

"A SPLENDID THING": JUSTIFYING THE BRITISH OPTICAL ASSOCIATION MUSEUM AND LIBRARY DURING ITS FIRST HALF CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the origins of the British Optical Association Museum and how it increased in prominence. Its value for matters such as historical research, pride of possession of members, publicity, recognition of the status of the profession, and demonstration of the long and distinguished history of the profession are examined. The arguments in support of the museum in the first half of the twentieth century by John Hamer Sutcliffe, and later his protégé George Giles, are highlighted.

KEYWORDS

British Optical Association; optometry history; optometry museums; optometry organizations; science museums

In 1926 the Dioptric Bulletin, in-house journal of the British Optical Association (BOA), published a letter from Charles Sankey Fraser of Brisbane, Australia, declaring, "I must congratulate you on the establishment of this Museum and Library. It will be a splendid thing for the young optometrists of Great Britain and our students from Greater Britain, and something of which the Empire may well be proud."¹

Such praise undoubtedly warmed the heart of the BOA's Secretary and *Bulletin* Editor, John Hamer Sutcliffe, demonstrating the Imperial prestige of the world's oldest professional examining body for sight-testing opticians and supporting his long-held contention that an awareness of the history of the profession would be of particular use to trainee ophthalmic opticians. Yet, in offering his commendation, Fraser was over a quarter of a century too late.

The immediate context of his letter was the publicity surrounding a grant from the Andrew Carnegie Trust to purchase further historical works for the BOA Library, but this money had only been awarded because the collection was already well-established. The origins of the library can be dated to July 1900 when the first President of the Association, the instrument maker John Browning, stepped down and bequeathed books and a sum of money to commence a

Library Fund. This action didn't just come out of the blue, as the council had discussed the desirability of establishing a reference library as far back as February 1899. From the outset Sutcliffe had put in writing his view that "the mere possession of a certificate, and a notification as to when the subscription is due, is hardly fulfilling the aims of an ideal society."² By January, 1901 a library catalogue, comprising seven titles, was published and a lending service commenced. That same year the association began collecting what were termed "optical specimens of historic value." The initial impetus was an unsolicited gift of antique spectacles and further gifts trickled in over the next few years, the oldest of which still identifiable in the modern-day museum, was presented in 1909.³ Sutcliffe was immediately inspired to develop a museum to sit equally alongside the library. By the 1930s the Annual Report sometimes referred to these two elements together as "the Collection."

Sutcliffe, born in 1867, was a slightly dandyish figure from the north of England with a large head, sometimes described, with affection, as the brother of Mr Punch. He seems to have been influenced by the aesthetic movement and wrote of his ambitions for an "optical house beautiful." This was an unconcealed reference to Oscar Wilde's American lecture

tour of 1882 when he introduced the concept of the “house beautiful,” a homely setting in which affordable but “artistic” goods could be displayed. The house beautiful was to be an eclectic mix of the antique and modern and the effect could be achieved through the choice of furniture, decorative arts objects and textiles, together with family heirlooms, souvenirs and personalia, all of these things selected with deliberation and placed with an eye for colour and harmony.⁴ One similarly convinced writer asserted that this would counteract a trend whereby “the houses in which people lived were only fit for blind people.”⁵

It is easy to comprehend how a man dedicated to helping people see more clearly would be attracted to the idea of a professional headquarters with a carefully curated interior. At first he lacked the canvas on which to work as the BOA inhabited cramped premises off Piccadilly. This did not prevent Sutcliffe from building a collection of tools of the trade, modern and historic, augmented by decorative items, in anticipation of greater space to come. The events of 1926 were therefore the long culmination of prior moves. The President, Mr. W. A. Barker informed the Annual General Meeting: “...we hope to have here what will become the finest Optical Museum and Library in Europe.... I think we have already made arrangements for the whole of the office staff to be moved in due course across the courtyard...into the temporary building, so that not only will the big Hall be furnished and equipped as a first-class Museum and Library but the atmosphere will be there. There will be no clicking of typewriters, printing machinery, and other distractions.”⁶ Thus Barker drew attention to a principal drawback of professional body museums, that they usually inhabit working buildings. The BOA was uniquely lucky in being able to separate staff functions from the presentational.

Later that year a suggestion was brought forward that a spectacle collection might be started. The members of the council were asked to forward interesting specimens. This shows that collecting was considered a group activity with all those involved in running the professional body being included in the requirement to seek out new exhibits and act as ambassadors for the museum wherever they travelled. In 1927 in anticipation of its first international conference, that was to include an historical and research exhibition, “The Secretary was authorised to purchase engravings of well-known physicists and oculists.”⁷ This decision marks the origin of the current museum’s Print Room.

