

Historical Article

The Midland Institute of Otology and its Founder: William Stirk Adams (1896–1978)

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Abstract

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the Midland Institute of Otology (MIO) a meeting was held in the Belfry Hotel, West Midlands, 19–21 September 1997. The meeting comprised an excellent academic conference, social events and a golf tournament. A report on the academic conference has been published (Stansbie and Pahor, 1997).

The MIO has been established to further the cause of ENT in the Midlands and it has succeeded in its aim to a great extent. An historical overview of the Institute is of interest and would serve perhaps as a model for similar organizations, especially in the provinces.

The Institute was the brainchild of William Stirk Adams. He remained the President from the conception of the Institute till his death. It is befitting to present a biography of such a dedicated personality.

Key words: History of Medicine; 20th century

William Stirk Adams (1896–1978)

William (Bill) Stirk Adams was born on 31 May 1896 in Acocks Green, Worcestershire, his father Arthur (1852–1934) was a master at King Edwards School teaching classics. Bill was educated at King Edwards Grammar School Birmingham, winning a foundation scholarship and several school prizes. His grandfather was a gun maker who exalted in rifling barrels when 'rifling' was first introduced.

Stirk Adams won an entrance scholarship to Birmingham University in 1915. His studies were interrupted by World War I when he served as surgeon probationer; he was also a spotter (located in a balloon to spot boats). He qualified with LRCP MRCS in 1919, then joined the Royal Navy as Surgeon Lieutenant 1919–1921. He was posted to the Far East, China Station. He obtained MB, ChB, Birmingham in 1921.

Initially a House Surgeon in obstetrics in the General Hospital and House Physician in the Royal Chest Hospital, City Road, Stirk Adams was next appointed Resident Surgical Officer (RSO), General Hospital, Birmingham. Having obtained his FRCS in 1924, he was in 1926 appointed as Assistant Surgeon to the Throat and Ear Department, General Hospital and in 1931 Honorary Aural Surgeon to

the Children's Hospital, Birmingham. With the formation of the United Birmingham Hospitals he became Honorary Surgeon to the Throat and Ear Department in 1941 working in both the Queen Elizabeth and Children's Hospitals until his retirement from the NHS in 1961. He and Musgrave Woodman established the Department in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. He also held honorary appointments with the City of Birmingham Mental Hospitals; and was Honorary Aural Surgeon to the Royal Cripples Hospital, Birmingham.

During World War II when his junior colleagues were in active service, he carried the work in Birmingham and also had Honorary Appointments at Ellen Badger Hospital, Shipston-on-Stour, Sutton Coldfield Cottage Hospital and Tamworth General Hospital.

He was interested in academic work and was a Hunterian Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1944. He was a member of the Prevention of Deafness Committee of the Medical Research Council (1944–1947).

Although a generalist, his main interest was in otology and specifically deafness due to eustachian tube pathology. As a member of the Medical Research Council he was charged with investigating

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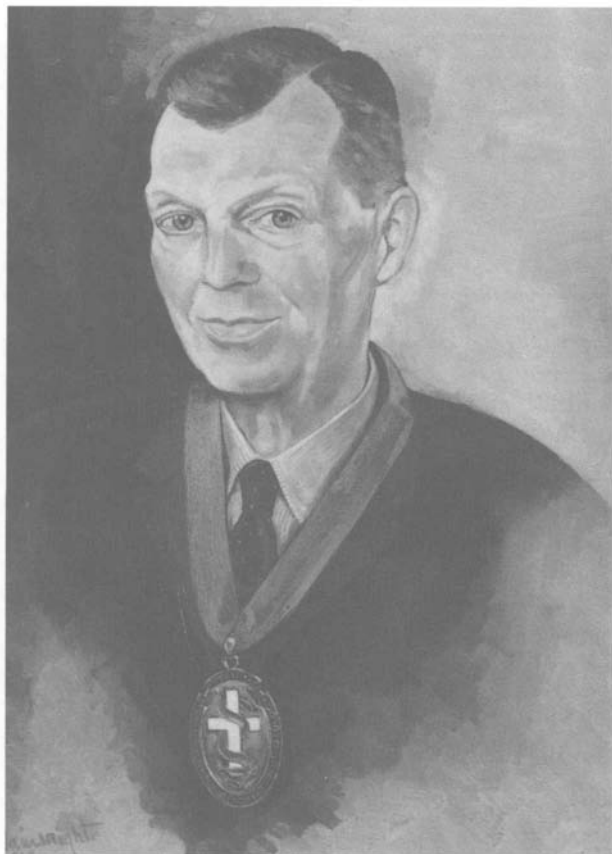


