, who would provide the motive power for the whole venture, and who would become the acknowledged founder of the College. The Committee wrote a Report and an Address, included in a later minute of the Council, which included details of how the College should be set up and a report of the first visit to Epsom.
A Deputation of our body consisting of Sir Thomas Phillips, Dr. Beattie and Mr. Propert visited the site offered for the College by Dr. Graham, and they have given us such information upon the subject as we required. We find that the ground in question consists of 20 acres of freehold land near the town of Epsom on the north-western side of the Downs. The aspect is nearly West, affording an airy, cheerful and healthy site, and the subsoil, which is chalk, insures dry walks for exercise, but the area presents a very irregular and inconvenient outline, and unless some alteration of its figure can be made by the acquisition of adjoining land, either by purchase or exchange, your Committee would hesitate to recommend it as a desirable site for the College...

(The Medical Benevolent College, Minutes of Council, August 1st 1851)

The Council of the Medical Benevolent College earnestly solicit the attention of the Public and especially of the Medical Profession, to this recently formed Society, by which it is proposed to supply a home with additional assistance to reduced Members of the Profession and their necessitous widows; also a school for the education of the sons of Medical Practitioners generally. Whilst many Societies have long existed for the relief of particular classes of the community from those casualties against which no foresight can adequately provide, it is remarkable that no general association should have been established for the benefit of Members of the Medical Profession, numerous as they are, and exposed as they are to special exigencies and peculiar vicissitudes. It is scarcely necessary to point out the claims of Medical men upon the Public at large. It may not be out of place, however, to intimate that by no profession are so many valuable services gratuitously rendered. Nor should it be forgotten that the Medical Practitioner stands in close and intimate relation to both poor and rich, who, when labouring under mental and moral prostration often consequent on physical suffering, are equally in need of some judicious adviser. Ever at the call of the Public, constant labour without recreation or change of place is his general lot. His life is shortened by professional and personal anxiety and toil, and by exposure to infection. From his position he is led to marry early, hence, when he falls into distressed circumstances, his fate is frequently shared by his wife and children. His calling is neither political nor public, but essentially social; society imposes upon him peculiar duties; surely then, in his day of need, he has special claims upon Society for consideration and assistance. The undertaking now recommended to public notice is the establishment of a Medical Benevolent College, which will include:-

First - An Asylum, in which 100 pensioners, who must be duly qualified Medical Men, or their Widows, (professing incomes of at least £15 a year) shall be provided with two furnished rooms each, and with such additional assistance and accommodation as the funds may permit. The Council, however, confidently hope that the Society will be enabled wholly to support some few deserving persons not possessed of the required income.

Secondly: - A school in which a liberal education will be given to 100 Boys, the Sons of duly qualified Medical Men; the majority of whom will pay £25 a year for education, board, lodging and washing; while the rest will be orphans educated and maintained entirely at the expense of the Society.

Thirdly: - A Chapel, capable of accommodating 300 persons.

The outlay for a site and Buildings, including fittings and furniture, is estimated at £20,000. The whole yearly expense in providing sensible allowances to the pensioners, in remuneration of Officers and other establishment charges, is calculated at £1,500. There are but few Medical Benevolent Institutions and these are limited to peculiar localities, or are merely provident, and afford relief to deserving persons not possessed of the required income. There is no institution calculated to provide an Asylum for those Members of the Profession, who, having ever maintained a respectable position, have yet been unable to secure an adequate pension for the infirmities of age or the necessities of their families; and further, to supply the children of Medical Men a liberal education suited to their condition in life.

When the very large number of Medical Men in England and Wales is taken into consideration, to whom principally an appeal might be deemed appropriate, the funds required to complete this undertaking may seem small; the profession, however, is far from wealthy. To the Public, therefore, as well as to the Profession, do the Council appeal for assistance; and from the latter, they solicit not a merely pecuniary aid, but what is more valuable zealous, active and personal co-operation.

(The Medical Benevolent College, Minutes of Council, August 1st 1851)
2. The Great Campaign

As a result of the work of the Committee, the first Public Meeting on 25th June was particularly well organised.

At a General Meeting of the Members of the Medical Profession and others, held at the Hanover Square Rooms on Wednesday June 25th 1851, to consider the propriety of establishing a Medical Benevolent College upon the plan suggested by John Propert Esq.

The Earl of Manvers having been voted to the Chair.

