



John Fairley: a biographical note

Anne Hargreaves

Born in 1915, with family roots around Hamilton, John Maxwell Fairley soon abandoned the field of insurance to study dentistry at Dundee, gaining his LDS from the University of St Andrews in 1941, and his BDS the following year, being the only student to achieve distinction. During his final year he acted as house surgeon and was appointed demonstrator to junior students in charge of the phantom head class. During subsequent service in the RAF, initially at Carlisle, then Prestwick and manning a mobile dental unit on Skye, he was posted to India where, at a field hospital in the east, he served as a dentist, anaesthetist and occasionally assistant to the surgeon, as a result of his maxillo-facial training.

After the war he returned to Dundee, having been offered a Senior Lectureship in Operative Dental Surgery (University of St Andrews) with consultant status at the Dental School, and also operating at the Dundee Royal Infirmary and Maryfield Hospital. In this immediate post-war period there were very few qualified staff available, but slowly both school and hospital were built up. Working with Professor A. D. Kitchen, then Dean of the Dental School, a new Dental Hospital was planned, built and finally opened in the 1960s. This administrative experience led to an invitation from the University of Khartoum, in the Sudan, to set up a dental school there, with input from the WHO, over a period of six months. A similar invitation to set up a Crown and Bridge Department in Sao Paulo, had to be declined because of the time of absence required.

When the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh introduced the new Diploma in Restorative Dentistry, the first awards were honorary and were given to one representative from each of the disciplines of conservative dentistry, dental prosthetics and periodontology, in Scotland, so John Fairley became the first person to receive this award.

His interest in dental instruments dated from his time as a House Surgeon and the collection was gradually expanded from visits to sales-rooms and retiring practitioners.

Collecting dental items

Jackie McGlone writing in the 'Collecting' column of the "Weekend Living" section of "The Herald" on Saturday, 26th March 2005, refers to a number of dental collectors items.

'Images of teeth-gnashing Scots clamouring for dental treatment shows that fears of surgery have receded. But the tortured instruments that made a BC (before chloroform) visit such a terrifying prospect continue to extract - from collectors wallets.

An early nineteenth-century silver dental pick in a gold and ivory case recently achieved £250 and a metal molar key, forerunner of dental forceps, can pull bids of £100 or more. Expect to pay £200 for folding dental chairs that brought relief to frontier Americans, and up to £15,000 for an eighteenth-century trepanning set. A hideous articulated steel jaw (£500) and a collection of Victorian glass eyes (£20,000) are not for the squeamish, but some items of medicalia are exciting a wider audience and propelling prices. Original nineteenth-century phrenology heads by L. N. Fowler are touching £500.'