



Summer 2026

In this issue

Letter from the President	2
Congress 2027, ORC and AGM, Journal Update	3
Poynter Lecture Report	4
Awards	5
Hunterian Prize	
Osler Travel Award	
New Affiliate Member	6
Affiliate Reports	7
Harold Ellis: a personal tribute	8

British Society for the History of Medicine

President: Hilary Morris

Vice-President: Bryan Rhodes

Hon Treasurer: Catriona Head

Hon Secretary: Lee Coppack

Editors: *Topics in the History of Medicine*: Edward Wawrzynczak; newsletter and blog: Lee Coppack

www.bshm.org.uk; admin@bshm.org.uk

X : @brithistmed; bsky: britsocmedhistory; Facebook: British Society for the History of Medicine; Instagram: brithistmed

Letter from the President, Hilary Morris



I begin this newsletter with sad news of the deaths of Harold Ellis and Christopher Gardner Thorpe, both of whom were at the forefront of promoting the history of medicine and who were also dear friends to many, including myself.

I first met Harold while completing my Diploma in the History of Medicine of the Society of Apothecaries (DHMSA) in 1980. From that time onwards he was a constant source of support, particularly as a guest lecturer where he never failed to inspire staff and students alike through a combination of his vast knowledge and wonderfully wicked humour. Many of his achievements were included in the recent obituaries, though I am grateful to Bryan Rhodes for adding his own personal reminiscences of being taught by Harold Ellis which are included in this newsletter. See [here](#) for Bryan's tribute.

Last week we were also saddened by the news of the death of Christopher Gardner-Thorpe. We will include a tribute reflecting his many achievements in the next issue of our newsletter, but at this time I simply wish to acknowledge Christopher's lifelong commitment to the history of medicine and much valued support of this society. The officers and members of the BSHM send their condolences to both families.

In June, I was delighted to award the Poynter Lecture to Dr John Clark whose fascinating lecture *Buried Evidence* reminded us of the importance of forensic pathology, and the need to include it in texts relating to the history of medicine. The hybrid lecture was held at St Andrews University and was part of a shared programme with the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine. I thank Malcolm Kinnear and all who worked so hard behind the scenes to ensure the day's programme was such a success.

Following my request for expressions of interest for the role of guest editor of volume 7 of *Topics in the History of Medicine (ThoM)* Nick Summerton, has put forward his name with the proposed theme: 'Myths, mistakes and misunderstandings'. All of us involved with the editorial process of our increasingly prestigious journal look forward to working alongside Nick and are assured that the diversity of this title will attract many fascinating papers.

Lastly, I am delighted to announce the venue of the 2027 Congress will be at the historic Liverpool Medical Institution (LMI). The dates are 8-11 September, and the themes are medical history, heritage and innovation. This is an exciting venue in terms of both the history of the LMI and the actual city which has a rich cultural history. Liverpool also offers a range of accommodation and has excellent transport links. Further details will follow as planning progresses.

As ever, I thank the officers who work tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure the BHMS achieves so much in promoting the history of medicine, as well as individual members and affiliated societies whose continued support ensures we remain one of the most prestigious societies of its type. I also look forward to welcoming you all to the forthcoming AGM this September (details below).

Congress 2027 – It's Liverpool

The next BSHM Congress will take place in the historic surroundings of the Liverpool Medical Institution (LMI) from 8 to 11 September 2027. For nearly two centuries this beautiful Grade II* Listed building has been a focus of medical life and a meeting place for the medical community of Merseyside.

The medical library, which remains its primary role, was founded in 1779. The *Liverpool Medical Society* began in 1833, and in 1839-40 the two organisations merged to form *Liverpool Medical Institution*. In time, they decided that the medical library should be housed in a new building, and the building we see today was completed in 1837.



More news of the Congress to come. Please mark your diaries now.

ORC and AGM

The annual BSHM officers' and representatives' meeting and AGM will take place online on Tuesday 29 September, time to be confirmed but most likely 16.00-17.30. We will send a formal notice with the time and link shortly.

Journal Update

Peter Carpenter, guest editor *Topics in the History of Medicine*, Volume 6, writes: We are aiming to publish about 11 papers based on talks given at the 2005 BSHM Congress - as guest editor I have discovered that progress is slow as papers are submitted, refereed, a second version requested and received, then re-edited before a potential third revision and approval by the editorial board before proof editing! We have most of the papers through the hurdle of the second version, which we hope completes the worst the labour for both writers and editors, but I now understand as the guest editor why we are unlikely to be able to publish until the last quarter of this year!