Mr. Propert in his Address to the Meeting adverted to the many cases of distress which existed in the Medical Profession and in Families of Medical men deceased arising in many instances from premature Widowhood, and other contingencies which were peculiar to the Profession, and having informed the Meeting of the principles upon which it was proposed that a Medical Benevolent College should be founded, briefly alluded to the success that had up to that period attended his exertions in furtherance of the object; Dr. Graham of Epsom had, also, most generously offered to place at the disposal of the Council, an eligible site for the College on very advantageous terms. Mr. Propert having pointed to the benefits likely to follow the establishment of such an Institution and appealed to the Public and the Profession in its support, stated that he left it, with the greatest confidence to the profession to decide upon the propriety of adopting the suggestion which he had humbly submitted for their consideration. Whereupon it was-

Moved by The Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London-
Seconded by Sir Robert Harry Inglis Bar(one)th; and resolved unanimously-

That this Meeting under a sense of the claims of the Medical Profession upon the Public at large, hereby declares the formation of a Medical Benevolent College, on the plan suggested by John Propert Esq. and pledges itself to promote its success by every means in its power...

After the founding resolution, the meeting went on to appoint Earl Manvers as President of the College, the Lord Bishop of Winchester as Visitor, 47 Vice-presidents, including the Earls of Denbigh and Effingham, the Bishops of London and Ripon, four of the Queen’s doctors (including Sir John Forbes, who had been so energetic in the 1844 scheme) and several Members of Parliament, Treasurer, Trustees and Members of Council. Full powers were given to the Council, land was offered by Dr. Graham and the Council were prevented from starting to build the College until two thirds of the estimated £18,000 should have been raised. These arrangements had clearly been organised beforehand. Not only were the problems suffered by previous schemes avoided from the beginning, but a most powerful group of men were tied to the scheme, whose reputations should ensure its success.
From this point unfolded a most ambitious fund-raising campaign. We can trace it through the wonderful records kept, both in the College Scrap Books, and from Council minutes and papers. From the beginning it was expected that sympathetic doctors and others would collect for the Society in their local areas. The first receipts were recorded as early as October 7th 1851, with wonderful records kept, both in the College Scrap Books, sympathetic doctors and others would collect for the sound financial organisation. Mr. Proper! had been Secretaries, Henry Tudor Davies and Dr. Edward Reading, Brighton, Leamington and (Kings) Lynn as have been considered even ten years before this business undertaken by the first Honorary Secretaries, Henry Tudor Davies and Dr. Edward Sieveking. It is unlikely that such a campaign could have been considered even ten years before this date, since fast and reliable postage and easy transport to meetings had to wait until the railway network was well advanced. Previous experience had persuaded the organisers of the need for sound financial organisation. Mr. Propert had been appointed Treasurer at the first Public Meeting, with Goslings as bankers and others as Auditors. Meanwhile the clergy were being mobilised, initially in the person of the Lord Bishop of Ripon, who agreed to preach the first sermon in aid of the funds. He began a strong tradition of clergymen preaching for the College, which extended far beyond the initial campaign. Among the preachers would be Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, (son of William and the opponent of TH. Huxley in the Oxford Debates about Darwinism, later Bishop of Winchester; the beginning of a long association with the College) and on at least two occasions, Charles Blomfield, the energetic and anti-Catholic Bishop of London, who had become Visitor to the College in 1851. Preachers would be appointed Life Governors of the College, as would clergymen who had ‘lent their pulpits’ to them. Prominent preachers would be elected Vice-presidents, as might anyone else whose name or title would adorn the letterhead.
The circle of obligation was widened as, over several years, well-disposed noblemen and gentlemen were involved in the Annual Festivals. For example, the Second Annual Festival was chaired by the famous Earl of Shaftesbury later to be commemorated by the erection of Eros in Piccadilly Circus. These great dinners at the Freemasons’ Tavern were quite Pickwickian in their length, including over a dozen speeches and replies, linked to toasts. For example, the Sixth Annual Festival would include 14 toasts and their replies and about the same number of songs. The menus were suitably long and complex too. No doubt many donations were made as a result of these dinners, but even if they were not, the publicity was considerable and the lists of Vice-presidents continued to grow.

A high point of the campaign must have been a concert by the New Philharmonic Society on July 4th, 1855, dedicated to the College, at which Hector Berlioz conducted the first British performance of his new symphony ‘Harold in Italy’ playing the viola solo himself.

Other entertainments were more popular, such as the programme at the Lyceum Theatre in 1857, of the comedy ‘A Wonderful Woman’, followed by ‘A Phenomenon in a Smock Frock’ and the farce, ‘John Dobbs’.
Unfortunately, the original estimates of £18,000 or £20,000 in 1851, proved to be far short of the real costs of establishing the College, labour and building materials having shot up in price, so that even £30,809 was so far short of the required sum that only twenty pensioners could be accommodated, which was rather less than the 100 originally projected. The far-reaching results of this shortfall will be explained later; but meanwhile money raising continued, initially for the Chapel in 1856 and later for further changes and accommodation in 1863. The College was well-launched, but the continuous strain of financing such an institution would have a considerable effect on the way it achieved its objectives over the next 150 years.