

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

NICHOLAS GAINSFORD: HIS BOOK

by

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One of the largest and most varied acquisitions of Western Manuscripts in 1992 came as a result of the generosity of the British Medical Association, when fourteen miscellaneous volumes and some loose papers were transferred to the Wellcome Institute from the BMA Library in Tavistock House.¹ Many of these manuscript books contained lecture notes by medical students—taken from John and James Gregory, William Hunter, Percivall Pott and others—supplementing the great number of this type of document already held in the Institute. The series also provided diaries, case notes, research papers and post-mortem reports, the latter of recent enough production to be placed in the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre.² The single most intriguing manuscript turned out to be the oldest. This was catalogued as Western MS. 6919, a notebook written by a rather different student to those of the great eighteenth-century teachers of the Edinburgh and London medical schools.

Nicholas Gainsford (or Gaynsford) of Hartfield, East Sussex, kept his notebook between 18 January 1711/12 and 18 November 1713. The volume is a small but closely-written working document of 38 folios, originally vellum-bound, but now lacking its cover and end papers; that aside, it is complete and well preserved. The contents of the manuscript may reasonably be divided into two parts: the first half being Gainsford's case notes on patients treated by George Willett (d. 1729), a medical man living at Groombridge and operating on the East Sussex-Kent county divide;³ the remainder is a list of medical recipes. The whole is indexed to provide a neatly self-contained reference work, but with no distinct note as to its purpose, or to the status of Gainsford and Willett, or to their relationship.

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¹ Catalogued as WMS.6915-6927, but see note 2 below. Our thanks are due to the BMA's Council and Board of Science and Education for the gift, and to Tony McSean and Penny Bonnet of the BMA Library for their help in making the transfer possible.

² Post-mortem reports for cases in London's coroners' courts by Ludwig Freyberger, 1907-13, 6 vols, (CMAC GC/140).

³ Willett leased Ham House in Withyham parish from 1707 (DLW 135). My thanks to Roger Davey, East Sussex County Archivist, for this information.

Nicholas Gainsford: his book

The book was first acquired by Dr Edwin Alfred Starling of Tunbridge Wells; some time before 1929, he dispatched it for safekeeping to Alfred Cox, then Medical Secretary at BMA House.⁴ It was probably discovered locally, as Gainsford belonged to an old established Sussex family residing in the parishes of Hartfield and Cowden not far from Starling's home. Gainsfords had held the manor of Cosins since 1454 and Nicholas's father, John, was described as a "Gentleman" in local parish records. He had a large family: Nicholas was the second son among six boys, and "several daughters". Although his date of birth is not certain, it must have been between 1696 and 1698. This would make Nicholas around fourteen or fifteen years of age at the commencement of his notebook, and suggests that it is a record of his apprenticeship. Parish registers provide the only other personal information on him—Gainsford died in 1732 and was buried in Cowden on 7th September, his profession stated as "Apothecary".⁵

The importance of MS. 6919 is not particularly as a set of medical records, although it does contain some cases of interest. The book provides a snapshot of the medical profession in a provincial location during the early eighteenth century, with all the points of interest and limitations of a single, casual image. For example, in relating the treatments administered by George Willett, his apprentice sets on record the names of (reportedly less successful) competitors in the local medical marketplace. As with Willett himself, their professional status is not always clearly defined—Gainsford uses the terms "Dr." and "Mr." interchangeably⁶—but from internal evidence it is possible to make occasional deductions. Thus, in the case of John Bourne of Penshurst, thrown from his horse, "Dr. Hayler of that Town . . . said it was Chyrurgeons worke and therefore desierd Mr. Willett should be sent for . . ."; it would seem safe to consider that Hayler was a physician and Willett perhaps a surgeon-apothecary, more likely an apothecary. Examples of surgical practice are uncommon in these notes, but this may be a reflection of Gainsford's requirements as an apprentice, rather than of Willett's practical experience or range of services.

