

# Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 32:

## Health and Humanity The Philanthropic Medical Workers of St John's in the Late Nineteenth Century Part 1

*This is an edited version of a talk given by Dr Jenny Stephenson for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor on 27 March 2026.*

Among the Pew Renters of St John's in the records from 1889 to 1890 were many benevolent men and women who improved the lives of Sheffield citizens. Five of these individuals had a connection with medicine. This week I explore the lives of three men working within and shaping Sheffield hospitals and its university. To what extent, I wonder, did the teaching and sermons that they heard each Sunday inspire their remarkable dedication?

### **Dr William Jackson Cleaver (1848 - 1895) : Pew 52**

Dr William Cleaver was an outstanding doctor who co-founded the Sheffield Hospital for Children in 1876. He worked in Sheffield's Royal Infirmary in 1874 and realised that there was very little health care provision for children. Along with architect J D Webster and solicitor Henry Vickers, he raised enough money to set up the Sheffield Free Hospital for Sick Children in Brightmore House, Brookhill two years later. He ran a child health outpatients service from there for the poor sick with around ten beds (inpatients for brief stays) as well.



*Brightmore House 1875, courtesy of Picture Sheffield*

He also offered advice to mothers how to manage simple childhood illness at home, and to prevent illness by the basics of good diet and general care. Training was also offered to women to become children's nurses.

Due to high demand, larger premises had to be built on Western Bank, into which Dr Cleaver's hospital moved in 1880.



*The Children's Hospital, courtesy of Picture Sheffield*

Referred to as The Children's Hospital, it had initially 35 beds. Extensions were built in 1888 and 1896, and 50 beds were accommodated. Doctors were very keen to work there, and Dr Cleaver had a plan to engage medical students from the nearby University of Sheffield Medical School once it was set up.

It was a great tragedy that in 1895, at the age of 47, Dr Cleaver died suddenly. The entry in Sheffield City Archives: 'CLEAVER W J (Dr) of Broomhill, co-founder, the Children's Hospital, death 31 Mar 1895'. He had died of pneumonia following Influenza.

Through Dr Cleaver's tireless efforts, the Children's Hospital was set to become the large thriving successful hospital it is today. His legacy, however, lived on, and the hospital grew steadily larger and more efficient.



*The Children's Hospital, courtesy of Picture Sheffield*

In line with Dr Cleaver's ethos that a hospital should be a Learning Institution, the Children's Hospital forged links with the University from its founding in 1905, with medical students being taught on the wards and in outpatients.

As we know, the hospital developed to become a major NHS institution, now caring for around 24,000 inpatients, 89,000 outpatients and more than 51,000 emergency admissions. It takes referrals from all over the UK.

What a testimony this is to Dr Cleaver, whom we can imagine sitting humbly in pew number 52, seeking enlightenment and direction in what turned out to be a major contribution to the health of our city.

#### **Professor Sir William Hicks (1850 – 1934) : Pew 49**



*Image courtesy of The University of Sheffield*

William Mitchinson Hicks graduated from St. John's College, Cambridge in 1873, becoming Fellow there in 1876. In 1883 Hicks left St. John's to become Principal of Firth College, Sheffield. In 1892 he became Professor of Physics and Mathematics there until 1905, when he brought about the founding of Sheffield University and was its first Vice-Chancellor. He was an excellent teacher, well liked by students and staff.

In 1898 he was knighted for his development of a mathematical formula (The Hicks Equation) to describe the flow of fluid along a pipe - fluid dynamics. As well as having an increasing number of practical applications, this was to become integral to a medical breakthrough.

Hicks carried out collaborative work with Dr Christopher Addison, the famous Sheffield Anatomist, (1869 – 1951). With his knowledge of anatomy of the kidney blood vessels, and with Hicks' knowledge of physics, together they were the first to show the blood supply of a human kidney using a dye and X-rays. This had a large impact at the time, and continues to do so.

Hicks also supported the Radium Institute, making radium cancer treatment available to the people of Sheffield. He founded the Basil Hicks Lectureship in memory of his son killed in the first world War of 1914 to 1918. Hicks retired in 1917, moving to Crowhurst, Sussex, where he died in 1934. The Hicks building of Physics and Mathematics is named after him.

#### **Dr Sinclair White (1858 – 1920) : Pew 25**

Dr Sinclair White qualified from Queen's College, Galway, In 1879 he was appointed Tutor in the Sheffield Medical School where he quickly became known for his outstanding teaching ability, thereby raising the standards.

From 1882 to 1885 he worked as House Surgeon in Sheffield Royal Infirmary. In 1885 he obtained the DPH (Diploma in Public Health) in Cambridge, moving to an appointment as Medical Officer of Health for Sheffield in 1886. In this role, he astutely noticed that there were a considerable number of

cases of lead poisoning in the south west area of Sheffield. He traced this unexpected finding to the unusually high level of lead in the drinking water from the domestic pipes. Tracing it further back, Dr White had the brilliant idea that this was due to the acidic water from Redmires Reservoir which had enabled lead to leach into the water from the lead pipes. He needed to have a legal challenge against the Authorities, but in the end this led to alkalinisation of the reservoir using limestone and later chalk.

He became Surgeon to the Children's Hospital in 1889, and in 1892 Surgeon to the Royal Infirmary. Working on the Board of Governors, he improved the Royal Infirmary by the addition of a surgical block with open-air galleries. In 1911 he was appointed Professor of Surgery.



*Image courtesy of The University of Sheffield*

White also made major contributions during WW1, running the hospital and being the main surgeon while colleagues were away on military duty. In 1917 he became Commandant of the Hospital, but his health began to fail. He was obliged to retire altogether in June 1919, moving to Bournemouth, where he died on August 8th, 1920. He bequeathed to Mrs Sinclair White his estate for life, then to pass to the Sheffield Royal Infirmary for a Home of Rest for the Nurses.

*Next week I will share with you the contribution made by two more of our pew renters to medicine both in Sheffield and on the battlefields of Europe.*

*Dr Jenny Stephenson  
6 April 2026*