FIG. 1

Oil painting by Sue Wainwright, 1968. William Stirk Adams is wearing the Presidential badge of the Midland Nursing Association of Otolaryngology

the results of radiation to the nasopharynx in cases of otitis media with effusion (OME). Other centres involved, besides Birmingham, were Bristol (Mr J. Angell-James), Edinburgh (Mr I. Simpson-Hall), Lincoln (Mr M. Spencer-Harrison), London (Mr J. Ballantyne). His views on the aetiopathogenesis of OME were presented to the Fifth International Congress of Otorhinolaryngology in Amsterdam, 1953 (Adams, 1953a). He found that in almost all cases with persistent negative middle ear pressure (measured by the oto-manometer he devised) there was peritubal subepithelial swelling localized around the nasopharyngeal end of the eustachian tube. It was on the basis of this finding that he advocated and carried out radiation therapy to the nasopharynx in such cases. He wrote two further articles on this subject in 1956 and 1957. He compared the effects of using radium versus deep X-ray (being used by Harkman in Warwick) and he concluded that radium was preferred. He did raise the question of side effects of radiation but the conclusion of the report was to recommend the treatment.

He invented the oto-manometer, before the introduction of Impedence, in conjunction with Professor Gilding, Professor of Physiology, Birmingham University. They combined an aneroid barometer (water) with a Siegal 'apparatus'. Mr W. Stirk Adams used the oto-manometer routinely in his practice (Adams, 1953b).

Through his association with mental hospitals in Birmingham (following his predecessor Mr F. D. Marsh) he continued performing sinus surgery for the relief of mental illness. This work was performed in close co-operation with T. C. Greaves, the Chief Medical Officer of the Birmingham Mental Hospitals. William Stirk Adams attended the presentation of Greaves and Pickworth (Pathologist at Rubery Hospital) to the Laryngology Section of Royal Society of Medicine on sinusitis and mental disorders presented in March 1928 (Graves and Pickworth, 1928). Operations were routinely carried out on the infected sinuses of patients in mental institutions with special emphasis on the sphenoid sinus with claims of cures of the mental states. The surgery was carried out in Rubery and Hollymore Mental Hospitals.

He visited centres on the continent, *viz*: George Portmann in Bordeaux, Oscar Hirsch in Vienna (Hypophysectomy) and attended a course by Chevalier Jackson held in Paris. He used to receive visitors from abroad at his home in Birmingham.

William Stirk Adams was a perfectionist, his patients came first, and he demanded the highest standards from his juniors. He had deep religious convictions and used to read the lessons regularly in St George's Church, Edgbaston. He was a great benefactor of impoverished children in the Ladywood area; he used to channel his help through his church. He remained a bachelor. Bill was the eldest of eight siblings: Arthur (civil engineer, was in the Royal Navy in World War I and was stationed in Egypt in World War II), Lewis (joined end of World War I, remained two years in Army and then moved to Australia to take up farming), Eleanor (midwife, Birmingham), Mary (pharmacist, Knowle) and her twin Jack (teacher – moved to Australia), Margaret (general practitioner, Knowle) and George (general practitioner, Essex).

