Dr. John Wall and the early years of Worcester Infirmary

Worcester is indebted to Dr John Wall for two of its most ancient and famous institutions, namely Royal Worcester Porcelain and the Worcester Royal Infirmary.

John Wall was born at Powick, near Worcester, in 1708 the only son of John Wall, a former Mayor of Worcester. He attended the ‘Kings School’ and at the age of 18 was elected scholar of Worcester College Oxford in June 1726. He took his BA in 1730. Elected Fellow of Merton College in 1735 and took his MA in 1736.

While in Oxford he was distinguished by his literary pursuits, especially in the Classics, Mathematics, Algebra and Philosophy; many eminent and learned people sought his acquaintance. John Wall applied the same diligence to his Medical studies and took the degree of Bachelor of Physic at St. Thomas's Hospital in December 1736, then began his career of fame in Worcester.

In the year 1740 he married Catherine, the youngest daughter of Martin Sandys Esquire of the City of Worcester. Uncle of the first Lord Sandys of Ombersley.

He was already quite a wealthy and famous man, and the Palladian residence he built still stands in Foregate Street, (number 43) bearing a plaque proclaiming the fame of a later resident, Sir Charles Hastings. Dr Wall's medical practice was incredibly vast, by today's standard. He consulted as far as Stratford Upon Avon, Kidderminster and Ludlow, visits were sometimes lengthy affairs lasting several days.

The Historian Nash remarks that "his practice as a Physician was particularly distinguished by benevolence, courtesy, penetration and success, but his benevolence displayed itself in its utmost extent in his unremitting attention to the poor". Three quarters of Worcester's population were said to be his patients.

So, when the newly appointed Bishop Isaac Maddox came to Worcester, in 1743, he found Dr John Wall eager to join his campaign for the foundation of a Charitable Infirmary, designed to relieve the physical sufferings of the poor, and the search for Medical knowledge. Bishop Maddox was an ardent advocate of social reforms and he set about raising money from Sermons and Lectures. Subscriptions and donations poured in from the local landed Gentry, Sir John Rushout, The Earl of Coventry, Lord Northwick, Lord Lyttleton, Lord Berkeley - to name but a few! An old house in Silver Street was purchased in 1745 for £100. And after considerable renovation the doors opened in 1746 - only the 7th outside London.

The four physicians Dr John Wall, Dr. Thomas Attwood, Dr James MacKenzie and Dr Thomas Cameron appointed the first members of staff.

John King - Secretary - £10/10s. p.a.
Mrs. White - Matron - £6 p.a.
Nurse Goslin - £3/10s. p.a.
Patience Perry - Maidservant - £3 p. a.

Although the Infirmary opened on 11th January there were no beds purchased until June. Five beds for the patients and one bed for the staff. Towards the end of the first year, a box of Surgeons Instruments was purchased, together with a 'sweating box'. A Christmas Box of 5/- was awarded to the Nurse for good behaviour! Nurses were regarded as Domestic Servants. During the first three years there had been 960 admissions. Among the cured were Dropsies, Mortifications, Scrophulus, Scarbutick, and Fistulous Ulcers, Empyema, Inflammation of the Eyes, Simple and Compound Fractures, St. Vitus Dance, Rheumatism, Cancers, Cataracts, Epilepsy, a gun shot wound through the Liver, Five Amputations and one boy 'cut for stone'.

Only patients with letters of recommendation from subscribers were admitted. The 'Rules of the Hospital were read out to them every week. (No one with an Infectious disease was allowed in, or expectant mothers, the dying or of unsound mind). Smoking and swearing, card playing and dice were forbidden. A Cook and a Chaplain were engaged in 1749, and in 1750,a Porter to evict trouble-makers.

By 1751 - Worcester Infirmary had become famous mostly for Dr Wall's treatment of sore throats in Scarlet Fever and Diphtheria. He was a prolific Medical Writer, and the first to recognise Angina Pectoris as a symptom of Heart Decease. His Son Dr Martin Wall Emeritus Professor of Surgery at Merton College, Oxford, collected all his writings into one volume, and published them in 1780.

Malvern Water captivated his interest and by 1756 he had discovered its extreme purity. Dr John Wall's paper "Observations and Experiments of Malvern Water" was re-published many times, together with 79 case histories of Water Cures. The Wits of the 1 5th Century wrote "The Malvern Water", said Dr John Wall, "Is famous for containing just nothing at all"

In addition to all his many interests and activities, he and his friend William Davis, Apothocary, of Broad Street, in June 1751, set up the first 'Porcelain Manufactory, under the title of 'The Worcester Porcelain Company.' (It did not become 'Royal' until King George III awarded this accolade in 1788 - when he visited Worcester for the 'Three Choirs Festival'.) Dr Wall remained its consistent and respected head, for 25 years. In fact the years 1751-1776 are justifiably called the "Dr Wall Period".

