

THE STAFF OF BARRINGTON'S HOSPITAL: 1900-1988

Lenihan's *History of Limerick* tells us that Barrington's Hospital opened for the reception of patients on 5 November, 1831. Patients were admitted only on the ticket of a governor 'unless in the case of persons accidentally injured, who were always immediately received'. Thus it seems that the hospital, from its inception, was designated as an accident centre. The historian goes on to say in seasons of severe epidemics 'the hospital was of incalculable benefit to the citizens, as it has been also in all cases of accidents, whenever immediate relief is demanded by the sufferer'.

Doctors seem to have been thin on the ground in those days. Writing in the *Old Limerick Journal* last year, Jim Kemmy stated that about the end of the 18th century the legal needs of Limerick were filled by two attorneys and three notaries public. He also mentions that there were two gunsmiths, two coach-makers, two plumbers, one architect, two book-sellers, one auctioneer, and a French masseur! There is no mention of doctors in this list, so it is not unreasonable to assume that doctors in

by Robert Holmes

those days were not only few and far between, but were also somewhat less prominent on the professional scale than they are today.

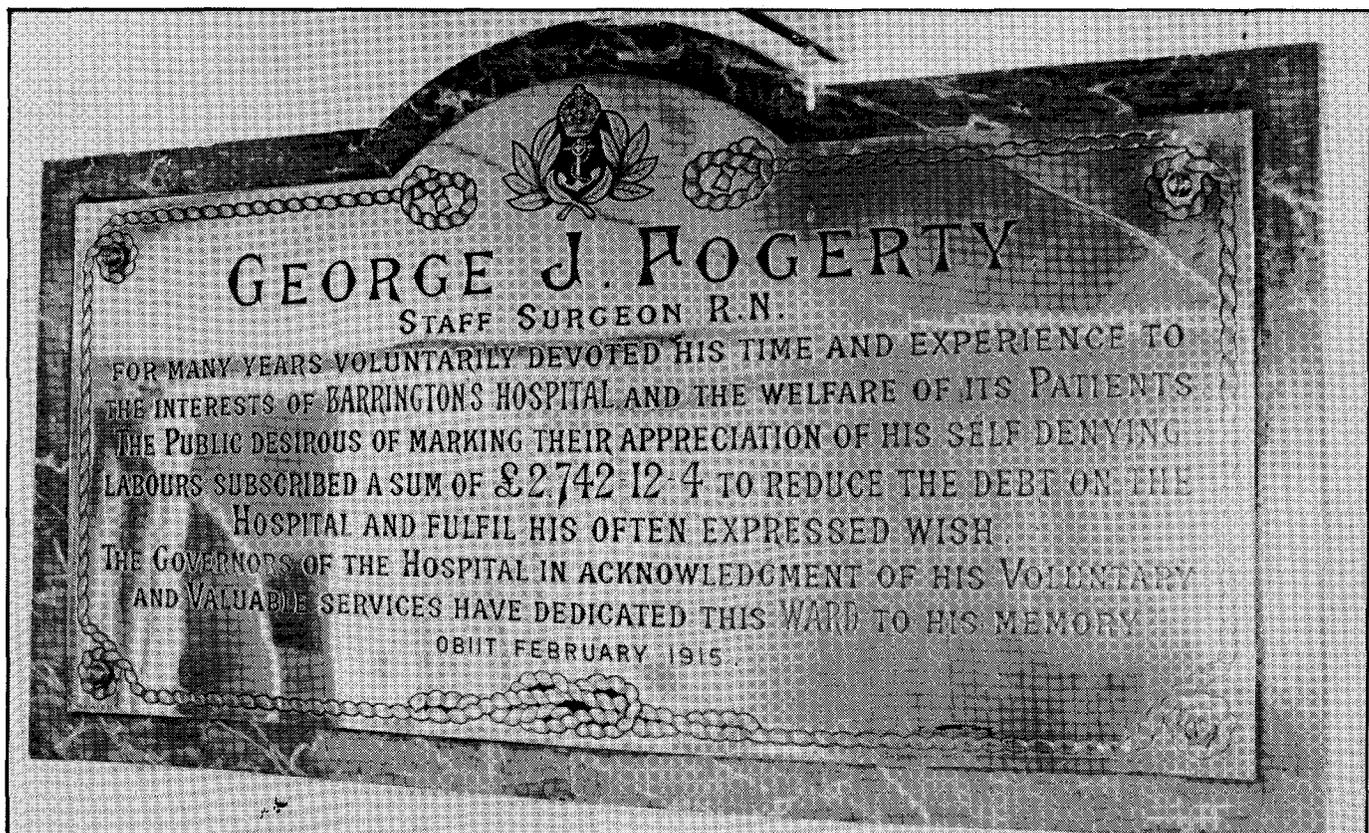
Improvements in medical practice were slow. With advances in anti-sepsis, anaesthesia and, later, radiology, surgeons slowly developed new techniques. Physicians, such as Corrigan, Stokes and Graves, earned Ireland a worldwide reputation for their skill in interpreting clinical signs and establishing the pathological basis of diseases, but there was little in the way of therapeutic advances. Indeed, it has been said that the safest age, in pharmaceutical terms, was probably the 1930s. The wilder excesses of bleeding and purging had mercifully ceased, and, with perhaps a dozen exceptions, the drugs available were neither very poisonous nor very effective. And there was little fundamental change in medical practice until well into this century. But, in recent decades, there has been a veritable therapeutic explosion.