He used to live in a large house in Westbourne Road, Birmingham (side of Church Road) which has since been replaced by flats. During World War II he would keep a cow in his garden for milk. Later he moved to 81 Harborne Road where he had a good library, which was later to become the nucleus of the Midland Institute of Otolaryngology library. William Stirk Adams was a keen gardener and bee keeper; he was the Bee Master of Edgbaston.* His bee hives were transported in his Rolls Royce to the Welsh border hills where heather grows and left there for six–eight weeks. The honey was shown in the Handsworth Park Birmingham shows and his housekeeper of 38 years used to show prize winning honey cakes.

A keen sailor, with an eighteen-foot boat, Stirk Adams was a commodore at Edgbaston Sailing Club. He drove a black 1933 Rolls Royce 20/25 four-door saloon affectionately known as OC9 (registration number) until 1971.

*Bee Master: If a 'stray bee colony is reported to the police, they inform the Bee Master. He tries to identify the owner of the "queen bee", otherwise he is entitled to keep it'.

Despite rather poor health and failing eyesight, ten days before his death he presided over a clinical meeting in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. On 1 February 1978 whilst walking to take a bus to Queen Elizabeth Hospital he fell and died. His funeral was at St George's Church, Edgbaston and the address was given by Mr G. A. Dalton (one of his previous registrars). He was buried in the family grave at St Mary's Church, Acocks Green.

William Stirk Adams, a keen teacher, founded the Midland Institute of Otolaryngology (MIO) in 1947 for the sole purpose of postgraduate education and the establishment of a Chair of Otolaryngology in Birmingham. He bequeathed all his estate to the MIO. The house contents and the Rolls Royce were auctioned over three days for a total of £53,500. This, together with the proceeds from the sale of his house and shares, constituted the prime funding of the MIO.

The Midland Institute of Otolaryngology

The origins of the Midland Institute of Otolaryngology (MIO) date back to 11 February 1947 when William Stirk Adams (Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH), Birmingham) wrote to 12 consultant colleagues from within the Midlands, *viz*: J. B. Cavanagh (Worcester), F. B. Gillespy (Birmingham and Midland Ear & Throat Hospital), B. G. Goodwin (Kidderminster), A. P. Macalister (Warwick), A. J. Moffatt (General Hospital, Birmingham), R. S. Strang (QEH), C. Naylor Strong (Ear and Throat (E & T) Hospital), C. L. Walker (E & T Hospital) and E. M. Woodman (QEH), D. J. Evans (E & T Hospital), W. W. Hallchurch (Wolverhampton), W. L. Thomas (Wolverhampton) suggesting the establishment 'in association with the University of Birmingham of an Otological Institute for teaching and research in the subjects of our specialty'. All attended a meeting on 23 April 1947, but the last three sent their apologies.

The first General Meeting, open also to specialists from Cheltenham, Coventry, Derby, Gloucester, Leicester, Northampton, Stafford, Shrewsbury, Stoke-on-Trent and Warwick, was held at the Birmingham Midland Institute on 12 December 1947 and attended by 17 individuals with apologies from a further seven. The constitution was adopted and the first officers elected.

The Annual General Meetings from 1948 have been held in October followed by a formal dinner; the venue usually being the Edgbaston Golf Club. Since 1949 the Institute has held Clinical Meetings twice yearly; a Winter Meeting hosted by one of the departments in Birmingham and a Spring Meeting usually by a department elsewhere in the Midlands. In 1977 the hosts of the Spring Meeting were the RAF Hospital, Wegberg, Germany and in 1987 the Free University, Amsterdam, where the meeting was held jointly with the South Western Laryngological Association. The 1991 meeting was held jointly with the West Midlands Surgical Society and took place in Florence, Italy. Many of these meetings have included lectures by experts of both national and

TABLE I
PRESIDENTS OF THE MIDLANDS INSTITUTE OF OTOLARYNGOLOGY

1947–1977	W. Stirk Adams
1978–1980	N. L. Crabtree
1981–1983	J. F. Neil
1984–1986	R. G. Hughes
1987–1988	J. McKenzie
1989–1990	J. N. M. Schofield
1991–1992	G. J. Rice
1993–1994	D. J. Brain
1995–	A. R. Das Gupta

international standing. The prestigious Annual Lecture at the Winter Clinical Meeting was instituted in 1971 and since 1980 has been dedicated to the memory of W. Stirk Adams.

