

Thomas Kilner – His Early Professional Life

Medical School

Kilner became a talented Medical Student at Manchester University. He won medals for his knowledge of anatomy and physiology, the Sidney Renshaw Exhibition and the Dauntsey Scholarship before graduating in 1912 having gained distinctions in pathology and surgery.

World War 1

After graduation he went to London and passed the MBBS degree there the year after. Despite originally intending to become a General Practitioner, he followed the path of many aspiring surgeons by demonstrating anatomy to undergraduate medical students before taking up his first junior doctor job as a House Surgeon. An attempt to enter general practice in Blackburn was thwarted, like for so many of his generation, by the start of the First World War. He was enlisted into the Royal Army Medical Corps and spent much of it in casualty clearing stations and base hospitals. However, this turned out to be fortuitous for the future of British plastic surgery.

He ended the First World War as a General Surgeon, looking after fractures of the femur in an orthopaedic unit at Camieres in France. Without really understanding what plastic surgery was, he was given the opportunity of transferring back to England in March 1919 with the offer of a job at the new Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup. Although he knew this unit specialised in a "strange new art" under Major Harold Gillies, Kilner was more keen to complete the FRCS examination. He took the job as a means to that end. He assumed that he would be trimming amputation stumps and fitting prosthetic limbs.

Sidcup

Kilner joined Sidcup with the rank of Captain, so beginning a long and close professional relationship with both Harold Gillies and Plastic Surgery. Their association started as one of teacher to pupil, but evolved into a partnership in which Kilner undertook much of the work himself. Gillies was the enthusiastic innovator, but Kilner the sensible "brake".

Kilner was invited to share private practice rooms with Gillies in Portland Place and the London Clinic, both near Harley St. in central London. As Gillies wrote to



Kilner. Courtesy JPRAS

Kilner in August 1922, "it is a real pleasure to have you help me, and even if it weren't, I don't know how I should get on without you."

It was in Gillies' practice that Kilner was introduced to the evolving concept of more general, what might be described as "peacetime" plastic surgery. This included the management of deficits obvious at birth (congenital anomalies). Together they corrected hundreds of cleft lips and palates. They repaired the functions of eating and speaking as well as providing a more visually conventional appearance for children who were at that time often socially outcast. Kilner became expert in the management of these difficult abnormalities.

The Partnership Dissolves

The Gillies/Kilner partnership lasted until mid-1929 when the two began clashing. Gillies felt it would be better for Kilner, and plastic surgery in general, that he spread his wings, working more independently. Kilner readily accepted this proposal to escape an atmosphere of some acrimony. For a time, he went back to general surgery, but in 1931 gained an appointment at St Andrew's Hospital, Dollis Hill. Here he and Gillies continued in parallel with facial surgery. It was during this time that Kilner became more interested and focussed upon congenital deformities and cleft surgery.

In 1936 Kilner beat Gillies to the post of first Plastic Surgeon at St. Thomas's hospital London, where he commanded a grand total of four beds. He was also an honorary consultant (alongside Gillies) to the Lord Mayor Treloar hospital at Alton, Hampshire. This was the first hospital outside London to appoint visiting plastic surgeons and it was to here that Kilner transferred all his cleft lip and palate patients from Saint Thomas's and the Princess Elizabeth of York Hospital for children in East London. It thus became an important centre for the management of cleft lip and palate.

Second World War & After

At the beginning of the Second World War Kilner was posted to the Ministry of Pensions run plastic surgery unit at Roehampton. Here, with Gillies, McIndoe and Mowlem they trained eight teams consisting of plastic surgeons, dental surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses and orderlies to serve as mobile army units treating injuries of the maxillo-facial region abroad. Roehampton rapidly proved too small and vulnerable to the bombing of London, so in 1940 a new unit of 1000 beds was constructed at Stoke Mandeville. Here Kilner set up, before accepting the first Nuffield Chair of Plastic Surgery at Oxford in 1944, also developing the unit there. Oxford and Stoke became a combined teaching unit. He retired in 1957. The Oxford unit still holds many of his case notes, files and other professional material.