

The story behind the

painting

The BDA's Head of Museum Services **Rachel Bairsto** uncovers the comings and goings of a dental practice in the 1930s.



The fascinating development of a fashionable 1930s dental practice has recently been revealed through a painting and its accompanying scrapbook offered for sale to the British Dental Association Museum. The painting is a rare depiction of a dentist (Conrad Ackner) at work and was painted by the leading twentieth century portrait painter Sir John Lavery. Depictions of dentists at work are rare making this work of exceptional significance. However, it is not only the painting which is of great importance but also the supporting story about the dentist Conrad Ackner and the development of his practice and all the staff that worked there.

The staff compiled a scrapbook in 1938 and presented it to Ackner as a celebration of the practice's 25th anniversary. The scrapbook, known as the *Bluebook*, details the coming and goings of the staff and major events in the lives of the staff and the expansion of the practice. The scrapbook captures the lively family atmosphere shared between all the staff, particularly highlighted by the following passage:

'Only members of staff can know what a profound and lasting impression 47B has made on all who have worked there, and it is to commemorate this spirit of 47B as well as Ackner's work of 25 years that we, his staff have compiled this scrapbook.'

Born in Czernowitz in 1880 (then part of Austria) Conrad Adolph Ackner came to London in 1912 and gained his Licentiate in Dental Surgery from Guy's Hospital. In 1913 he set up his practice at 47B Welbeck Street

whilst working as the first dental radiographer at Guy's Hospital. At Welbeck Street he rented one room known as the white surgery from the owner Miss Fanner. He developed his X-rays in the basement and kept his own accounts and records. Rooms were also let to Lewin Moseley, another dentist who first qualified with LDS in 1903 and Dr John Weir (later Sir John Weir KCVO), surgeon to the royal household.

The development of the practice was temporarily halted as during the latter days of the First World War, Ackner was interned at Crystal Palace as a suspected alien. Moseley temporarily looked after his patients until his later release. Miss Fanner was initially apprehensive about re-letting to Ackner but she overcame her fears and rented him a large former bedroom from which the practice grew rapidly. He converted a room in the basement in 1919 as an extra surgery and engaged another dentist, Mr Holloway. In December 1919 he appointed the first dental receptionist to the practice, Miss M. Slade. The scrapbook describes her as one who *'controlled the entrances and exits of patients with great, and sometimes formidable efficiency'*.

The general demand for dentures and denture repair work during the 1920s and 30s for those who could afford to seek dental treatment at that time was reflected at Welbeck Street. It is not surprising that we can trace a gradual expansion to support this. In 1920 a Head Mechanic, Mr Rohr, was employed

and as a result a small workshop next door to Ackner's surgery was created. The staff commented that Rohr became a favourite with the older patients for being such a *'wizard in making plates'* and a character loved by the children *'known as a little man, with correspondingly little glasses, balanced on the end of his nose for the purpose of studying their regulation plates'*. Within 13 years there were five mechanics working at 47B including an odd job boy and junior mechanics under the supervision of Mr Rohr. To accommodate the workforce a second workshop was acquired in 1930. The reliance of the dentist on the work of the technician was clearly felt by Dr Ackner when in 1927 Mr Rohr fell seriously ill for a period of three months. The scrapbook records the *'mechanical nightmare'* experienced as a result.

In 1925 the practice took on its first secretary and this began the secretarial department of the practice. Miss Gibbs converted the surgery in the basement into an office which was filled with filing cabinets and all the work was recorded on charts and in loose leaf ledgers. Miss Gibbs became a central figure in the practice as well as mother and nurse to the newly acquired practice dog 'Fang'. Miss Gibbs was known for carrying the Alsatian around in her muff. Her wedding in 1935 to Mr Maxwell at St George's Church in Hanover Square is one of the many practice weddings recorded in the scrapbook. It reads:

'The practice closed down for the Saturday morning and the whole staff of 47B attended both the ceremony and reception which was held at Browns Hotel in Dover Street. The reception was a very happy affair and the majority of the guests were in some way connected with or known to 47B.'

