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PAST PRESIDENTS

Professor William Beilby (1783–1849)

In the days of Beilby and the famous Simpsons, Sir James Young Simpson and his equally distinguished nephew Sir Alexander Russell Simpson, midwifery was a specialty of medicine. The term 'Obstetrics' was not yet in use. In fact, the British College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (known today as The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) was only founded by William Blair-Bell and Sir William Fletcher-Shaw in 1929.

Little is known about Beilby beyond the fact that he was born in Sheffield, and in 1807, apparently

with no intention of becoming a doctor, went into the linen trade in Dublin. However, six years later, he entered the medical school in Edinburgh, qualifying after three years. His MD was on an obstetric topic and that remained his special interest for the rest of his professional life. In fact, his official title was 'Physician Accoucheur to the New Town Dispensary'.

President of the College from 1844–46, almost the only paper extant from that time is a letter to him from Sir James Young Simpson about an unseemly row he had had in a patient's house with the surgeon Mr Syme, offering an explanation and apologies. (It will

be recalled that Simpson was himself to become President, from 1850–52.) On a happier note it was during Beilby's Presidency that the Great Hall of the College was built and officially opened, the President's address drawing heavily on Sibbald's autobiography.

Beilby was a devoutly evangelical Christian, deeply involved with what was then known as the Evangelical Alliance as well as being First President of a Medical Missionary Society, one of several springing up at that time of missionary outreach, particularly to the Indian subcontinent and Africa.

Derek Doyle
Obituaries Editor, The Journal RCPE