Up to the first quarter of this century,



Dr. William Fogerty '... a respected member of Barrington's staff ... to 1929'.

all doctors were perforce generalists, and usually took their post-graduate training at home; they lived in cities and were



Memorial to surgeon George Fogerty in hospital ward.



The management committee, June, 1924.

always readily available, day and night. Holidays were short: there were no 'ansaphones' or fly-by-night locums, and frequent house-calls were the order of the day; home deliveries were common, and obstetrical complications were usually treated in the patient's house.

The somewhat artificial schism between hospital consultants and general practitioners was not then in evidence. It would seem as if the more respected and well-thought-of doctors got on to hospital staffs, but they were all engaged in general practice. Many of the hospital doctors held dispensary posts up to recent times. Dr. Michael Feely, a well-loved practitioner on the staff of St. John's, Dr. John G. Holmes and Dr. Frank Crowe of Barrington's Hospital, all ran dispensaries. Another energetic dispensary doctor, Dr. Cecil Molony, had an attachment to the old County Infirmary in Mulgrave Street. It must have been a great boon for doctors to be able to admit patients directly to hospital, instead of having to spend hours on the telephone, as many G.M.S. doctors do today.

Dr. William Fogerty was a respected member of Barrington's staff from the turn of the century to 1929. Part of his training was in ophthalmology and, by the standards of his day, was a competent eye-surgeon. He had a small laboratory in his home, and did tests there in the evenings, including sputum tests for T.B. A member of a well-known and distinguished Limerick Protestant family, he was also a staunch ecumenist. He lived in O'Connell Street, and used to hang valuable tapestries out of his windows when the Redemptorist Arch-Confraternity processions were passing; this was a token of great respect to those days. Ward 6 in Barrington's Hospital was known as Dr. Fogerty's ward. He had a keen interest in all aspects of Limerick life, and maintained that the

reports of the attacks on Jews in Limerick in the early part of this century had been somewhat exaggerated. He stated that, to the best of his knowledge, few members of the Jewish faith had been treated in any of the Limerick hospitals, or by local doctors, for injuries sustained during the unfortunate incidents of 1904.



Dr. William O'Sullivan '... courtly gentleman'. Hon. visiting physician from 9 Feb., 1906, to 5 June, 1954.

Dr. John Devane was the doyen of medical practitioners in Limerick for many years. He took his fellowship in surgery in 1909. Two years later, he sat the M.D., and obtained a gold medal in this examination. He also had a diploma in public health. He was a leading member of the staff in both Barrington's and St. John's hospitals.

