

THE BICKERSTETH ERA

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'As a tree is known by its fruit, so man by his works.'

A mural tablet in the spacious entrance-hall with its sweeping stair-case lauds the fame of Henry Bickersteth, M.D., F.R.C.S., Surgeon of the Somerset Hospital, Cape Town (Fig. 1), to successive generations of house-surgeons entering the portals of this venerable building. He was indeed a man 'of wide-renowned fame and noteworthy talent', who spent his active surgical years in the

old hospital which was situated on the then outskirts of Cape Town, on a piece of land now abutting on Prestwich, Alfred, Hospital and Chiappini Streets at Green Point.

In the planning and establishment of the 'new' hospital, no person worked harder than William Henry Bickersteth, but ironically he did not live to see his work come to full

fruition since he died on 6 August 1862, some two weeks before the first patient was admitted.

We may well picture to ourselves this vigorous man and master surgeon, impatiently striding the lengthy corridors and still empty wards, dreaming his dreams of surgical conquests yet to come. But this was not to be, and it was left to others to carry on his work.

The Bickersteth Family

What manner of man was Bickersteth, and whence did he come to work for and serve the people of the old Cape—leaving his mark to be remembered after one hundred years?

William Henry Bickersteth, born on 21 April 1813, was the great-grandson of James Bickersteth, Surgeon of Kendal in the county of Westmoreland, who died in 1776. James was reputed to be the first male person to attend the birth of a child in the British Isles. One of James Bickersteth's sons was Henry, Surgeon of Kirkby Lonsdale in Westmoreland, whose youngest son Robert became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, while another son was a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. A third son was the Rev. John Bickersteth (1781-1855), M.A., of Trinity College, Cambridge, (the father of William Henry), who was Vicar of Acton, Suffolk, and later in 1837 was inducted as Rector of Sapcote in the County of Leicestershire.

Henry had four brothers, two of whom, Edward and Robert, rose to high office in the Church while one, Edmund, died in Cape Town in 1839. Both Robert (later Bishop of Ripon) and Henry were intended for the medical profession, and both were students at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. Being sons of a county clergyman of more worth than wealth, and members of a large family, both the young students appear

to have doubted their chances of professional success in a metropolis like London, so crowded with aspirants for fortune and fame.

Robert entered the Church, but Henry clung to the profession he first adopted, swayed perhaps by the strong surgical trend in his family history. But he did not complete his studies at St. Thomas'.

Burrows, in his erudite and fascinating account in *A History of Medicine in South Africa*, describes the circumstances of the arrival of the young Henry in 1832—a 19-year-old medical student (*sine diploma et licentia*)—as shrouded in mystery. He may have been hampered in his studies by lack of funds or perhaps he came to the Cape having planned in advance to be apprenticed to the illustrious Dr. Samuel Bailey, surgeon and accoucheur, of Cape Town.

Cape Town of the First Half of the 19th Century

Let us picture the Cape where Bickersteth spent the whole of his working life: At the time of his arrival 26 years had elapsed since the second British occupation, bringing in its wake a new stream of immigrants, among them veterans of Napoleon's downfall at Waterloo. The Little Corporal himself had long since spent his last fretful years on the island of St. Helena.

The inhospitable sand-hills of Algoa Bay were making way for the town of Port Elizabeth, and Grahamstown was becoming a thriving centre of business activity.

The year 1834 brought the emancipation of the slaves, and Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban dealt successfully with a Kaffir War on the frontier. Early 1836 saw the beginning of the Great Trek, an acceleration on a large scale of the movement of expansion that had been going on for a century. But the traveller setting foot on the shores of Table Bay had little thought for the Hinterland.

Cape Town of the first half of the 19th century was a quiet, old-fashioned place—a straggling little town of low, white buildings, dwarfed by the mountain beyond. Though small, it was then, as now, a cosmopolitan place, and travellers from England, some on their way to India, some to Australia, others bound for the copper diggings in Namaqualand, mingled with the colonists. Indian civil servants came to the Cape to spend their long leave and recuperate in the health-giving climate.

