

Medicine in Axminster: Surgeons (both human and veterinary), doctors, hospitals, pharmacists, dentists and others

Evidence from the 18th century

There are several 18th century wills held in the National Archives (and accessible via their website) which provide evidence of surgeons linked to Axminster (see below for details), though it is striking that no surgeons or doctors were described as such in the various lists of Freeholders assembled during the 18th century in connection with the drawing up of voters' lists. The nearest we get is in 1741, when the list for Axminster included John French, described as an apothecary.

We do, however, have evidence from apprenticeships¹ involving apothecaries and surgeons based in Axminster who took on apprentices during the 18th century, as follows. In 1721 Thomas French (apothecary, and probably the father of John French, mentioned above) took on an apprentice. Then William Pear, a surgeon, took on two separate apprentices, in 1736 and 1744, followed by Nicholas Bragge in 1758, 1762 and 1766, and Robert Gammes in 1763, 1766 and 1786. This demonstrates beyond all doubt that the wealthier residents of Axminster had access to medical services from the 1730s at the latest.

Those surgeons who were living in Axminster when they wrote wills are as follows, in date order, with the year being the date when the wills were proved, which is not necessarily the same as the year of death: John Tomkins (1758), Wheeler Tomkins (1764), Pollard Lewes (1764), Samuel Symes (1790) and William White (1792). The parish register for Axminster burials in 1792 confirm that William White died aged 66, but also states that he had at one time been a Navy surgeon. This should encourage a note of caution: some of the other surgeons who wrote their wills in Axminster may not have practised locally; they may simply have settled here after civilian or military practice elsewhere.

When the first available trade directory was drawn up in 1792, it included two surnames from the list above, namely Samuel Symes (though probably Samuel Short Symes, the son of the Samuel Symes mentioned above, who had died at least 2 years before), described as a surgeon and apothecary; and William White, the ex-Navy surgeon (see above). It also listed Nicholas Bragge & Son and Robert Garniss (presumably a mis-spelling of Gammes), both described as surgeons and apothecaries, and Robert Robertson, a druggist.

In the case of William Pear, the first known surgeon to serve Axminster, there is evidence from the accounts of the Axminster Overseers of the Poor that he was paid to provide some aspects of care for the poor, as directed by the Overseers.

In the case of Nicholas Bragge we know that he practised as a surgeon in Axminster from the early 1750s. In 1754 he appears on the list of subscribers to a treatise on mathematics² described as 'surgeon, of Axminster', and he also had the first of a series of children baptised at Axminster that same year, having been married in 1752 at Kilmington. There is

¹ Source: 'Country Apprentices 1710 to 1808' from the Society of Genealogists, accessed via the findmypast.co.uk website.

² Source: 'A New Treatise of Arithmetic' by Joseph Thorpe (1754), accessible on-line via google books.

also a tablet on the wall of Axminster church commemorating his death on 17 September 1809, which describes him as '50 years a surgeon'.

It seems likely that he was trained either in London or in the armed forces, and we know that by 1783 he was a 'corresponding member' of the Medical Society³, meaning that he did not live close enough to London to attend their regular meetings. The society's membership included a fair proportion of military surgeons, as well as many London-based names.

We then have evidence of Nicholas Bragge's interest in public health, and in particular in the emerging science of vaccination, in the 1770s and 1780s. This evidence comes from the 1802 'Report from the Committee on Dr Jenner's Petition, respecting his Discovery of Vaccine Inoculation'⁴, which contains the following text taken from a letter dated 12 April 1802 from Nicholas Bragge to Sir William Elford, Bart, a member of the committee.

"It is now more than thirty years ago that I first made experiments, and proved that the vaccine disease was a preservative against the small pox; and it is, I believe, more than twenty years ago, that, through the Rev Herman Drew, I acquainted Sir George Baker with the observations and experiments I had then made, which I am certain Sir George will readily acknowledge. Unhappily an accident by fire has deprived me of having recourse to them now, but my memory will supply me with enough to convince you, that Dr Jenner is not the only person entitled to the reward that may be thought deserving for such discovery. It is now, I believe, twenty years ago, that Mrs Rendall, the wife of a respectable farmer in the parish of Whitechurch⁵, near Lyme in Dorsetshire (who is at this time a tenant to Lady Catherine Damer, in the same parish for which I have been concerned as an apothecary for the poor ever since I have been in business) inoculated herself, and three or four children for it; and those children, who have long arrived at manhood, have since inoculated their friends and neighbours whenever an opportunity has offered."