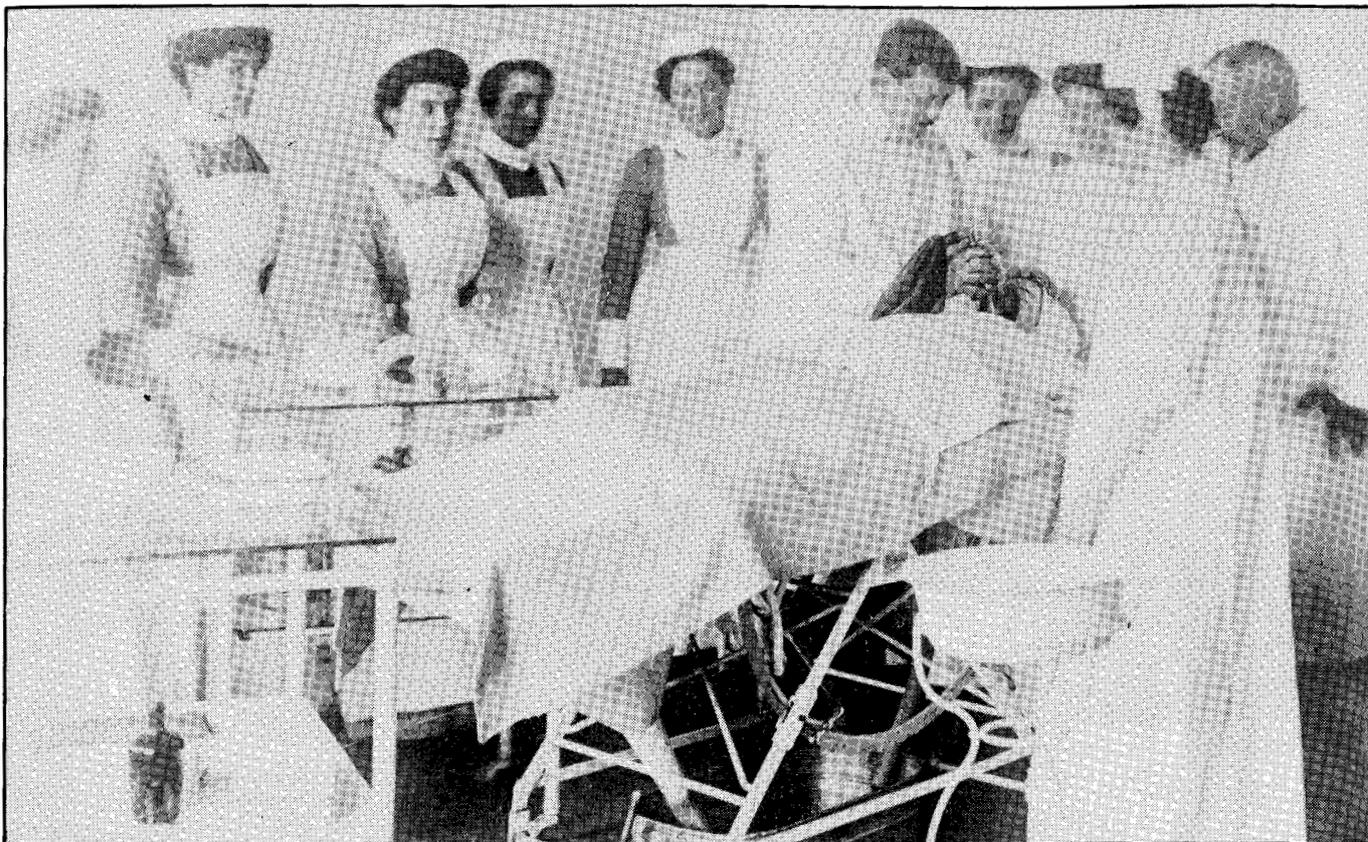
Dr. M.J. Malone also held both an M.D. and a fellowship. He was a consultant physician to Barrington's for

years. Both he and Dr. Devane were very keen on exercise. Dr. Malone used to don rubber boots – called 'low-cuts', at that time – and walk the bank from Thomond Bridge to Athlunkard Boat Club, after he had finished his hospital sessions in the morning. Dr. Devane's favourite recreation was tramping in the Clare hills.

Doctor William O'Sullivan and Jim Roberts, both members of the staff, were keenly interested in boxing and used to referee local contests. There is a story told that, during the 'Troubles', Jim Roberts was stopped by one of the Auxiliaries while doing a night call. A heated argument ensued, during which Dr. Roberts K.O.'d one of his interrogators, whereupon the other 'Auxie' ran for it. The good doctor then had his victim conveyed to Barrington's Hospital, where he attended his wounds.

