

MEMORIES OF A SURGEON-LIEUTENANCY  
EDINBURGH 1941-43: PART II

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## WEEKEND LEAVE

The Peebles Hotel Hydro, the Hydropathic, was taken over during both world wars for use as a military hospital. In the 1939-45 war it was intended to serve the allied forces, prisoners of war and, in the event of heavy air raids or of invasion, the civilian population. The public rooms of a hotel—its lounges and dining rooms—are most suitable for conversion into wards: the bedrooms are of limited value as most of the staff would be housed in temporary huts in the grounds or billeted with local families. A few officer patients not in need of constant nursing observation would be allocated bedrooms. In one hospitalized hotel that I visited, bedrooms normally intended for two guests would each accommodate as many as six army patients up to the rank of captain, or three majors, or two lieutenant-colonels, or one colonel or brigadier, or the equivalent ranks in other services. A major-general or above, would, when possible and if he required it, enjoy two adjoining bedrooms converted into a small suite. In my limited experience senior officers who had seen active service did not expect or seek conditions in hospital better than those provided for officers below them in rank.

At the Hydro, a considerable number of the guest bedrooms were not required for use by the hospital. Some considerate and sensible representative of the powers, that be established the practice that medical and nursing officers in the armed forces in the vicinity could be accommodated for weekend leave. A room for two, afternoon tea, dinner (and a glass or two of wine) and breakfast cost under a pound (a married surgeon lieutenant's pay at that time was about £1.8s. a day). The only condition was that each couple on arrival had to show their marriage lines as well as their identity cards: without these there was no admission.

There were four medical officers at Granton in my time, the surgeon commander, who was Senior Medical Officer (SMO), and three surgeon lieutenants, one of whom was 'sea-going' (that is, he was attached to a flotilla of small ships based at the harbour). Duties permitting, we were allowed weekend leave once in nine weeks. It started at 1200 hours (midday) on the Saturday and ended at 1159 hours on the Sunday morning. If a medical officer returned late from such privilege leave his entitlement to further weekends off duty was withdrawn for nine periods (81 weeks, considerably longer than his appointment to the shore base would last). The master-at-arms was a strict disciplinarian, but humane. On the Sunday of a medical officer's weekend leave the master would watch with some anxiety as the clock in the guardroom on Granton Pier showed midday approaching. If the doctor was not in sight by then the master would covertly set

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the hands of the clock back, contrary to KR&AI (King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions) and to the convention, but perhaps not to the proper tradition, of good discipline in the Senior Service. The master was never deliberately put in that equivocal position by a medical officer, but his concern was helpful when trains were delayed by unreported effects of enemy action or of mechanical or human failure.

The Peebles Hydro was an ideal weekend haven. The town was attractive and the countryside beautiful; the hotel was comfortable and its board admirable. Unfortunately, although Peebles was ordinarily said to be 23 miles from Edinburgh the distance between HMS *Claverhouse* at Challenger Lodge and the Heart of Midlothian—respectively the Navy's and the Ordnance Survey's triangulation station in Edinburgh—had to be added: this brought the separation up to 25.98 miles, exceeding by 1,725 yards the limit of 25 miles laid down by Rosyth Naval Command as that beyond which no officer might proceed on weekend leave (longer periods of leave were not so constrained and generally allowed travel to any destination within the British Isles).

The Naval Officer in Charge (NOi/C), Leith and Granton, was a retired admiral, recalled for wartime home shore service. He was attending the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh for regular consultation, and naval custom required that an officer of his rank be accompanied by a medical officer on such visits. The latter had no role except to facilitate the admiral's visit to the hospital: the admiral recognized this to be a waste of time that would have been better spent with the sailors attending the Sick Bay in Granton. However, tradition was not to be ignored, even by an admiral quite able to see with courtesy his own expeditious passage through the bureaucratic formalities inseparable from the attendance at a civilian hospital of patients from the services.

One Saturday morning I was detailed by the SMO to go with the admiral to the Infirmary. While in the pinnace, driven through the unbusy streets by a Wren, the admiral usually relaxed and spoke with the medical officer about things in general and about the latter's personal interests and hopes in particular. Contrary to what was feared by some of the officers under his command, he never put questions, even obliquely, about the health of individuals (and thus he never put a doctor in the awkward position of having to refuse on ethical grounds to answer a question by a senior officer: I knew to my cost the outcome of such impropriety on the part of a commanding officer seeking to rid his ship of a difficult personality). On this Saturday the admiral mentioned that he had understood that I was to be on leave in Peebles with my wife—why then was I accompanying him? I explained that the leave had been countermanded because Peebles was beyond the 25 miles limit. He made no comment on that but spoke instead of the attractions of Tweeddale. The visit to the Infirmary went smoothly. Later that day I was summoned to his office. He bade me sit down and rang for his flag-lieutenant. 'Flags, how far is Peebles from Challenger Lodge?', he asked. 'Twenty-six miles, sir', replied the flag-lieutenant, with an apologetic side glance at me. 'Let me be clear on this', said the admiral, 'the distance is 26 miles. Twenty-six nautical miles?'. 'No, sir, standard English land miles, statute miles'. 'Flags', said the admiral, 'ours is the Senior Service, we are officers of the Royal Navy or', with a little nod to me, 'its Reserves. In the Senior Service we measure distance in nautical miles, British Admiralty nautical miles—not American nautical miles, not international nautical miles, but British