A settled, well-to-do middle-class carried on successful business and had well-appointed comfortable homes both in and outside the town, notably in Sea Point. Later the villages of Rondebosch and Wynberg were to become the popular residential areas. Kalk Bay was becoming a fashionable seaside resort and fishermen even then beached their boats there and came to sell their catch in the town.

The Coloured working population, principally of Malay extraction, formed a distinctive and characteristic feature of Cape Town.

A few substantial merchant firms transacted the extensive wholesale and shipping business of the place. Plate-glassed shop fronts were unknown, but numbers of dark, cool retail shops containing good stocks supplied luxuries and necessities at moderate prices. George Findlay, of 4 Grave Street (now Parliament Street), advertised 'Articles likely to be required by mining companies' in the last decade of Bickersteth's life, and other firms in the centre of Cape Town in the eighteen-fifties were Fletchers, of 2 Keizersgracht (now Darling Street), and George Darter, piano manufacturer.

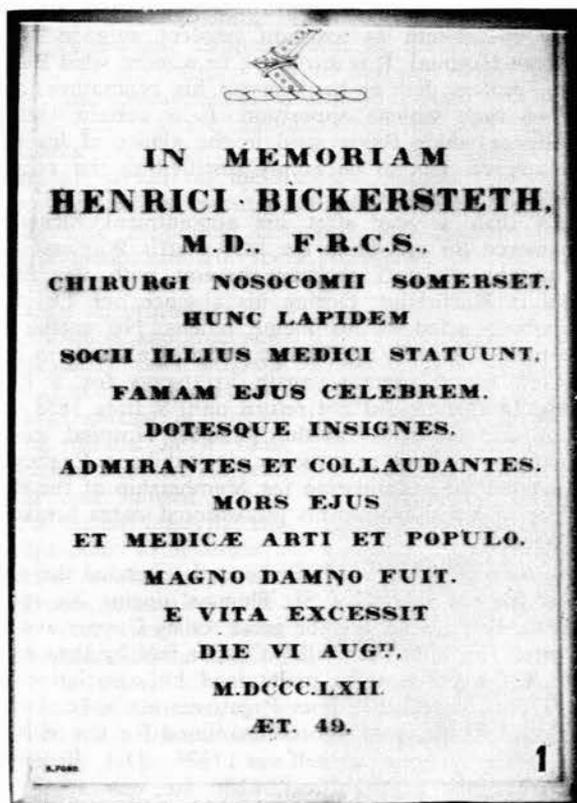


Fig. 1. The mural tablet in the entrance-hall of the hospital

The taverns of 'The Thatched House' and the 'London Hotel' in Greenmarket Square served the needs of townsman and traveller alike, and along the Heerengracht with its thatched roofs, cumbrous stoeps, canals, and shady trees, merchants and citizens congregated in the cool of the evening to smoke their pipes and cigars and hear the gossip of the day.

Fishermen beached their boats at Roggebaai, now vanished under the Foreshore, and the rigging and masts of sailing craft traced a pattern against a background of blue skies.

Into this new and strange world so far removed from his native England and the noise and bustle of the great city of London, came the young Bickersteth to seek his fame and fortune — unheralded, perhaps, but it is inconceivable that some correspondence had not passed between himself, or some sponsor on his behalf, and Dr. Bailey, for very soon after his arrival in Cape Town he commenced his duties at the old Somerset Hospital as hospital assistant.

Bickersteth's Career

The old Somerset Hospital was started by Dr. Bailey in 1818. In due course it was taken over by the Burgher Senate who dispensed with the services of Bailey. But, when the Burgher Senate was abolished, the Colonial Government assumed direct responsibility for the management of the hospital, and Bailey was once more, in 1830, appointed resident surgeon, a full-time post carrying a salary of £300 a year.