When George Clancy and Michael O'Callaghan were murdered by the British forces in 1921, Dr. Roberts was the first medical man on the scene. Incidentally, when a doctor was needed at night at this period, a woman had to act as messenger, as she was less at risk if caught breaking the curfew. Dr. O'Sullivan was honorary secretary to the staff from 1927 to 1954. He was a courtly gentleman, who always wore a sprig of ivy in his lapel. He also ran a pharmacy in William Street.

My father, Dr. John G. Holmes, served Barrington's and St. John's for more than half a century, from the 1920s to the '70s. I feel somewhat diffident in mentioning him here, as I had a great deal of admiration for him. I can testify to his extraordinary work-load. In addition to his hospital duties, he had a large general practice, and a heavy obstetrical list. At a time of much poverty and poor housing, he was dispensary doctor to the No. 2 District. He acted also as police surgeon



The operating theatre in the 1920s.



'Say it with flowers' ... Doctors, matrons and some members of the nursing staff, June, 1964.

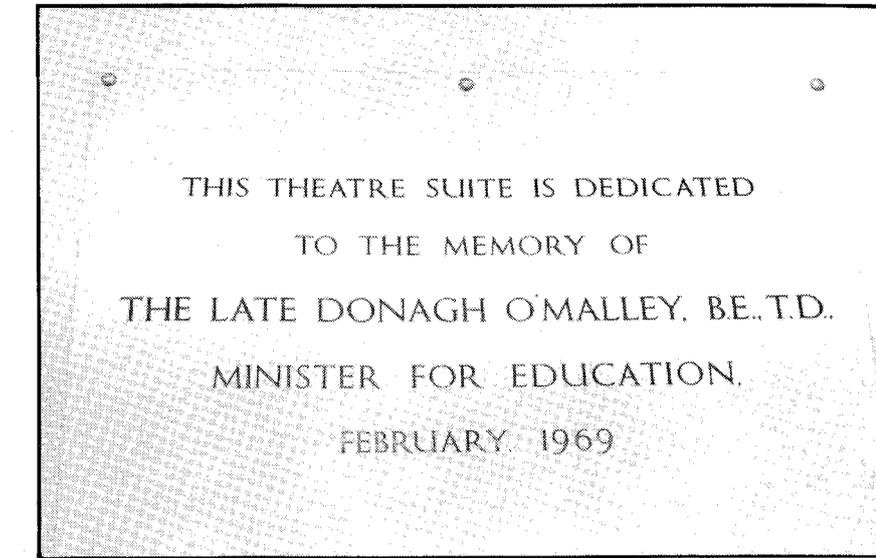


for years. He had a particular interest in ophthalmology, and, in the middle of a busy surgery, often spent some of his time in doing a refraction. Indeed, he was ophthalmic physician to Barrington's prior to Dr. Sarah O'Malley taking up duty. He had a very equable temperament, and never hurried a patient, no matter what his or her station.

Dr. John Troy and Dr. William Dundon were also stalwart members of staff. Dr. Troy, always quiet and gentle, held the degrees of M.D. and D.P.H. In addition to his other duties, he acted as pathologist to the hospital, until Dr. Gerald Tynan joined the staff. Dr. Dundon worked in Barrington's all his professional life. He was house-surgeon to the hospital from 1919 to 1929, and was then elected to the staff as assistant surgeon and radiologist. He died in 1956.

Dr. Stephen McDonagh graduated from being resident medical officer in 1927 to joining the staff as anaesthetist soon afterwards. Sadly, he died a young man in 1951.

The last three non-specialist doctors to be appointed to Barrington's were doctors Tynan, Crowe and Cullen. Dr. Tynan qualified in 1938, and, as part of his training, worked in Cork Street Fever hospital, where he trained in pathology. He published a paper in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* on the diagnosis of diphtheria. When he joined Barrington's initially, he was responsible for pathology in the hospital. He continued this work until Dr. Gerry Furnell took over, and established a laboratory in St. John's Hospital. In 1950, Dr. Tynan became surgeon to the hospital, and from then on



New operating theatre, dedicated to Donogh O'Malley, February, 1969.

concentrated on clinical work. He was a life-long total abstainer, and in his younger days he sported a rather dashing moustache. One of his close relatives also wore a moustache, and was not averse to a few drinks. On one occasion, this worthy castigated a lady hotelier for the poor quality of her stout. She took umbrage and, picking on the wrong Tynan, defended herself vigorously, believing that the bemused doctor had been the offending critic. As can be imagined, some hilarity ensued, and alas, about that time Dr. Gerald's moustache disappeared forever.