Practitioners mentioned by Gainsford can be summarized in tabular form:

Dr. White	of Lewes	ff.3r.[x2],4v.
Dr. Robards	of Nuthurst	f.4v.
Dr. [Thomas] Langrish	of East Grinstead	f.6v.
Dr. John Hayler	of Penshurst	ff.8r.,8v.,10r.,12v.
Dr. Britt [John Brett?]	of Wadhurst	f.9v.
Dr. Thomas Maynard	[of Rotherfield]	f.11r.
Dr. [Thomas] Fuller	[of Sevenoaks]	f.12r.
Edmund Hadswell	of Riverhead	ff.13v.–14v.
Dr. Legg	?	f.15r.

Of the forty-six numbered cases recorded by Gainsford, most were attended by George Willett, frequently after failed attempts at cures by others. All of Willett's endeavours are

⁴ A. Cox–L. Shields, 6 September 1929, letter deposited with WMS.6919.

⁵ W.D. Gainsford, *Annals of the House of Gainsford* . . ., Horncastle, for the author, 1904–09.

⁶ For discussion of titles see Irvine Loudon, 'The nature of provincial medical practice in eighteenth-century England', *Med. Hist.*, 1985, 29: 1–32; and J. G. L. Burnby, 'Apprenticeship Records', *Transactions of the British Society for the History of Pharmacy*, 1977, 1: 145–94.

24
 Observat: 1644
 A Broken head wth Fracture
 Thomas Cambridge and one Rich: Beavon Servants to Phill:
 Rogers of Hartfield being disposed to catch a few partridges
 wore a sth with two Rugged fellows and y^e said Thomas
 did unfortunately catch a Blow on his head but he ^{supposed} ^{bridge}
 it to be not very much deferred sending for any Chirurgion
 for 14 dayes neither did he acknowledge he had Catch any
 hurt to his majord &c: Because he did not know that they went
 out on that daye when M^r Willott came he found him
 dosing his head being very much Confused as he vomit
 some times in feision being made he found a fracture in
 the Scull and some of y^e Brains to be discharged w^{ch} seeing
 know there must be some desperate operations made
 if his life was saved: therefore desired y^e assistance
 of some Eminent Surgeon for fear of his dying and
 his hands in y^e operations and him self never seeing
 such a piece of worke done it was presently granted
 and M^r Edmund Hadswell of Riverhead was sent for
 w^{ch} had been a Sea Surgeon therefore y^e operation
 was delivered to him for to do w^{ch} he did he desired a key
 with which Circular Infision was made and y^e Scull
 Layd bare from y^e Sagittall Suture to y^e fst Suture
 down behind y^e Ears they finding y^e fracture to go so
 far and indeed a very great fracture: there was divers
 fractures near to y^e Sagittall Suture there was y^e
 Scull laid bare presently and found to be y^e upon
 y^e Dura mater &c.

A page from Nicholas Gainsford's notebook, WMS.6919, folio 13v. (Wellcome Institute Library).

presented as successful except where patients subsequently left the locality, and their eventual fate remained unknown, or where the case is unusual enough to merit attention. It should be clear that although one purpose of the book would be to collect proven medical responses to a range of ailments for Gainsford's benefit, such a format is necessarily slanted in favour of Willett's professional expertise; however it need not have been at the expense of the others noted above.

It would seem that a definite rivalry is being expressed in other areas of practice too. Willett's good opinion of fellow workers bears an inverse relationship to their proximity, so that in case 11, for example, where Willett recommends the services of others (physicians?), he selects White and Robards from Lewes and Nuthurst. Both lived at a reasonable distance from Groombridge (about 18 and 27 miles respectively) and were presumably, therefore, less likely to compete for Willett's clients than the medical men of Penshurst and Wadhurst, whose shortcomings are noted in Gainsford's manuscript. In the more self-interested treatment of his own wife, described as case 37, Willett enlisted the help of Dr Fuller, presumably Thomas Fuller (1654–1734) MD, residing at Sevenoaks, 12 miles from Groombridge and so closer to home.⁷ One successful cure described is the work of a journeyman shoemaker at Lewes, a safe combination of distance and alternative employment. Disappointingly, Gainsford has nothing to say about the medical scene at Tunbridge Wells, a mere 5 miles distant, other than to note the use of its waters.⁸