There was an extract from a generally supportive letter from Rev Herman Dew, and a reference to (but not an extract from) another supportive letter from William Tucker of Coryton (Kilmington).

The committee concluded that although the beneficial effects of inoculating people against the ravages of smallpox by exposing them to cow pox had been generally understood in dairying areas for some time (as evidenced by Nicholas Bragge), Jenner had taken the principle a stage further. What he did is very clearly described on the jenner.ac.uk website, which confirms that he was awarded £10,000 by the British Government in 1802, and a further £20,000 in 1807.

Nevertheless, we can conclude that in Nicholas Bragge Axminster enjoyed the services of a forward-looking and diligent medical practitioner somewhat earlier than many towns of a comparable size.

³ The Medical Society of London ([website medsoclondon.org](http://website.medsoclonondon.org)) was founded in 1773 to encourage the exchange of medical intelligence between physicians, surgeons, apothecaries and 'accoucheurs'. Unlike other societies of the time membership was not restricted to naval surgeons, hospital physicians, licentiates of the Royal College or those associated with a particular hospital. The 'Laws and Regulations of the Medical Society' were dated 19 December 1779 and printed in 1803, together with a list of members, and can be found on-line.

⁴ This can be found on-line as pages 172 to 188 of 'Reports from Committees of the House of Commons, Reprinted by order of the House' Vol.XIV (1793 to 1902). The report on Dr Jenner's petition was dated 6 May 1802, with evidence taken over the preceding year or so.

⁵ This is almost certainly a reference to Whitechurch Canonicorum.

1800 to 1849

The next evidence of medical practitioners in Axminster comes from Pigot's directory of 1823/24, which names Samuel Short Symes (whose will was proved in 1824) as a surgeon, alongside Charles Arnold and Charles Hayman. James Robertson Mill was described as a physician. Dorothy Anning and Thomas Chapple were both listed as druggists and grocers.

In 1831 John Mallock of Axminster left a will in which he was described as a surgeon, but the parish burials register shows that he was just 28 when he died, meaning that he had not been practising very long. His death may well have been caused by an outbreak of cholera which affected Axminster in 1831.

There were two directories published in 1838 and 1844 which show the continuing presence in Axminster of Charles Arnold (listed in 1838 on 'Honiton Street' (presumably West Street) and in 1844 on 'Church Lane' (possibly Church Street)). Charles Hayman (see above) was presumably the elder of Hayman & Son, identified as surgeons and registrar of births etc (with the address in 1844 given as Western Road). James Fynmore Symes of Castle Hill was also listed as a surgeon both times, he being the son of the late Samuel Short Symes (see above), and at least the third generation of his family to be a local surgeon.

Charles Hallett was listed as a surgeon in 1838 but not in 1844 (though this may be an error, or he might have been serving as an army surgeon for a time, because he was repeatedly listed from the 1850s to the 1880s: see below). In 1844 James Eckley Pattison on Jessamine Cottage, Lyme Street was listed as a surgeon for the one and only time.

Thomas Chapple (see above) continued as a druggist, on Lyme Street, joined on both occasions by William Keech, a chemist, druggist (and agent for Atlas Fire Insurance) on Chard Street; and William Symes Pryer, a chemist, druggist and fancy stationer on West Street (1838) and Trinity Square (1844).

Although not a medical man, it is worth noting that the 1844 directory also listed John Finnamere, a veterinary surgeon, on Chard Street. His continuing presence in the town was noted until 1866, but is not repeated below.

1850 to 1869

Directories from which information can be drawn were published in 1850, 1856, 1857 and 1866.

Five surgeons were listed in 1850: Charles Arnold, Charles Hallett, Charles Hayman, Philip Charles Hayman and James Fynmore Symes; together with three druggists: Thomas Chapple, William Keech and William Symes Pryer.