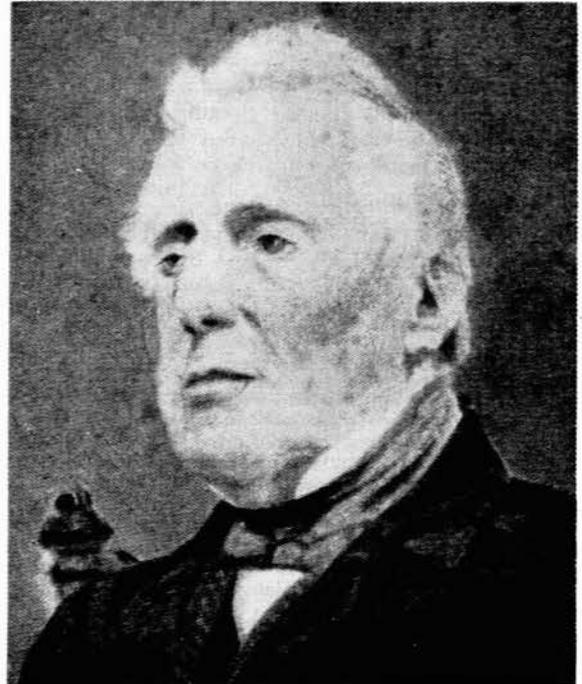
Bailey belonged to the school of medical apprenticeship and he created an opening for a hospital assistant after assuming control. It is possible that he may have written to England in search of a likely candidate, which may explain the circumstances of Bickersteth's departure from England and his assumption of the post of hospital assistant so promptly after his arrival.

In 1834 Dr. Bailey requested the Government to appoint a resident assistant surgeon to the hospital, and urged strongly that Bickersteth be given the post. He pointed out that Bickersteth had already for the past 2 years performed the duties of an assistant surgeon to his satisfaction, but that since he had never undergone any examinations it would be necessary to examine his competence for the post.

We do not know how far Bickersteth had progressed in his studies at St. Thomas'; but there can be no doubt on the score of his ability. He must have proved a most apt pupil and conscientious assistant for Bailey to have persisted in pressing so strongly for his appointment (lacking a diploma as he was) in the face of strong and justifiable opposition.

Bailey recommended that Dr. John Murray, Principal Medical Officer to the Army, and Dr. Louis Leisching jnr., an experienced private practitioner, be appointed as examiners. The Governor, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, gave his consent, but Dr. Leisching strongly opposed Bailey's plans on the grounds that such a procedure would be unethical, unconstitutional, and an injustice to others who, lacking a diploma, had been refused a licence to practice.

A heated controversy then arose which sadly split the medical fraternity of Cape Town at a stormy meeting



Dr. Samuel Bailey

attended by the Governor himself, held at the house of one Dr. Fleck. But all the protests were of no avail and Sir Benjamin D'Urban confirmed the appointment of Henry Bickersteth as assistant resident surgeon of the Somerset Hospital. It is intriguing to wonder what Bailey's young protégé felt as he took up his promotion in the face of such violent opposition. It is certain that the confidence which Bailey held in the ability of his assistant surgeon was to be amply justified in the years to come.

Less than a year after his appointment Bickersteth volunteered for service in the 1835 Kaffir War and spent 10 months as staff assistant-surgeon with the British forces in Kaffirland. During his absence one Dr. J. R. Zeederberg acted as his locum tenens. No sooner had he returned than he applied for leave of absence to go to England for 6 months, again arranging for a locum tenens. In fact he did not return until 9 June 1838 when he resumed his duties at the Somerset Hospital, now as a qualified medical practitioner, for while in England he had passed the examination for Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons and his professional status henceforth was secure.

We may conjecture that Bickersteth attended the teaching at his old school of St. Thomas' during his stay in London. Perhaps he saw the great Astley Cooper at Guy's Hospital, for, although Astley Cooper had by then retired from active practice, he maintained his association with Guy's until his death. James Paget was at the start of his illustrious career, having been examined for the M.R.C.S. by Astley Cooper himself in 1836. Did Bickersteth experience the same ordeal when he was admitted a member of the College on 5 January 1838? At that time his contemporary, James Paget, was struggling for a living

as a sub-editor on the staff of the *London Medical Gazette* at a salary of £50 a year!

