

# The medical history of Epsom College

Here College Archivist, Rebecca Jallot, delves into the archives and uncovers fascinating insights into Epsom's links with the medical profession, and how this has evolved over the decades.

Looking at 19th century medicine with a modern eye reveals it to be somewhat medieval. Despite major advances in vaccinations, obstetrics and pathology curing illness was still a worrying combination of botanical concoctions, bleeding and remedies that included arsenic and mercury.

The Industrial Revolution that forced cities to grow exponentially also brought overcrowding, poverty, unsanitary living conditions and increased disease. Death rates were high in the cities. Small pox and tuberculosis easily took hold in communities. Doctors didn't have structured formal training such as we would expect today and learned under an apprenticeship and through on-the-job experience.

On the frontline of exposure to epidemic levels of disease doctors were ill equipped to help their patients and themselves when they caught the very diseases they were trying to cure.

Parliament responded and agreed to an official inquiry into the Poor Laws in 1832 and this resulted in new Poor Laws established in 1834. After continued

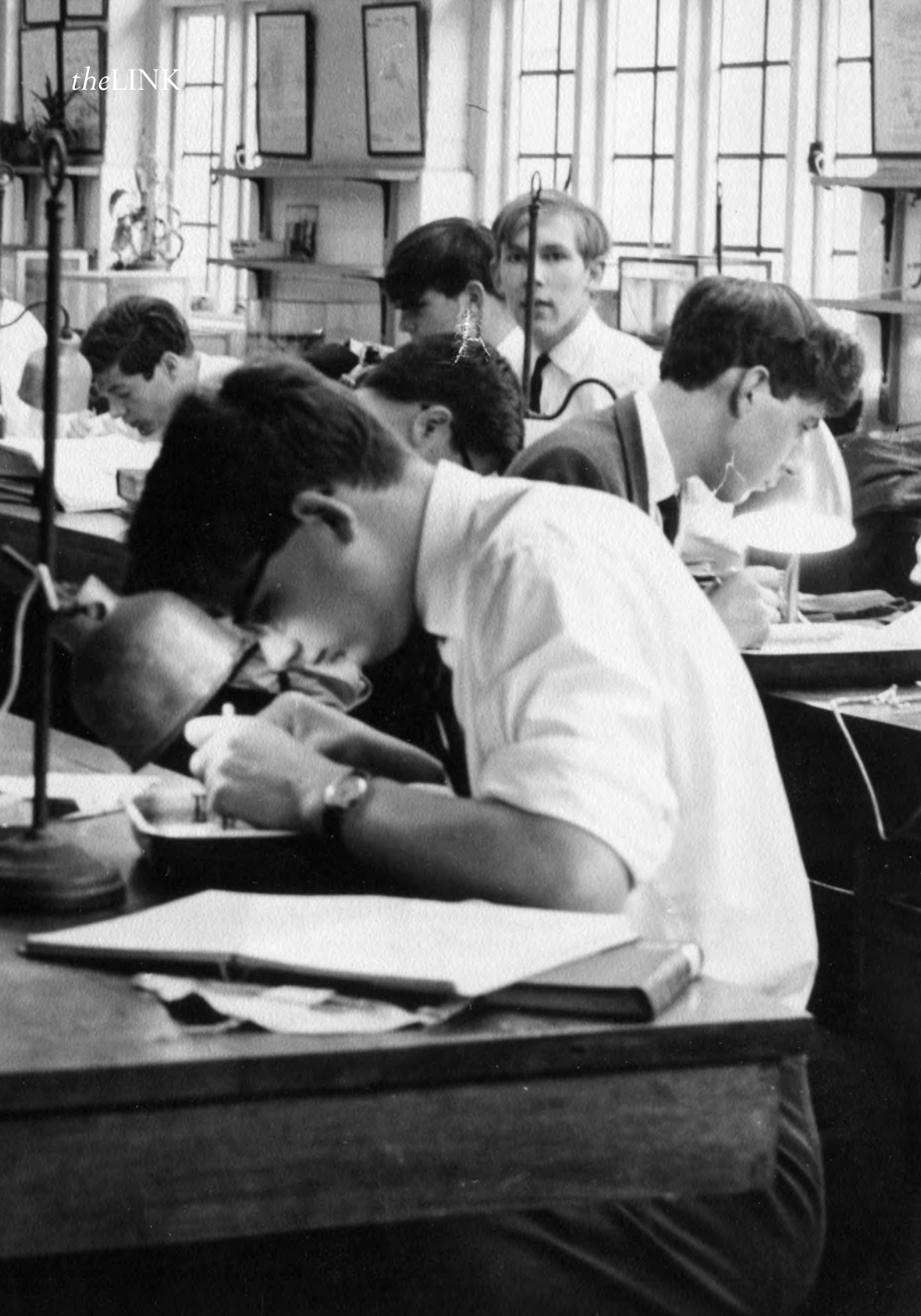
work, the Public Health Act of 1848 was put in place. This Act created local health boards nationwide, investigated sanitary conditions and established the General Board of Health.