By 1856 three of the five 1850 surgeons (Charles Arnold, Charles Hayman and James Fynmore Symes) had apparently retired, leaving the other two in place, along with George Gillett. Philip Charles Hayman was recorded as practising on Western Road (as previously). A directory from 1857 gives George Gillett's address as South Street, and Charles Hallett's as Poplar Mount, though by 1859 George Gillett had moved into Thomas Whitty's former house on Silver Street (now the Law Chambers), which he rented until 1867⁶.

One of the 1850 druggists (Thomas Chapple) had also retired by 1856, leaving the other two in place, as they were in 1857.

⁶ Source: 'House Histories for Beginners' by Ian & O-lan Style (Phillimore & Co, 2006). See Chapter 16.

In 1866 the same three surgeons were listed, in the same places (apparently wrongly, in the case of George Gillett). William Symes Pryer was still a druggist, but William Keech had been replaced by Frederick John Gunn.

A year earlier, in 1865, there had been an outbreak of typhoid in Axminster.

The 1870s

A directory from 1870 only names two surgeons (Charles Hallett and Henry James Ellery of 'The Shrubbery') and one chemist (William Symes Pryer). However, subsequent directories strongly suggest that the omission of Frederick John Gunn in 1870 was an error on the part of the compilers.

By 1873 a further surgeon had arrived, making three in all: Thomas Appleton, of West House, and the two previously named druggists were again listed.

There were two separate directories published in 1878 and 1878/79 which between them confirm the departure of Henry James Ellery, the continuing presence of Thomas Appleton and Charles Hallett, and the arrival of a new surgeon: George Barns of Castle Hill House. There was no change in the two druggists serving the town.

The 1878 and 1878/79 directories also name William Joseph Vivian as a veterinary surgeon, living at Lynch Villa on what is now North Street. He is not listed again thereafter.

1880 to 1899

There were four further directories published, in 1883, 1889, 1890 and 1893.

By 1883 Thomas Appleton was listed as a private resident rather than a surgeon, so had presumably retired. This left two active surgeons in the town: George Barns and Charles Hallett. Two chemists and druggists were also listed: John Goodwin Protheroe (Chard Street) and Pryer & Harris (Trinity Square).

In 1887 Axminster Cottage Hospital was opened in the former carpet factory building on Silver Street, thanks to the efforts and support of Miss Emily Conybeare. The 1889 directory states that it had 17 beds, and names the matron as Miss Kate M White-Spunner. Only one surgeon was named at that time as serving the town (though see below), the newly-arrived William Langran, of Silverleigh, and only one chemist: John Godwin Protheroe.

The 1890 directory confirms the presence of William Langran, but also lists George Barns of Castle Hill House (who was presumably omitted in 1889 by mistake). Both men are named as visiting surgeons to the Cottage Hospital, which had a new matron: Miss Rachael Riley-Nichols. A further surgeon was also identified working in the town: Charles Henry Hallett, of Castle House. The chemists listed in 1890 were Michael Charles James Harris of West Street, as well as John Godwin Protheroe.

The 1889 to 1893 directories also identify a new veterinary surgeon in town: William Charles Ford of South Street.

The 1893 directory gives the number of beds in the hospital as 14 (a reduction of 3), and names the matron as Miss Julie Foster. Three surgeons are listed: George Barns and William Langran, plus George John Padbury of Lyme Street. No chemists are named in 1893, though that need not mean that none were practising.

Medicine outside Axminster, and public health, from the 1880s onwards

Until the late 1870s one of the Axminster doctors (Charles Hallett at that time) acted as surgeon to the Axminster Union workhouse, but from the 1880s the Union took on additional responsibilities for public health functions such as vaccination. The Union generally employed two officials with administrative responsibilities for vaccination campaigns, one in Axminster and one typically in Colyton.

The 1883 directory identifies those doctors with responsibilities to Axminster Union, namely Charles Hallett in Axminster, plus other doctors based in Chard, Charmouth, Colyton, Dalwood, Lyme Regis, Seaton and Thorncombe. The doctor based in Dalwood, Dr Britton Hodges, was not a vaccinator. This provides a good indication as to the choice of doctors available to residents of outlying villages at that time, and the distances they might have to travel if the doctor did not come to them.

1900 to 1919

There were five further directories published, in 1902, 1906, 1910, 1914 and 1919.

