Foreword

Forty Years On

The Institute of Ophthalmology, University of London, was the first of its kind in the world when it was ceremoniously declared open on 4th November, 1948, and that is the date we choose as our birthday, but the seminal idea of its conception arose long before, tentatively in the mid-1920s and again in the 1930s when Sir John Parsons and Sir Stewart Duke-Elder aroused considerable interest by proposing the founding of a separate organisation for teaching and research in ophthalmology, as an expansion of the existing medical school at Moorfields Eye Hospital, established when the hospital moved to its present site in City Road in 1899.

Through lack of funds — that painfully reappearing spectre — the idea was stillborn and the Second World War stopped any further development, but with the formation of the British Postgraduate Medical Federation within the University of London the idea was reborn. In 1947 the three main ophthalmic hospitals in London, that is Moorfields, the Royal Westminster and the Central London Ophthalmic, amalgamated and the latter hospital was converted into the Institute and incorporated in the Federation.

I am honoured to have been invited to introduce this celebrative edition, presumably as one of the surviving members of the original staff who was present at the opening ceremony at which Sir John Parsons represented British ophthalmology, Professor Alan Woods of the Johns Hopkins Hospital American ophthalmology and Professor Weve of Utrecht European ophthalmology.

At this meeting Sir John Parsons made an acknowledgement which still expresses our first thought on this anniversary. He said "I think the most important thing this afternoon is to congratulate the person who is really responsible, more than anybody else, for both the amalgamation and the Institute — Sir Stewart Duke-Elder. If it had not been for his enthusiasm, his perseverance and his tact, and I think I may say — his political acumen, I doubt very much whether the Institute would have materialized, at any rate so soon". Sir Stewart was so immensely gifted both as an ophthalmologist and a scientist, as a writer of unequalled ability and a man of

amazing industry, that the Institute was fortunate indeed to have him as Director, where he was the dynamic driving force and the father figure for many years.

And what exciting years they were! I am sure that all my colleagues of those days would agree that the new Institute was admirably served by the wise Earl of Rothes as Chairman, the benevolent Robert Davenport as Dean and the untiring and remarkably able Clifford Seath as Secretary. The place was alive with activity, being peopled with mature scientists and younger workers eager to prove themselves, with postgraduate students from the hospitals working for the Fellowship or higher degrees, with dozens of Diploma students from about 24 different countries, and with a constant flow of visitors from overseas, keen to inspect the new enterprise which was rapidly becoming famous for its output of original work, so attracting young scientists from abroad to work in the laboratories. There were regular open lectures, clinico-pathological and scientific demonstrations and open days. The refectory had two sittings for lunch, and lights blazed from the windows far into the night! This success was most encouraging because not everyone was wedded to the philosophy of specialised Institutes in medicine. Is it right, they would argue, to isolate research and teaching of a subspeciality away from the general stream of medicine, and to immure young scientists in a separate building with security of tenure for the whole of their professional lifetime? The answer was provided by the remarkable advance of ophthalmological science since the foundation of the Institute, achieved by harnessing various disciplines to its cause and the fact that, in contrast, little had been achieved in the past when it struggled within the general stream of medicine. In any case we are a superspeciality!

Naturally, the Institute has changed in 40 years. None of the original members of the scientific staff remains. Of those present on the opening day, Sir Stewart Duke-Elder, Mr Edgar Fincham, Professor Hartridge, Dr Katherine Tansley and Dr L C Thompson have died. We remember them on this anniversary with respect and affection, and also those who left or retired, Dr N Ambache, Professor Herbert Dartnall,

Professor Hugh Davson, Dr Peter Hansell, Dr Maurice Langham, Dr David Maurice, Professor E S Perkins and Professor R A Weale. They, with those too numerous to name who soon after joined the staff, were the founders of the scientific reputation of the Institute, in company with the many attached clinical ophthalmologists from the Hospital.

The preliminary transfer of the Dean's Department and the Department of Pathology to Cayton Street in 1978 predictably split the family in two, and the discontinuance of Diploma-level teaching in 1984 removed the multiracial population, resulting in a quieter and less animated atmosphere. To some extent the Institute lost its exclusiveness; there arose many other ophthalmological research centres, often patterned on our own. There are now a host of researchers investigating the eye (the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology has over 4,500 members), and it would seem that all possible aspects of ophthalmological research are now being pursued. If this trend continues the researchers may become more prolific than the problems; hinted at already by the titles of some projects! Certainly old fields are being innocently reploughed, rarely uncovering hidden treasure, and the long-suffering melanoma continues to vie with drosophila as an object of obsessional scrutiny. The more obvious questions have been answered, even though negatively; those that remain require more sophisticated techniques, and are daunting in their complexity and in the very long-term prospect of their solution.

The eighties have been depressing years for academic medicine. The decrease in funding imposed by the University Grants Committee has resulted in greater competition for grant support from other sources and these difficulties, together with higher costs, have dramatically reduced the resources of the Institute, at a time when great advances in modern technology require a comparable evolution in research activity to exploit their potential. Were it not for "Fight for Sight" a charitable appeal

launched by members of the Institute over 23 years ago to raise funds for research into the causes and prevention of blindness, the situation would have been disastrous.

Despite these crippling restraints — part of the contemporary scene — the same high standard of research continues to flow from the Institute, as evidenced in this Journal, and members of the staff continue to be among the leaders of world ophthalmology.

Now the Institute faces, with the happiest prospect, another challenging and crucial point in its history. Separation from the two branches of its associated hospitals has long been a frustrating and serious disadvantage. This year the Holborn branch of Moorfields has moved to join the enlarged City Road branch and the Institute *in toto* will become established alongside the hospital in a new building to be completed in the near future, thus establishing one of the greatest centres of clinical and scientific ophthalmology in the world. The plans for this great endeavour are far advanced and funds are to be provided by the University Grants Committee and the University of London, together with financial support at present being raised by a Special Appeal Committee under the enthusiastic and inspiring Chairmanship of Sir Richard Meyjes, set up by "Fight for Sight".

We can therefore look back with satisfaction upon the 40 years of our existence with an initial period of establishment, followed by consolidation, then by a period of survival through financial stringency, and now one of expansion and unification with an even closer partnership with the Hospital.

At the opening ceremony in 1948 Professor Weve of Holland gave us his blessing in these words "May British ophthalmology take a leading place for years to come, in keen competition with our very efficient friends in America and elsewhere in the world and with the full assistance of Continental ophthalmologists". That is still our objective and our destiny. A new life begins at 40!

Norman Ashton