## THE DAWN OF A NEW SCHOOL

The medical profession also responded and in 1851 Dr John Probert proposed his idea for a school for the sons of 'distressed medical men' that would offer a foundation education for boys destined for medical careers.

His idea was well received, and a huge campaign was organised to raise the funds needed. Medical men were petitioned in the first instance for contributions. Soon the circle would be widened to include all men of means. Dinners, concerts and festivals were organised all with the purpose of fundraising. Indeed, one such concert took place on the 4 July 1851; the New Philharmonic Society played the first British performance of *Harold in Italy* composed by Hector Berlioz. Berlioz himself conducted and played the viola solo.

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When the doors of Dr Propert's visionary school opened to the first 100 boys in 1855, the education offered doesn't appear to have been biased towards Science.

Boys were taught Latin, Greek, English, French, German, Writing, Arithmetic, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Geography, History, Music, The Scriptures and the Prayer Book. Lectures were occasionally given on Literature and Science. However, by 1858 the Headmaster's Report insisted that a chemical laboratory was needed. By 1886 a Biology laboratory had been constructed and it was reported in *The Epsomian* of that year that it was 'an exceptionally good one, second to no school laboratory in the kingdom'.

#### CRADLE FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS

The speed of building new Science accommodation took hold and by the early 1900s the Chemistry Laboratory had been rebuilt with the addition of new laboratories. The school became recognised as a 'School of Science' due to the specialist teaching that the facilities afforded.

By the 1930s the College was receiving much recognition for its Science scholars. The first Head of Biology, Arthur Ellis, has been appointed and a second Biology master to support him. The result was 19 Open Scholarships won to Oxford and Cambridge and multiple Exhibitions and Scholarships to medical schools. The entrance into medical school was facilitated as boys were able to take the First Medical Examination whilst still at Epsom - it was a popular choice. Epsom College had firmly become the scholastic cradle for medical students.

The distinguished list of medical honours gained by Old Epsomians is quite magnificent; multiple times students have become President of the Royal College of Physicians, President of the Royal College of Surgeons and eminent doctors and surgeons.

The Epsom College Register declares strongly that the school has produced 'countless general practitioners, many of the highest character and attainments, selfless and without ambition... such are among the finest flowers of Epsom College'.

#### ACHIEVEMENT AND SERVICE

The combination of high standards of achievement twinned with the sense of service to community had been established early in the College's history and it marked students apart as it does now.

Epsom College now offers an all-encompassing education and it is inevitable that a natural dilation of those leaving for a medical career would take place over time. However, the College's distinguished medical tradition has been maintained through successive generations. Families have a bigger educational choice than ever before. Those that attend the College are not tied to a medical career and certain funding doesn't tie students to institutions. However, we are still the foundation for many successful contemporary medical careers.

Almost 3,000 students have entered the medical profession since the establishment of the College, and it is still a much-chosen career option year after year. A thriving College means a continual stream of not just steadfast medical professionals but to all manner of occupations. The clear dedication to achievement and service offers, as the Register might suggest the burgeoning of many more fine flowers.