As surgeon in charge of the Somerset Hospital, Bailey had many duties. Not only was he responsible for accident and emergency cases but also for lunatics, lepers, the chronic sick and paupers, in addition to the routine cases. Over and above these duties Bailey also had a large number of town commitments, and it is not surprising that he failed to do justice to all his work as surgeon in charge of the hospital. This led to criticism which brought the Somerset Hospital into disrepute and in due course resulted in the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry to investigate 'the irregularities and looseness of the system' and 'to lay down proper rules for the future government of the hospital'. On 14 September 1840 the Governor approved the Commission's draft of regulations for the management of the Somerset Hospital, which led to drastic changes, the chief of which was the appointment of an Inspector of Colonial Hospitals under whose control the surgeon and his assistants would henceforth fall. The assistant resident surgeon was allowed no private practice and his hours of residence at the hospital were strictly laid down. He could leave the premises only between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m., and then only under special circumstances. Bickersteth protested and petitioned the Governor to be permitted private practice and for modification of the strict hours of residence 'so that he might be enabled to attend church service on Sundays'. But to no avail.

In June 1845 Dr. Bailey, at the age of 67, went into semi-retirement and Henry Bickersteth became Surgeon of the Somerset Hospital. Now commenced the most active, fruitful and happiest years of his life, as also a new era in the history of the hospital, when by the energies and endeavours of its surgeon it came to be highly regarded both by the medical fraternity and the laity throughout the Cape. In addition to his hospital work Bickersteth served on the Colonial Medical Committee, was surgeon to the recently formed (1840) South African Mutual Life Assurance Company and surgeon to the Vaccine Institution. He soon established for himself a reputation for conscientious and able superintendentship of the hospital, and great skill and dexterity as a surgeon. He was skilful in diagnosis and kept abreast of current medical affairs in a most remarkable manner. He read eagerly and showed an interest in clinical teaching, and he attempted 'to institute a system of medical instruction by lectures, dissections, etc., and in every way to foster the conversion of the hospital into a practical school of medicine' thus anticipating by some 70 years formal medical education at the Cape. He was loved and trusted by his patients, and during this era there was a change

of attitude of the public towards the hospital, especially of the Malay patients among whom mistrust and fear were very strong.

Bickersteth wrote in 1856 that 'the prejudice against the institution that used to be so strongly entertained by the Malay and Coloured population is daily diminishing' and the Dean of Cape Town bestowed high praise when he said that people of means preferred to stay in hospital rather than elsewhere because of the kind and very able treatment of Dr. Bickersteth.

Bickersteth devoted his life to the surgery of the Somerset Hospital. His knowledge of anatomy and his surgical dexterity were of a very high order as can be seen by his case reports in the *Cape Town Medical Gazette*.

Amputations were the most commonly performed routine procedures, but in the *Cape Town Medical Gazette* of 1847 Bickersteth reported in great detail a case of aneurysm of the carotid artery treated by ligation—a formidable undertaking in pre-anaesthetic days. The tumour, which pulsed strongly, was about the size of an orange and situated between the angle of the mandible above and the cricoid cartilage below. When exposed at the operation the vessel lay at a great depth 'and it became a matter of some hazard to insinuate a probe between the artery and vein'.

An aneurysm needle carrying a single ligature of thick silk was successfully passed behind the artery and the ligature drawn tight. 'On drawing the second knot the silk unfortunately gave way; another ligature was however passed in a few seconds and the vessel secured. The man bore the operation, which lasted about 18 minutes, most nobly, scarcely uttering a word or moving at all during its performance.' Sad to relate the patient succumbed on the 31st postoperative day after repeated secondary haemorrhages. The *Cape Town Medical Gazette* also carried reports by Bickersteth on 'A case of cataract with some remarks upon a new operation for the depression of the lens' and 'A case of empyema with paracentesis thoracis' in which he described in particular the metallic clink heard on auscultation.

From the hospital reports of mid-1847 we are given a glimpse of the variety of clinical conditions treated at the hospital: Fevers, phthisis, bronchitis, pneumonia and asthma, chronic hepatitis, dysentery and chronic diarrhoea, manias, idiocy, delirium tremens, apoplexy and paralysis, dropsy, fractures, and abscesses—a most forbidding array of medical



The New Somerset Hospital as Dr. Bickersteth must have seen it shortly before his death in August 1862.

and surgical problems in an era when the doctor's armamentarium was slender indeed.