Most of the china made at Worcester under Dr Wall was in Chinese style, and was carefully and beautifully painted by hand. These pieces are now much sought after. The successful business has outlived its earlier competition to the present day.

By 1765 The Governors of the Infirmary found it necessary to consider erecting a larger and more convenient building for the accommodation of the
sick, the existing one being 'in a ruinous condition, and necessarily requiring
constant repair at considerable annual expense'. It was grossly over-crowded
and badly ventilated.

In July 1765 two acres of land, situated in the 'Artichoke Field' at the top of
Salt Lane, (Castle Street) was acquired for £200. Mr. Edward Garlick put up
the money and advised on the planning of the building. Anthony Keek being
the Architect-at a fee of £250. Sir John Rushout was the first and largest
benefactor. Dr Wall watched the progress of the building from the back of his
house in Foregate Street, and would walk down to the site. The path
afterwards was called 'Dr Wall's Walk' later renamed 'Infirmary Walk'. Close
by the building site was the town house of Lord Coventry, 'Walnut Tree
House' The Doctor's Residence.

On Michaelmas Day 1770 there stood, on the Artichoke Field, overlooking
'Pitchcroft' a handsome new Infirmary and the proud Citizens of Worcester
admired its Georgian Grandeur. The Historian - Nash, said, "I have the
satisfaction to think that all was well done, that the House is large,
commodious and perfectly strong. That the whole of the plan was executed
with great frugality and economy, and it is hoped, would continue for ages, an
honour to the County and a comfortable asylum to many sick and lame".

The building had cost £6085 9s 9d. The patients and equipment were
transferred to the new premises in September 1771.

The present Entrance Hall was used as Out Patients, and what is now the
Board Room was the Physician's Room. The area now used as Out Patients
was a wash-house and coal yard. Wheeley Lea was the Men's Ward, and
Rushout the Women's Ward. Each ward accommodated 20 beds.

On the North side of the Physician's Room was Matron's Office and opposite
was the Apothecary's Room. On the South side was the Surgeon's Room
(now the corridor leading up to X-Ray and Bates Wards. Upstairs, above the
Physician's Room was the Chapel. What is now Ganderton were two small
wards, and what is now Garlick were staff bedrooms. The top floor was added
later.

In 1773 there were 445 in-patients and 522 out-patients. Of the 445 in-
patients, 217 were cured', 25 relieved, 4 discharged themselves, 2 were
incurable, 3 were discharged for misbehavior, while 24 had died.

In 1776 sadly, Dr John Wall died, and was replaced by Dr James Johnson.
The Nurses were petitioning for extra help and pay, and the number of beds
was reduced to 30 through lack of funds-sounds familiar!

1781 Six-pence a day was put aside to provide the three Nurses with a pint of
Ale, although it seems the Matron had to pay for her own!

Several bequests to the Infirmary that year enabled them to increase the
number of beds to 58. In 1790 Matron was put in charge of the Wine and
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Brandy. By 1792 the beds increased to 65 - and Ladies were invited, for the first time, to become subscribers. Carriages travelling in Dr Wall's Walk had caused several accidents, so bollards had to be placed at either end - they are still there!

So, by the end of the 18th Century the Infirmary was well established. Dr. Wall had seen his dream come true. He had been such a great inspiration to all who worked with him, and was held in great esteem and affection. It was said of him "In all concerns of life, and particularly in his practice, he was distinguished by an uncommon sweetness and cheerfulness of disposition: which in union with his extensive knowledge, and penetrating discernment, attracted the affection and secured the confidence of those who required his professional assistance. To his zeal and diligence the City and County of Worcester are in no small degree indebted for the advantage of their Infirmary. His zeal was increased by its establishment, and was still further animated by its success. He gave it constant and regular attendance during his whole life, under very trying circumstances of fatigue and indisposition. The Governors of the Infirmary have recorded, in terms of great respect, their sense of the obligations they owe to his assiduity. After a life devoted to Worcestershire and its people."

Dr. John Wall died on 27th June 1776 aged 67 years at Bath, after a lingering illness and is buried in the Abbey Church.

"After a life of labour, for the good of others. Nature gave him talents; a benevolent heart, directed the application of them to the study and practice of a profession most beneficial to mankind"