nautical miles; not English land miles, or Scots miles, or Irish miles, but British nautical miles. How many British Admiralty nautical miles is it to Peebles from where this ship is berthed here on Boswall Road?'. The flag-lieutenant pursed his lips, closed his eyes tightly, screwed up his face and reminded me of my own problems with mental arithmetic: then he answered, '22.6 British nautical miles, sir'. 'Thank you', said the admiral, 'the MO's request to spend weekend leave in Peebles conforms to the limit of 25 miles by road or railway that is promulgated as the farthest distance permitted to officers proceeding on local leave. See that this ruling appears in Local Orders—namely, that for all purposes relevant to local leave from this ship the upper limit of distance shall be 25 Admiralty nautical miles'. 'Good show, doc!', whispered the flag-lieutenant, out of the corner of his mouth. 'I heard you, Flags', said NOi/C, and added, 'Yes, good show, gentlemen!'

#### *A reminder*

One English statute mile = 1,760 yards = 5,280 feet = 1.609 km.

One Scots mile (obsolete) = about 1,976 yards = about 5,928 feet.

One Irish mile (obsolete) = 2,240 yards = 6,720 feet.

One British nautical mile (Admiralty) = 2,027 yards = 6,081 feet.

One American nautical mile = one international nautical mile = about 2,025 yards = about 6,075 feet.

## THE LONDON COLLEGE

As I write in October, the London College is beset by holes in the ground. That on our North flank looks like a Roman amphitheatre as the lower ground floor of the College extension takes shape. Work started in July after the usual delays from unsuspected obstacles, and completion is expected by April 1996. Fellows and members have contributed £250,000 to the £1.9 million cost and about the half the remainder has already been pledged by Trusts and other donors to whom we are very grateful. The maze of trenches across the car park and into the road which gave us a passing resemblance to Vimy ridge now convey rerouted cables and drains.

Our last hole started as a fairly innocent looking rupture in the tarmac of the Inner Circle, which soon revealed a small cavity. The road was closed for an expected 5 weeks. However it turned out to be a stud abscess leading to a spectacular cavern carved out by years of leakage from a Victorian sewer. A gargantuan caisson has been lowered into the hole and the road closure has stretched out to 5 months with no end in sight. Access to the College by car is now a severe IQ test but it has brought its compensations. The freedom from traffic noise has made birdsong audible and Regent's Park seems closer than ever across an empty road. In our record breaking summer of sunshine and drought London, which relies on artesian water, has escaped hose-pipe bans and the Royal Parks have continued to blossom; the Italianate Garden opposite the College and the Rose Garden are still ablaze with colour in late October. Edinburgh Fellows seeking to escape the Northern winter have the same privileges as London Fellows in booking accommodation in 9 and 10 St Andrew's Place where they can stay, with their families, in Georgian splendour for a very modest fee.

We have just held our annual Harveian celebration. The orator was Professor John Swales. His appointment as Director of Research and Development at the Department of Health was announced the week before so he was at pains to explain that his oration had been written before he had any inkling that he would be working for 'them'. I can confirm that he submitted his manuscript six months in advance, earning a place in the Guinness Book of Records. He spoke of two revolutions in science, illustrating both from his research interest, arterial hypertension: the explosion of knowledge that started in Harvey's time with the introduction of experimental science; and the realisation that the opportunities opened up by science exceed our resources making hard choices inevitable. The text is in the November issue of the College Journal.

The Harveian dinner is always attended by the good and the great, and a few who are both. The Secretary of State for Health, the Rt Hon Stephen Dorrell, replied for the guests and gave a ringing affirmation of his commitment to an NHS free to all at the point of issue. Also at the top table was Mrs Margaret Beckett, then Shadow Secretary of State for Health, but during dinner Lord Desai surreptitiously called Westminster on his mobile and told Mrs Beckett that she had topped the poll in the shadow cabinet election and was bound for a more lofty portfolio than humble Health. The message was passed to Stephen Dorrell who paid her a courteous complement before they departed in the same taxi to vote in opposite lobbies.