Dr. Frank Crowe served as house-

surgeon to the hospital from 1943 to 1949, and in 1950 came on the staff. He was a great colleague. Dr. Stephen McDonagh, who was the anaesthetist in the 1940s, became gravely ill at the end of that decade and died shortly afterwards. Dr. Crowe stepped into the breach, and gave much of the anaesthetics in the hospital in this period. When, through the generosity of Lord Nuffield, Barrington's was given an 'iron lung', Dr. Crowe went to Dublin to learn how to operate this respirator, and it was a great help for some time until more sophisticated appliances came along. Dr. Edward Cullen, cheerful and hard-



The retirement of Dr. John G. Holmes, after more than 50 years' service.

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The retirement of Dr. Michael Roberts, after 49 years' service, April, 1984.

working, was a great servant of the hospital, and is still in active practice. The closure of Barrington's hurt him deeply.

The first of the new breed of specialist consultants was Dr. Michael Roberts. The son of Dr. Jim Roberts, he joined the staff in 1936 as ENT consultant. He qualified in 1933, and worked at the Birmingham Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital and at the Kajek and Neumann clinics in Vienna. Michael was skilful and energetic, quick to adopt new techniques and advances, and soon became a leading figure in his chosen speciality.

Dr. Sarah O'Malley had worked in Yorkshire and in the Birmingham Midlands' Eye Hospital before joining Barrington's as ophthalmologist. She played a prominent part in the cultural life of the city for more than thirty years.

In the next few years, several well-trained consultants joined the staff. Dr. Pat McMahon, gynaecologist, took his M.A.O. degree in 1943, and had been assistant master to Holles Street National Maternity Hospital before coming to Barrington's.

Dr. K.N. McMahon specialised in radiology, and had held training posts in the General Hospital, Birmingham, and the Manchester Royal Infirmary before taking his D.M.R. in 1945. Dr. Anne McMahon was the first consultant

paediatrician to gain a hospital appointment outside Dublin. She had worked as a resident medical officer in the Birmingham Children's Hospital, and obtained her M.D. and M.R.C.P.I. degrees in 1945. She had the distinction of carrying out the first exchange transfusion to treat rhesus incompatibility in the new-born outside Dublin. Dermot Devane became consultant surgeon to the hospital a few years later. He had worked in the Post-Graduate Hospital, Hammersmith, and had taken his fellowship in surgery in 1950.

I have given some details of the training of these doctors to show that, for a small hospital in a provincial city without a university, the management boards of Barrington's Hospital adapted quickly to medical progress, and fully appreciated the necessity of well-trained consultant appointments. All these appointees were from Limerick. This was not so much due to nepotism or provincialism as to the paucity of well-trained applicants, for rarely were there ever more than two suitable candidates for any of these posts – quite a change from the position today, when there is an embarrassing number of superbly qualified doctors for any available position.

The first 'outsider' was Dr. John McCormack, when he was appointed

anaesthetist in 1951, and even he had Limerick connections. Soon after, the surgeon, George Cantillon, came from Cork, and I also joined the medical staff at that time. Later, as vacancies occurred for one reason or another, a number of consultants joined the hospital; these included Dr. William Bennett, pathologist; Dr. John A. Holmes, gynaecologist; and Dr. D. O'Keeffe, ophthalmologist. Dr. Colm Toland came as anaesthetist when Dr. John McCormack moved to St. John's in 1972. Dr. R. Davis came from England to succeed Noel McMahon as radiologist. Another surgeon, Terry McCarthy, and Dr. John Leahy, consultant physician, also joined the staff. The last two specialist appointments were Kevin Manning, ENT surgeon, and Dr. Dermot Molony, gynaecologist.

As well as being a successful surgeon, Dr. Roberts proved to be a most effective medical secretary when he succeeded Dr. O'Sullivan in 1954. For some time, it had been clear that a new outpatients' department was needed to replace the old department, then located in the basement; the toilet facilities were poor, and at high tides the floors were often inundated. When the Hospitals' Commission's representatives eventually inspected the out-patients' section, one of the group said he thought it was as good as some similar departments in



Nurse Jacinta O'Flynn serves lunch to Mona Napier on 30 March, 1988, the day before Barrington's closed.