Why should George Willett's professional concerns be discernable in Nicholas Gainsford's notes? We may assume that in addition to requiring effective remedies, Gainsford had no interest in offending his master by being less than flattering in a public document.⁹ Furthermore, in reading the text it is difficult not to suspect that the cases described are at least in part Willett's narrative of events rather than Gainsford's observations. Thus, while comments are occasionally attributed directly to Willett, the identity of the first person is sometimes unclear. Crucially, case 44 is dated as taking place from 29 September 1699, well before any professional relationship between the two. This detailed account of a severe skull fracture and the operating practice of a former naval surgeon (Edward Hadswell) must be George Willett's recollections. The precise dating and description of the case implies a reliance on a written source of his own, but the circumstances may have been sufficiently unusual to be perfectly memorable if Willett was inexperienced in such a drastic form of intervention.

The manuscript contains one other suggestive feature with regard to the presentation of Willett. The rear cover bears the signature of "Richd.G.", possibly one of Nicholas Gainsford's younger brothers. At least one other Gainsford, a Robert, had an interest in medicine by 1713 and it would not be altogether surprising if more than one family member shared in their profession.¹⁰ It is of course purely speculative to consider Nicholas's notebook as a subtle form of advertising, aimed at interesting potential apprentices among his siblings or other relatives, but one must acknowledge the lucrative nature of the master-student contract.¹¹

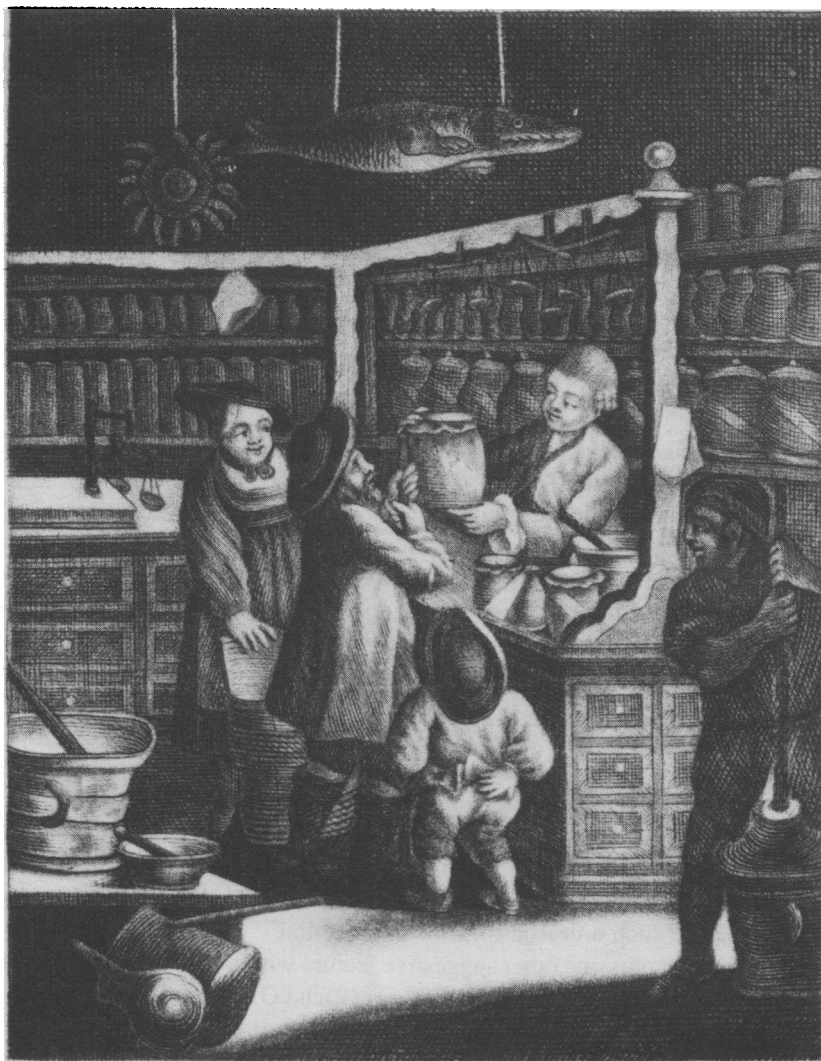
⁷ See Munk's Roll and DNB; not surprisingly recipes by Fuller are a feature of the second half of WMS.6919.