In 1853 Bickersteth again journeyed to England where he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons by examination, being admitted on 13 October 1853. James Luke was then President of the College. He also received his M.D. from St. Andrews in the same year. He returned to continue his work, no doubt stimulated by contact with eminent colleagues and abreast of current medical thought in Victorian England.

Bickersteth was married at a very youthful age and was not long at the Cape before his eldest child, a son, was born in 1832. What an intrepid undertaking to leave his homeland for the Cape Colony at the age of 19 years with his young wife, slender financial resources, and minus a diploma! It lends weight to the probability that he must have felt confident if not certain of getting a position as an apprentice with Bailey on his arrival. His first marriage was marred by the tragic loss not only of his son aged 13 years at Rugby School in England but also of two daughters in infancy. A third daughter, however, we learn, married one Charles Burton, King of Munzerabad, East Indies, in St. George's Cathedral in 1862!

By his second wife Bickersteth had four children. Despite his large family it is a sad thought that there were no direct descendants who remained at the Cape to perpetuate his name after his death.

There is little more to be gleaned of Bickersteth's personal and social life. However, from the biography of Robert Gray, First Bishop of Cape Town, emerges a tribute to the character of the man, which lends some insight into what may have been his circle of friends. Among Bishop Gray's friends were Sir Harry Smith, the Governor, and Lady Smith, Mr. Montagu, the Colonial Secretary, and Dr. Bickersteth who was kind and gentle and considerate. When the Bishop took ill Bickersteth moved him to his own house in the town and nursed him there.



The bronze plaque in St. George's Cathedral, Cape Town.

A bronze plaque and a beautiful stained-glass window dedicated to his memory by his daughters is to be seen in the Sanctuary of St. George's Cathedral, Cape Town, commemorating his 'Twenty-seven years of faithful and devoted service for this city and diocese and as a member of the choir of this Cathedral'.

About 1860 Bickersteth's health began to fail and in 1861 he visited England for a third time, for the purpose of undergoing medical treatment there, but without success. Of his illness we know only that for 'many months' before his death he suffered from epileptic attacks and was under the care of his friends, Drs. Fieck and Taylor. They were with him when he died at his house in Roeland Street at two o'clock on the morning of 6 August 1862.

The life of this courageous and competent surgeon was all too brief. He will be remembered in the annals of South African surgery as the first surgeon with a higher qualification to practice the art of surgery in this country, and as one who played a great role in advancing the standard of surgery at a time when the establishment of a medical school was scarcely dreamt of by medical men here.

No surgeon could wish for a better epitaph than that which hallows his memory in the hospital which he helped to build:

**In memory of
Henry Bickersteth
Surgeon of the Somerset Hospital
this stone
his medical colleagues erected
his wide-renowned fame
and note-worthy talent
admiring and praising.
His death**

**Both to the Art of Medicine and to the People
was a great loss.**

I wish to thank Dr. G. J. Joubert, Superintendent of the Somerset Hospital, for permission to publish a photograph of the Bickersteth mural tablet, and the Rev. E. L. King, Dean of Cape Town, for his permission to photograph the bronze plaque in St. George's Cathedral. I am indebted to Dr. Ian Levin and Dr. Arthur Rosenberg for the photography. The Rev. Anthony Bickersteth of the Diocese of Kimberley provided invaluable information on the Bickersteth family tree.

Thanks are also due to the Rev. D. R. Rogerson of the Rectory, Sapcote, England, for his help in tracing the background, and to Mr. W. R. Le Fanu, Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons, for accurate data on Bickersteth's admission as a Member and Fellow.

I thank my wife for her unstinting efforts in the time-consuming task of trying to trace Bickersteth's last resting place.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Edmund H. Burrows' *A History of Medicine in South Africa* which covers in detail Bickersteth's association with the Somerset Hospital.

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