Dublin. Dr. Roberts told him indignantly that Barrington's did not wish to be compared with the worst but with the best! Agreement for a new out-patients' section was obtained.

Later, Dr. Roberts was the moving spirit in getting a splendid new operating suite, with two air-conditioned theatres, built. This suite was formally opened in 1969, and was dedicated to the memory of Limerick's leading politician, Donogh O'Malley. Dr. Roberts was also instrumental in getting a new entrance and a fire-proof stairway constructed.

Dr. Colm Toland succeeded Michael Roberts as medical secretary a few years after he joined the hospital, and was also effective and energetic. Mainly at his instigation, in 1981 and 1982, the hospital's mechanical and electrical services were brought up to standard, and a new medical oxygen system installed. The cost of these alterations came to £212,000. Later, new lift-shafts were provided, and then came a new intensive care ward at a cost of £130,000. The Limerick/Shannon Rotary Club kindly presented a blood-gas analyzer to assist in patient monitoring, and this equipment was fitted in the intensive care unit.

As recently as 1986, the Department of Health approved and funded the purchase of two houses beside the hospital at a cost of £60,000. The houses had been bought with the intention of expanding the out-patients' department.

Such expenditure made the closure of the hospital, less than two years later, quite inexplicable.

Dr. Toland also played a leading part in the deputations and protests that preceded the closure.

Any doctor coming to work in Barrington's from another institution could not but be pleasantly surprised by the calibre of the nursing staff. They were always cheerful, willing, and nothing was ever too much trouble for any of them. They were also sensible, competent and practical, even when the conditions were tough, particularly in the out-patients' department late at night. Their devotion to duty could only be described as edifying. They all deserve to be remembered.

Much of the credit for this unblemished record was probably due to the excellence of the matrons. In my thirty-odd years at the hospital, there were three matrons. Miss Curtin was a superb manager who donated the medal named after her for the nurse showing most kindness and courtesy each year. She revolutionised nursing in Barrington's, started the training school, and was the driving force in getting the nurses' residence built. Miss Hoare was always calm and regal, confident and unflappable; she had a genius for picking suitable candidates for the nursing school.

Our last matron was Mrs. Anna Casey. She was of County Clare stock,

and trained in Whittington Hospital London, and had been assistant matron in the Royal Northern Hospital before coming to Limerick. Anna Casey lived and breathed Barrington's; she often did the work of ten people, and was never averse to getting involved in the most onerous tasks herself. She was an inspiration to us all, and it was sad to see her distress when the news was announced of the impending closure of the hospital she had so faithfully and successfully served for the past thirteen years.

Doctors and matrons may come and go, but Sister Joan Bluett goes on forever. She has been assistant-matron to Miss Hoare and Mrs. Casey. Always dependable, always capable, always there. She has been a fostermother to hundreds of nurses who loved and respected her, although she always insisted on discipline and maintained the highest standards.

Because of space considerations, I cannot even begin to list all those others who contributed so much towards the effective running of the hospital and to its friendly atmosphere down through the years – the para-medicals and other staff, the members of the management committees and the hard-working ladies' guild. But a few people have earned their own unique places. Dave Clohessy, who worked as a gardener for 45 years, must have been one of the hospital's longest serving employees. And I must not neglect to mention the secretary/managers who worked so hard in the interests of the hospital. The last three names come automatically to mind ... Pat Hartnett, John Cummins and Tim Kennelly. It is a measure of the high esteem in which Pat Hartnett was held that when he retired as secretary/manager, he was co-opted immediately on to the management committee.

Sadly, we are witnessing the end of a remarkable era – the close of the voluntary hospital movement. In the annual report of 1950, the chairman, Very Rev. Dean Swain, reported a loss on the year's working of £8,922. The Hospitals' Commission agreed to pay £6,200, leaving a loss of £2,700 odd. The previous year, the annual loss had been cleared in full by the Commission. This development, and the annual financial shortfall thus created was to herald the eventual closure of the hospital, the end of its influence on medicine and its contribution to the character of the inner city. It is sad now to stand in the silent out-patients' department or main corridor. Ghosts abound – ghosts of loved ones and friends.

'... the unending columns press in noiseless tumult ...'

We can only hope that the memory and influence of Barrington's Hospital will live on, and will serve as a fitting memorial to all who worked there.