By 1930 the Annual Report remarked, “The Association can now claim to have a good collection.” It had already been described in similar terms in a Statement of Evidence

presented by the BOA to a parliamentary inquiry into the Optical Practitioners Bill of 1927. This suggests that the museum had a political purpose in positioning the professional body where its status would persuade government of the sense in legislating to protect and regulate the profession, seen as the ultimate mark of recognition. In 1929 it was possible for the BOA to state “Our members are perhaps not aware that in addition to having what is undoubtedly the finest optical and ophthalmic library in the world, the Association owns an exceedingly fine collection of old spectacles and optical instruments now awaiting classification.”⁸

For the first time the museum began accepting long-term loans and reproducing images of its best items on its own colour printing press. These were promoted as suitable for framing with the suggestion that members would adorn their practice waiting areas with them. This is an example of the abiding theme of the 1930s, that the BOA Museum had potential for what we would nowadays term “soft publicity.”⁹

The increased prominence of the museum provoked internal debate at the BOA, particularly after over £600 was spent in one year to buy new exhibits especially, as the pages of BOA publications make clear, the emphasis was on aesthetic items, jewelled spyglasses, an embroidered fire surround featuring bespectacled characters, optical fans, a collection of coins and medals and a ceramic collection. Mr Sutcliffe’s optical house beautiful suddenly became reality when their lease was terminated and they moved to a fine Georgian townhouse in Brook Street, Mayfair. As editor, Sutcliffe does seem to have become carried away with his enthusiasm for “New showcases...fitted with the latest improvements in lighting’ and his desire to exploit the new space and form a truly ‘representative collection.’”¹⁰

At the 1935 Annual General Meeting the minutes recorded that “Mr E. G. Guyatt, in criticising the balance sheet, doubted the utility of a Library of any other than modern books, and also any necessity for a museum.”¹¹ Subsequently he wrote a letter claiming he was generally in favour of such facilities, as long as they were not too expensive to maintain, and denying he had actually mentioned the museum.¹² Nevertheless the episode prompted much correspondence from members, some opposing and others supporting the museum. It led to an editorial by Sutcliffe, of quite remarkable length and thoughtfulness. In this, Sutcliffe outlined his personal concept of the “museum mind,” stating that, “A recent letter in the Dioptric News with an editorial footnote, together with some subsequent correspondence I have received, have brought to me very forcibly the question as to

what place a library and museum should have in the 'outfit' of such a society as the British Optical Association."¹³

He acknowledged one letter he had received that "deplores the acquisition of objects which are described as 'pretty' things," but he had also received letters calling for the "usefulness" of the museum to be increased "to a far greater extent than was originally intended," for example by asking manufacturers to deposit new products. Another had suggested opening at least one evening per week. All this had prompted an analysis, that the BOA had three types of member. Those of museum mind showed "pride of possession." They assumed that maintaining a museum would be helpful. Secondly, there were those who took a "shop-window" point of view. They may "heartily" support the museum because it enhanced the political and commercial value of their own professional standing, even if they may not themselves have had occasion to visit. The third group, whom he declared to be "certainly in a minority" view, felt that they would never have an opportunity to visit and may not be interested anyway. In the course of his argument he stated that if the council "confines itself to looking at everything from a detailed, commercial, sordid point of view, the sooner it discards its professional ideals the better." This seems to confirm that he believed museums were to be deemed a "professional" activity. Furthermore, "A great association must have and always has its assets in the shape of headquarters, the interest of its members, and what we may term worldly possessions."

The response was substantial. One member wrote "...may I associate myself with the first class of person he mentions, thoroughly agreeing with them that not only will the library and museum be useful, but will also be a fine thing for the B.O.A. to possess."¹⁴

Later that year Sutcliffe noted a plea in the *Pharmaceutical Journal* for a History of Pharmacy Museum. "The plea certainly goes to show that the institution of a museum in connection with a big association is almost a necessity." We may note this use of the word "necessity," echoing Guyatt's reported criticism.¹⁵ He also printed a full-page plea to members to "Visit the Library and Museum," announcing that evening openings would be trialled over the winter months. He hoped to attract three types of visitor: the specialist researcher, who knew what he wanted, the browsing researcher open to what he might find on a visit and, thirdly, "the member who possesses the books that he wants, but is interested in the development of visual aids." Indeed, "We hope that before long there will not be a B.O.A. member in London or the Home Counties who has not yet visited the

Museum." Even in the present century that hope has yet to be realised!

It seems that Sutcliffe was balancing the need to justify the museum's existence as a direct service to the membership and promote the less tangible concept that it somehow added to the prestige of the profession. The following year he wrote that the museum "might be a source of interest to those members who have the courage to give a little of their spare time to come and look at it, but its great value lies with that small outside public whose interest it is necessary for the Association to court." He drew attention to an economic argument, that such activity was cheaper than, say, running a national advertising campaign.¹⁶

As a result of the debate, it was agreed unanimously "that the general policy adopted with regard to the Library and Museum served to uphold the prestige of the Association." Furthermore, "it was suggested and duly approved that in addition to the present collection in the museum, specimens of modern frames and inexpensive instruments be added. Enquiries had been made with several wholesale houses and it was understood that they would be willing to supply such specimens free of charge. These would then be dated and classified and kept for future reference."¹⁷ So, by encouraging discussion of museum policy Sutcliffe secured committee-level backing for even more ambitious collecting.