Poynter lecture 2026

Buried evidence

John Clark

The role of the forensic pathologist dealing with mass deaths and burials is typically focussed towards either identification or establishing cause of death, or both, but as forensic pathologist John Clark explained in his Poynter Lecture for the British Society for the History of Medicine, political forces can sometimes determine what happens to the bodies, how the story is told and what story is told.



John delivered his lecture *Buried Evidence* at the joint meeting of the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine and BSHM held on 20 June at St Andrews University. He demonstrated the importance of forensic pathology and related disciplines in the investigation of mass killings and politically charged deaths.

As John described, the organised respect for wounded and dead combatants really only began in the mid-19th century with the founding of the International Committee of the

Red Cross (ICRC) and the development of humanitarian law through Geneva Conventions and other treaties. Prosecutions for mass killings came much later, not until World War I.

When authorities order or sanction the killing of a group of people who they perceive as a threat and bodies are buried to hide the evidence, each side is likely to accuse the other when eventually these bodies are uncovered, additionally manipulating or misinterpreting the evidence for political gain. John cited two examples from the early 20th century, one from Serbia in 1914 and the other from the Finnish civil war of 1918, neither of which resulted in any prosecution.

One of the best-known mass killings that John described was the Katyn massacre from the Second World War – a series of mass executions of high-level Poles carried out by the Soviet Union between April and May 1940. Its name comes from the Katyn Forest in modern-day Russia where in 1943 Nazi German forces discovered mass graves as they advanced eastwards. The Germans blamed the Russians, the latter vehemently denying this until 1990. The political ramifications continued for many years.

Sometimes, soldiers have clearly died in combat, and the focus is more on identification. One such example was the Falklands Conflict of 1982, following which many Argentinian soldiers were buried on the islands as 'unknown' because of the lack of specific identifying documentation. There they remained for the next 35 years until Argentine

President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner appealed to the ICRC for help, now that identification was a realistic possibility because of advances in DNA technology. In 2017 an international team of forensic specialists successfully exhumed and identified 121 bodies from the Argentine Cemetery – the great majority of the unknown – and reburied the soldiers in their original graves. The cemetery is thus now a specific point of memorial for relatives to visit.

In considering the British dead in the conflict, it had been the accepted practice ever since World War I for men to be buried close to where they fell, and this was the initial policy adopted in 1982. Disquiet from many British families however, led then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to allow repatriation to the UK. In the end the majority were returned, and only 16 men remain buried on the islands.

John concluded with the conflict in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, in the aftermath of which he had been much involved. The investigation of mass graves here was primarily a criminal investigation, where establishing cause of death and securing other evidential material played an important part in the conviction of those senior figures indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

He described two particular trials to indicate how medical evidence can counter (or support) specific allegations. One was that of Radovan Karadžić, former psychiatrist and Serbian politician who in 2016, was ultimately found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity, including in Srebrenica, and who is today serving his life sentence at Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight.

In addition to a UK career in Aberdeen, Sheffield and Glasgow, John was Chief Pathologist for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in its investigation of war crimes from the Balkans Wars of the 1990s. His expertise has also led to involvement with the International Criminal Court, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the European Court of Human Rights. He is secretary of the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine.

Awards

Hunterian Prize 2026



Euan Strachan, Neurosurgery Resident at the Wessex Neurological Centre, Southampton, won the 2026 Hunterian Prize with his essay: *On the Legacy of John Hunter, Neuroanatomy and Neurosurgery: there and back again*. The prize is awarded for the best essay that connects contemporary medical, dental or veterinary knowledge with 18th or 19th century medicine, comparative anatomy or evolutionary biology.

Euan with outgoing Hunterian Society President Cathy Corbishley

Launch of Osler Student Travel Awards 2026-2027

Applications are now open for the Osler Student Travel Awards 2026-2027. The awards are worth up to £4000 and provide funds for an undergraduate student at a UK medical school to travel to North America to undertake research on an agreed topic in history of medicine using material not available online.

The deadline for submissions is 30 November 2026. There is no requirement to register an interest before formal application for the award, and students are welcome to contact BSHM President Hilary Morris or any of the other sponsors if they would like an informal discussion about suitability of topic, likely sources of expertise and/or archival material is required.

The 2025 winner was Lakshmi Aggarwal, a third-year medical student at Bristol who is going to Canada to research Canadian doctor, Peter Edward Jones, who worked in public health, with an emphasis on improvements for indigenous Canadian peoples. This project allows Lakshmi to merge her interests in medical history and sustainability. The title of her project is: *A Physician Between Worlds: Sustainability and Environmental Health in the Work of Dr Peter Edmund Jones (Kahkewaquonaby II)*.