⁸ WMS.6919 f.16v. Willett treats one patient from Tunbridge Wells, f.11v.

⁹ The medical recipes were inspected—f.36r. is endorsed "Examind. & Aproved. F.[T?] Rusel".

¹⁰ Gainsford, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, pp. 133–4, quoting from a "parish book" (overseer's accounts?) "Paid Mr. Ro. Gainsford for curing Goody Rogie . . ."

¹¹ Burnby, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, pp. 159–60 for a brief account of premiums.



An eighteenth-century apothecary's shop, engraving. (Wellcome Institute Library, Iconographic Collections.)

In searching for comparable records within the Western Manuscripts Department, it is apparent that this form of apothecary's book is quite rare, at least in terms of Wellcome Institute collections. Gainsford's manuscript resembles a volume of case notes produced by Alexander Morgan, a Bristol barber-surgeon (WMS. 3631). Morgan's text is almost precisely the contemporary of Gainsford's, beginning circa 1714. He sets out his position as trainee by referring to "my Master", but is considerably more active in dealing with patients personally. The cases described are distinctly surgical; Morgan's earliest account, of a skull fracture, is dealt with in a far more matter-of-fact style than Gainsford's long account of similar injury (one short paragraph to three pages). There are many other differences between the two—Morgan continues to record cases long after his apprenticeship, for example—but in general, the notebooks are of a type. If this is so, Gainsford's book may be of more than the local interest so far described.

Considerable progress has been made in recent years in identifying apprenticeship records (usually archival) for the history of the medical profession. These have included Inland Revenue papers and probate inventories within local record offices.¹² Such papers are essential in allowing historians to broaden their understanding of professional development and practice, particularly during the first half of the eighteenth century. Gainsford's notes make a small contribution to this area of study. At a simple level, they provide names of practitioners for the period—Nicholas Gainsford and George Willett are both absent from P. J. and R. V. Wallis's now standard guide, *Eighteenth century medics*, for example.¹³ However, if numbers of apprenticeship casebooks were kept and have survived, there may be scope for studying them as a class of manuscript, supplementary to archival sources.

There are obvious difficulties in tracing and identifying these books; case records are, after all, the commonest of medical papers and it is by no means obvious that WMS. 6919 is an apprenticeship work. The Wellcome Institute's Medical Archives and Manuscripts Survey (MAMS) should help in the first instance.¹⁴ The survey, resumed in the last year to record written material for the period 1500–1945 held in London repositories, will eventually gather together reports detailing known papers of this type (and indeed all other sorts of medical documents) as far as they are presently recognized in their home institutions. Although imperfect, this resource when completed should be a first access point for the researcher in medical history using primary materials. The MAMS project will also serve to link together an assortment of archivists' waifs and strays, such as Nicholas Gainsford's book.

¹² P. J. and R. V. Wallis *et al*, *Eighteenth century medics (subscriptions, licences, apprenticeships)*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Project for Historical Bibliography, 1988.

¹³ Burnby, *op. cit.*, note 6 above; Joan Lane and Anne Tarver, 'Henry Fogg (1707–1750) and his patients . . .', *Med. Hist.*, 1993, 37: 129–47.

¹⁴ For further information on the MAMS project, or contributions of information to it, contact Richard Aspin or Julia Sheppard at the Wellcome Institute.