The passage goes on to tell that staff enjoyed themselves so much that Dr Ackner thought it



Extracts from the appointment book reveal that Ackner was generally only seeing a couple of patients a day. They shed light on



Left-hand page: 'The Dentist' by Sir John Lavery
 Left-hand page, bottom: Head 'mechanic' Mr Rohr
 Far left: Chart showing the expansion of Dr Ackner's practice at 47B
 Left, top: Office staff in 1937: Miss Stewart, Miss Robinson and Miss Rogers
 Left, bottom: Dr Ackner, Mr and Mrs Freathy and Dr Tararud on Hollywood night
 Left: Fang the practice dog



the glittering array of society patients he built up over the 25-year period. Patients included author John Galsworthy, Arthur Bliss, conductor and composer, Marlene Dietrich, actress, many leading politicians, military figures and royalty of note including the King of Norway among others.

The scrapbook is a unique record of the development of a fashionable 1930s dental practice. It gives an evocative insight into the personalities and lives of all who worked there and the supportive and friendly atmosphere that was created and experienced as well. The scrapbook adds an important dimension to the story behind the painting.

'MISS GIBBS WAS KNOWN

FOR CARRYING

THE ALSATIAN AROUND

IN HER MUFF.'

Help to save this rare depiction of a dentist at work (pictured, next to headline) by the leading twentieth century portrait painter, Sir John Lavery, for the British Dental Association Museum. We need to raise £60,000 to acquire this work so that it can be enjoyed by visitors to the museum, dental historians, researchers, school groups and the dental profession as a whole. It is a hugely significant work in terms of dental history and art history. We have already raised £51,000 through grants from the Art Fund and MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and now we desperately need your contribution to make the final shortfall.

To make a donation please contact the BDA Museum on 020 7535 5832 or 020 7563 4549. For further details please visit www.bda.org/museum

his duty to intervene in the case of a certain Miss Lunn and take her home. 'This action was quite unnecessary', it was recorded.

The expanded practice also allowed each dentist the opportunity to specialise in their particular area of interest. In 1927 Dr George Gerhard Exner joined the practice and took over the white surgery on the first floor. Dr Exner carried out the majority of the surgical work and was recognised as being quick and efficient. According to his obituary in the *British Dental Journal*, 'if one turned away to re-examine an x-ray photograph one could easily miss his extraction – the impacted molar was on the table and the stitches going in'. With the full time appointment of Dr Marius Tararud in 1931, Ackner was able to concentrate on X-rays, consultations and plates and the newly appointed Dr Marius Tararud specialised in jacket crowns, bridges and inlays.

The scrapbook makes particular note of the moving story of the Freathy family. Mr and Mrs Freathy joined the practice in 1936 as butler and housekeeper and their son Billy was taken into the workshop to learn mechanical dentistry. In November 1937 Mr Freathy senior and his seven brothers made the headlines of the *Daily Sketch*. The reunion of the brothers on Armistice Day marked the first time the seven brothers, who all fought during the First World War, were reunited since October 1918. The scrapbook proudly includes the newspaper article and the letter from King George acknowledging to Mrs Freathy the contribution to the war effort of her seven serving sons.

The social life of the practice is also recorded in the scrapbook. In 1936 the

practice hosted its first 'family party' for all the past and present staff and their spouses. The following evening a doctors' party was held for all the doctors connected with 47B and their wives. Earlier in the year Ackner had acquired a cinematograph (an early video camera) and shot a large number of films, mainly in colour of the staff at work. The films were apparently 'most successful and amazing' and shown as the evening entertainment. Further film evenings at the practice became known as 'Hollywood nights' and were much enjoyed by all. Although the film footage has not survived there are a couple of photos recording the staff of 47B enjoying a Hollywood night.

Not surprisingly another important event recorded in the scrapbook is the painting of Conrad Ackner at work in his surgery. Sir John and Lady Lavery by this time were two of many notable patients of the practice. In a newspaper report Lady Lavery states that one of the practice staff was supposed to be modelling for the painting but she had to step in at the last moment. Ackner was very proud of the painting and it hung in the surgery waiting room above his collection of ivory pieces until the practice closed in the late 1960s. He also used the painting as a calendar to send to all his patients and to advertise the practice. According to the Ackner family he was criticised for this by the General Medical Council but no official records of any warnings exist.