BSHM is among the supporters of the award along with the John Blair Trust, Friends of Millbank, The History Society at the Royal Society of Medicine, The Scottish Society of the History of Medicine, The Hunterian Society and the Osler Club of London. Although the Osler is in the title, all are equal partners, and each society appoints one member to the committee. The awards committee also has a representative of the American Osler Society.

Hilary also asks other BSHM affiliates and members to let students know about the award, which will be promoted on the BSHM and other sponsors' websites.

For more information see <https://bshm.org.uk/> or contact: president@bshm.org.uk

Welcome to our new affiliate member



The Veterinary History Society

A Window on the History of Comparative Medicine by Paul Watkins

The Veterinary History Society (VHS) was founded in 1962 and over the ensuing years has promoted the investigation and description of many aspects of veterinary history, in its broadest sense. Unsurprisingly, there has always been a close link between the veterinary and medical professions, and this is reflected in many of the developments in veterinary history.

The society produces a journal (normally two volumes a year), which contains a range of original articles. Over the last year, the society has undertaken a complete overhaul of its website and uploaded all copies of the journal in a digitised format, which can now be downloaded. The contents have been abstracted, indexed and are searchable both by author and keywords. Members of the society can access all the contents, as well as receiving the journal as hard copy. We now offer online membership, to allow access to the website contents. Non-members can purchase copies of an edition for £10.

The website provides a rich source of information, which we hope will be of value to medical as well as veterinary historians. For example, papers available include John Hunter and his link to the veterinary profession; John Barclay and the teaching of anatomy; Edward Coleman and the establishment of army veterinary services and veterinary contributions to the development of therapeutic penicillin. Find out more at <https://thevhs.uk/>

Paul Watkins is Chairman of the Veterinary History Society.

Affiliate reports

British Society for the History of Pharmacy

The British Society for the History of Pharmacy held its annual conference in Edinburgh from 8-10 May with the theme 'Pharmacy Communities: Local and Global Perspectives'. For a full report, see <https://www.bshp.org/>

History of Medicine Society of Wales

The summer meeting of the History of Medicine Society of Wales, in Llandrindod Wells, had five talks of great interest. Anne Freeman spoke on the history of geriatric medicine in Wales preceded by a full description of views about ageing, and ways of caring for the elderly, in times past.

John Mayberry recounted the development of the *Hamadryad* hospital ship in Cardiff in 1866 and its subsequent replacement with a proper hospital building in 1905.

The old postcard shows former HMS Hamadryade as a hospital ship moored in the River Taff in Cardiff, Wales. Behind is the Royal Hamadryad Seaman's Hospital in the final stages of construction in the final stages of building. The ship was towed away in 1905.



Chris Locke described the conflicts between the doctors and miners in South Wales at the turn of the 20th century. Overproduction of medical graduates had led to a shortage of jobs, so many were forced to take positions as "club doctors", some of whom were employed by miners' cooperatives.

James Coulson gave an overview of arsenic poisoning in the 19th century with reference to two legal cases. He set the background of problems with chemical identification of arsenic which proved difficult in these said cases.

Helen Sweetland finished the day by introducing as to three of her heroes, women who made great contributions to medicine in Wales. She set the background of difficulties for women gaining medical qualifications in the 19th century.

<https://homsw.org.uk/>

Scottish Society of the History of Medicine

The Scottish Society of the History of Medicine held its summer meeting on 20 June at St Andrews University, and appropriately two of the presentations linked medicine and golf. Following the presentations, forensic pathologist and SSHM secretary, John Clark, delivered the 2026 Poynter Lecture, *Buried Evidence*.



Malcolm Kinnear, Iain Macintyre and David Hamilton (with blue cube microphone)

Presentations

- Edinburgh surgery and the history of golf – Iain Macintyre, Edinburgh
- Robert Chambers: publisher and his profitable sojourn in St Andrews in the 1840s
David Hamilton, St Andrews
- The Arrott medical kindred – Malcolm Kinnear, Fife

Members' events

See <https://bshm.org.uk/history-events/> New page under development.

Please send listings for inclusion to secretary@bshm.org.uk

Harold Ellis : A Personal Tribute

By Bryan Rhodes

It was with great sadness that I learned of the recent passing of Professor Harold Ellis, at the age of 100. I send my deepest condolences to his family and friends and would like to make a few comments about him and his remarkable career that spanned more than seven decades.

He studied medicine at Oxford University, qualifying in 1948, the same year that the NHS was created. During his surgical training in Oxford, he developed a passion for teaching, helping to guide students and trainees, including a young Roy Yorke Calne, towards success in surgical exams.

Incredibly, he managed to write his first book, *Clinical Anatomy: Applied Anatomy for Medical Students and Junior Doctors*, published in 1960, during the later stages of his surgical

training at Oxford. This book was, and continues to be extremely successful, the latest 14th edition published in 2018.