In consequence, at the next AGM, Mr Tranter opposed passing the accounts. He "made a long speech" (reported across three entire pages). £947 had been spent on the museum in the last year, entirely on acquisitions, but "what about the prestige value? Its ultimate value in that direction is obviously the impression it creates on the public mind, directly or indirectly; and it may be necessary to know just exactly how far it has impressed the public in order to be in any way assessed as to its prestige value. Unless that prestige value is sufficient to influence a large circle, and unless it does enable the general public to differentiate between your members and others, its value to the B.O.A. is not very great. I am not trying to decry the Library or Museum, but I am trying to assess their value, and my point is that until that Library and Museum are shared by the entire profession, it will never achieve the fullness of its purpose."¹⁸ In consequence, the BOA Council considered a sub-committee report into museum purchases since May 1935. It concluded that "The Museum was comparatively [to the Library] in its infancy, and if it was to be used from the point of view of prestige, it would necessitate a large amount of money being spent on it during the next two or three years... [it] could be enlarged by gradual buying

spread over the next fifty or sixty years, in which case it was naturally to be expected that many valuable additions would be lost, as at present the market for optical antiquities etc., was very keen.”¹⁹ There was also positive feedback from those such as Mr Watson Baker who wrote it should be a matter of self-congratulation to the Council that they have had the “foresight” to invest in this manner. He directly linked owning a museum and library to becoming a registered profession and made a rhetorical comparison with “parallel bodies.”²⁰ Another member recognised the lengthy timescale over which this achievement had been made: “I am very proud of the B.O.A. Library and Museum as the finest of its kind in the world, and the foresight and energy which was responsible for its creation and maintenance reflect the greatest credit upon the B.O.A. Councillors and Secretary during the last forty years.”²¹

Thus, bolstered from above again, Sutcliffe proceeded. At the next AGM, in 1937, the President, Mr. O.W. Dunscombe invited members to buy things they saw in antique dealers’ shops and present them to the Association.²² The risk of uncontrolled collecting does not appear to have been addressed. We might note that none other than Mr. Tranter donated two pairs of spectacles to the museum, the following September.²³

Writing in 1938, the BOA Council Member Cecil Flick could claim, “It is only within the last few years... that this nucleus has developed sufficiently in size and quality to be dignified with the name of museum or collection, but by purchases and donations the Association now possesses a magnificent collection of spectacles, spectacle cases, spyglasses, magnifiers, early ophthalmic apparatus, paintings, engravings, cartoons and portraits depicting spectacles’... Donations of apparatus, etc. to the Collection from members of the Association will be welcomed by the Council.”²⁴ We may note the open-ended nature of this appeal, devoid of targets, suggesting perhaps that Sutcliffe, approaching retirement and having in his view secured the existence of the collection, was less involved in a hands-on manner, leaving appeals for donations to others with less of his own precise vision. By September 1939 it could be reported that there was now a “separate Instrument Section,” housed in former library bookcases reassigned for the purpose.²⁵

During the Second World War, Sutcliffe retired as BOA Secretary and shortly thereafter was killed tragically during the blackout, removing any possibility that he would wield influence from the wings. There was, however, no reduction in gifts. In 1942: “...many interesting antique visual aids have been presented by members and gratefully received.”²⁶

There were serious proposals to rename the collection the Sutcliffe Museum and poignant acknowledgement of new acquisitions that he would have appreciated. For instance, a front page editorial entitled “Tradition,” proclaimed the gift by a Jewish refugee of a pair of Nuremberg “masterpiece” spectacles, “which the late Mr. J. H. Sutcliffe tried all his life to secure.” It was even reported in the pages of a very popular newspaper the Sunday Express. The new Secretary, George Giles, then issued perhaps the most explicit justification of collecting the BOA had ever expressed:

Our readers may ask what this has to do with present-day optical politics, since most of our leading articles are political in text. The answer to that question is that we believe this background to be as important as the fact of our present high training and education, since it reinforces beyond doubt our claim to be no jumped-up profession, but one that is deep-rooted in a past which stretches back to an organised existence, two hundred years at least before the profession of medicine was similarly established. Whether we consider it a worthwhile characteristic or not, it is the habit in our country to expect our professions to have had a long and distinguished history... we survive today as much by our history as for our present usefulness.²⁷

Giles had been recognised as a protégé by Sutcliffe in the early 1930s and although his elevation had come unexpectedly following the death of Sutcliffe’s direct successor in 1941, it is surely on account of his shared view of the importance of a museum that it outlived its founder. Giles was of the “museum mind” and worked to keep up relations with long-time donors, writing to one that he would undertake to reopen the museum after the war when “perhaps even you will be staggered at the amount and worth of what you have given to the Museum over a period of years.”²⁸

The willingness of senior figures to attach a “value” to the museum that stretched beyond monetary figures and took a long-term view of how the collection might serve the profession in the future explains why the museum flourished. Their ability to attract support from the grass-roots membership and to deflect criticism by acknowledging and confronting it head on, using the full resources of the print media under their control explains why the UK profession possesses the wonderful historic resource it does today.

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