In 1902 the matron of the Cottage Hospital was Miss Morton, followed by Miss Rose Nash in 1906 (by which point the bed count was down to six) and Miss Collier in 1910. The present hospital on Chard Street was opened in 1912, and in 1914 the matron was named as Miss Amy Secker Watson, with the bed count shown as 10 beds and a cot. By 1919 this had risen back to 17 beds and one cot, and the matron was Miss M Hatton.

George Barns evidently retired between 1902 and 1906, but both William Langran and George John Padbury are listed consistently as surgeons over this full period. By 1902 George John Padbury had moved to 'Coombefield'.

By 1902 there was also a new doctor resident at Dalwood: John Hurd Gordon.

By 1906 James Crooks had moved to Axminster (Castle Hill House). He was a surgeon, and although he was employed to oversee factory health on behalf of both Chard and Axminster Councils, he very probably had a private practice in the town at the same time. By 1910 he had been succeeded by John Neville Bliethe Vise (who lived at 'Heyop', now the Law Chambers on Silver Street), and by 1914 by William Charles Mence (also of 'Heyop'). When war came, he signed up and served in various theatres of war. He died in Axminster Hospital in 1919 (to which he was by then officially attached as a surgeon) as a result of illnesses contracted during his army service.

In 1914 the directory lists Miss Spradbury of Castle Hill as the District Nurse, and Mrs Edith Sprague of South Street, a certified midwife. Mrs Sprague was still listed in 1919, and the new District Nurse was Miss Elizabeth Alice Trott of Castle Hill.

From 1902 to 1914 the only chemist's shop listed in Axminster belonged to Henry Imber-Parsons of Chard Street. By 1919 he had been joined by Ivor Reginald Phillips whose shop was on Trinity Square.

The 1919 directory was the first to name a surgeon-dentist: Thomas Henry Taylor of West Street.

From 1906 to 1919 George David Lansley of South Street practised as a veterinary surgeon.

The 1920s

There were two directories published in the 1920s, in 1923 and 1926. These confirm the continuing presence of surgeons William Langran (by then of 'The Lawn') and George John Padbury (by then of 'The Laurels'). By 1926 they had been joined by Allen Leopard Crockford (of Terrace Lodge), who had served in World War I as a captain, and been awarded the MC.

The matron of the Hospital was Miss E Williams in 1923, and Miss A Wallbank in 1926.

Mrs Sprague remained the midwife in 1923, but was not named in 1926. The position of District Nurse was filled by Miss Annie Wedlake of West Street in both years.

George Butt Geake was named as the dentist on West Street in both directories. By 1926 he had been joined by William Ernest Mead on Trinity Square and Bertram F Robinson on West Street.

Henry Imber-Parsons and Ivor Reginald Phillips remained the two chemists serving Axminster, and George David Lansley was still the town's only named veterinary surgeon.

The 1930s and 1940s

In 1934 St Thomas Court was opened as an integrated health centre, with three doctors, a dentist, an oculist, a dispenser and a physiotherapist. If not the first such facility in the country, it was certainly one of the first.

William Langran retired in 1935, and was presented by Charles Snell (Lord of the Manor) with an album containing 1,358 names, a gold watch, and £335-2s-7d in recognition of his long-standing and devoted service to Axminster and district. Following his retirement the 1935 directory names George John Padbury and Allen Lepard Crockford, and records that they had been joined by Arthur Douglas Morton, R Wayland-Smith and Norman Leslie Capener.

Miss E Ravenscroft was the matron of Axminster Hospital throughout the 1930s.

The three dentists who had been present by 1926 had been joined by 1935 by Samuel L Manning (on Trinity Square).

Ivor Reginald Phillips still had his chemist's shop in 1935, and had been joined by Stanley James Simmons on Chard Street. George David Lansley was still the town's only named veterinarian.

The 1935 directory was the only one to name an optician: Stanley C Tovey of Lyme Street.

By 1939 the only change in surgeons was the replacement of Norman Leslie Capener by Anthony Hollingsworth and A Lock.

Only two dentists were listed: George Butt Geake and Bertram F Robinson, and Ivor Reginald Phillips was the only chemist to be named.

After World War II Drs Finzel and Parkinson joined Dr Morton, followed later by Dr Bill Leach.