However, it was his second book, *Lecture Notes in General Surgery*, published a few years after he had been appointed the foundational Professor of Surgery at Westminster Medical School, London and co-authored by his senior lecturer, Roy Yorke Calne, that made a deep impression on me. First published in 1965, I purchased a copy of the sixth edition of 1983 during my final year as a medical student. For myself, and I'm sure for thousands of other budding surgeons, this small book seemed to make complex issues much simpler and easier to understand, a godsend before taking stressful exams. It was never far from my side during the early years of my own training.

Professor Ellis had a particular interest in breast cancer, and I recall attending a brilliant lecture he gave in Liverpool in the late 1980s on this subject. This was also the subject of his 1986 Bradshaw lecture, a transcript of which was published in the *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons* the following year. The lecture included an excellent account of the history of the surgical management of breast tumours, stretching back to Celsus; a clear indication of Ellis's burgeoning interest in the history of surgery.

From the mid-1980s onwards, he published a number of books about the history of surgery including *A History of Surgery*, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Surgery* and *Operations that made History*. He had a particular admiration for Sir Astley Cooper, publishing a biography of him in 1985, recognising Cooper as a pioneering surgeon with a passion for clinical anatomy.

Although he retired from clinical practice at the age of 63, in 1989, Ellis continued to teach anatomy, initially at Cambridge University and then, well into his 90s, at Guy's Hospital.

The Inaugural Sir Richard Owen Lecture

In 2011, some of the surgically oriented medical students of Lancaster University Medical School decided to establish a new surgical society, named the Richard Owen Surgical Society named after Lancaster's most famous surgeon-anatomist. To celebrate this development, I decided to organise an annual lecture devoted to the history of surgery and anatomy, which was supported by the university. There was no doubt in my mind as to who should be the first speaker and the society agreed; we were all delighted that Professor Ellis agreed to come.

On October 12th, 2011, Professor Ellis started his chosen lecture, 'Royal Operations', in front of a packed audience of students, surgical colleagues and hospital staff. He chose to speak about three of the operations which had featured in his 1984 book *Famous Operations*, and were reproduced, with an additional chapter about splenectomy, in his 1996 book *Operations That Made History*.

Firstly, we heard the sad story of Queen Caroline's umbilical hernia. In November 1737, her bowel became strangulated in the hernia and despite numerous elixirs, enemas and bloodletting, prescribed by the four eminent Royal physicians, the Queen's condition deteriorated. By the time that the Queen had consented to the 'indignity of a surgical examination' it was too late to operate. 'I'd rather be a pig farmer than a physician!' exclaimed Professor Ellis, explaining that by 1962, when he had been appointed to the chair

in surgery at Westminster, dealing with such a condition would have been simple 'even for my SHO!'

Secondly, he told us about the sebaceous cyst of George IV. This may not appear to be as exciting as Queen Caroline's condition, but it did feature a successful operation and was performed by Professor Ellis's favourite surgeon: Sir Ashley Cooper, in 1821. The punch line was provided by the royal patient himself who, when informed the tumour was called a steatoma, replied: 'Well I hope that it will stay at home and not annoy me anymore.'

Finally, we heard about the pneumonectomy of George VI. Professor Ellis had met the consultant surgeon involved (Sir Clement Price-Thomas) but had not spoken to him about this Royal operation. After the King's physicians had released a press statement in 1951 that the King was suffering from 'a small area of catarrhal inflammation of the lung'. Mr. Price-Thomas was consulted about the King's real diagnosis: lung cancer. Professor Ellis described how the subsequent operation was performed in a room at Buckingham Palace, which had been converted into a close replica of the Westminster Hospital operating theatre. The difficult operation was a success, and the makeshift operating table was returned to Westminster adorned with a commemorative plaque.

Following the lecture and a short presentation, I went with Professor Ellis for a meal at a local hostelry with the students of the new surgical society. Harold was truly in his element at the meal, regaling the students with anecdotes from his career and encouraging all present to continue in their path towards surgery.

I had the honour of hosting Professor Ellis in my home overnight, but this privilege came with a *caveat*. I was required to take him to the train station early the next morning for the first train to London, so that he could be back in the dissecting room at Guys as soon as possible.

Harold Ellis was truly special: a surgeon's surgeon with a deep passion for teaching and an incredible dedication to clinical anatomy. He used his amazing communication skills to popularise the field of British surgical history, and his publications will serve as a long-lasting legacy of his extraordinary life.

Bryan Rhodes is a retired consultant orthopaedic surgeon and Vice-President of BHMS.