Finance/sponsorships

The relatively small income from subscriptions (3 guineas per annum in 1947, increased to £5 in 1971, £20 in 1986 and £50 in 1996) was supplemented by occasional donations of up to £100 from charitable trusts and from Mr William Stirk Adams himself. However, the major bequest received from the estate of the Founder President in 1978 allowed the Institute to widely extend its activity.

In addition to local lectures the Institute has since 1973 helped to sponsor the Toynbee Memorial Lecture held biannually at the Royal College of Surgeons of England and more recently at the Royal Society of Medicine. This sponsorship will continue to at least the year 2000.

In recent years the Institute has supported numerous research projects by consultants and trainees, provided expenses for members chairing sessions or presenting papers at meetings abroad, and supported the establishment of a Chair in Otolaryngology at the University of Nottingham. In addition, since 1984 a Bursary has been awarded to enable a Midlands trainee to attend the Advanced Otolaryngology Course in Nijmegen. In 1984 and 1985 the Institute joined with the TWJ Foundation to fund Fellowships open to national competition to enable a senior trainee to work in Toronto; and Fellowships have been awarded to enable trainees from eastern Europe to attend the British Academic Conferences in Glasgow and Dublin.

Nursing

In accordance with William Stirk Adams' initial vision, the Institute has a long history of supporting nurses in the specialty of Otolaryngology. This began with the establishment in 1951 of a Diploma examination for State Registered Nurses and was followed in 1952 by the formation of the Midland Nursing Association of Otolaryngology for those nurses successful in the examination. In 1961 a Proficiency Certificate for State Enrolled Nurses was instituted. These diplomas are recognized unofficially within the specialty nationwide and continue to be a focus for postgraduate nurses. Mr William Stirk Adams was the Founder President of the Nursing Association and close links between the Institute and the

Association continue. Members of the Nursing Association were welcomed participants in the 50th Anniversary of the MIO.

Audiology

Having recognized a need, the Institute was instrumental in establishing in 1967, with the support of the West Midlands Regional Hospital Board, a Training Course for Audiology Technicians; this was later taken over by appropriate authorities as training in the subject developed.

Accommodation/library

From the earliest days the idea of finding permanent physical accommodation for the Institute existed, but this has never materialized.

The Institute has an extensive library, which was installed in 1968 within the University of Birmingham Medical School Library (the Barnes Library). The library continues to expand within this accommodation and is now one of the most comprehensive ENT specialist libraries in the country.

Social activities

Until recent years the Annual Dinner, held in conjunction with Annual General Meeting, was for members only, but wives and friends have long been catered for by programmes of general interest run parallel with the Clinical Meetings and have also attended informal dinners held on the evenings of the Winter Clinical Meetings. From 1973 until 1989, when reducing interest led to a change in policy, an annual social meeting in November incorporated a dinner followed by a lecture, the Second Yearly Lecture, on a topic of general interest.

Minutes/records

The records of the Institute are detailed and indicate that many of the problems of 50 years ago are not unlike those of the present day. Thus, for example, limited funding meant that the Institute was unable to establish a physical base and attempts to strengthen academic links with the University were frustrated, viz: 'Mr Stirk Adams rejected the opportunity of a lectureship as the status was ill defined and inadequate' (minutes 20 April 1948). There is hope before the Millennium, that such a Chair may be established.

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