EDITORIALS AND ANNOTATIONS

SYDNEY LIMBREY HIGGS

EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

Attainment of the age of eighty years seems to be a characteristic of those who have served the British Orthopaedic Association as its Presidents. We are especially pleased to record this double achievement of Sydney Higgs, who was born on September 12, 1892, though his tall athletic figure and fine head of dark hair belie his years.

Qualifying in 1917, he joined the Royal Navy, in which he served until the end of the first world war. Thereafter, having served his house appointments, S. L. H. joined the band of distinguished surgeons at the Military Orthopaedic Hospital, Shepherd’s Bush, conceived by Robert Jones, and subsequently at St Mary’s Hospital, Roehampton. There he came under the influence of such men as Reginald Cheyne Elmslie, Thomas Fairbank, Gaythorne Girdlestone and Rowley Bristow.

A Bart’s man, he was appointed Assistant Orthopaedic Surgeon under Elmslie, to whom he was a most worthy junior colleague and whom he later succeeded as Orthopaedic Surgeon in charge of the department. He was also on the staff of the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. Under the influence once more of Robert Jones, he collaborated with Elmslie in converting Chailey Heritage from a home for crippled children into an active and, in many ways, unique orthopaedic hospital with an integrated boarding school and the usual peripheral clinics of the day. He was responsible also for orthopaedic and massage clinics throughout Hertfordshire. Under the aegis of the British Red Cross Society, these were open to patients of all ages. Those needing in-patient treatment were usually admitted to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital or to St Bartholomew’s.

On the outbreak of the second world war, part of St Bartholomew’s was rusticated under the Emergency Medical Service to a vacated mental hospital at Hill End, St Albans, where a large special orthopaedic unit was established under his charge to serve a wide area and to treat the wounded, both civilian and military. This task presented scope for his organising ability and for applying the wide experience of the reconstructive surgery of war wounds that he had acquired after the previous war. He soon established a happy and fruitful collaboration with those in related disciplines, notably neurosurgery and plastic surgery. The liaison with plastic surgery was of particular importance because the nature of many of the more serious war injuries made the work of the orthopaedic and plastic surgeons complementary. He was also appointed Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon to the Army, Eastern Command, a post that gave him special pleasure.
The Chief will always be remembered by numbers of orthopaedic surgeons as an outstanding clinician, teacher and friend. Many of them received from him their initial training and enthusiasm for orthopaedics. The same high standard that he set himself he expected from his assistants. They were left in no doubt when these standards had not been reached; his criticism was forthright and pinpointed the mistakes, but was never given harshly and was never given without the kindly word of advice. For work well done his praise was quiet but very generous. His ward rounds were particularly impressive. He had a presence that demanded attention. Everything had to be exactly right. A facet of his character that must have been apparent to all was his complete dedication to his patients. He had the gift of making each one feel that his own case was Higgs’s particular interest and concern, an attribute of the good doctor that he impressed on his juniors. His advice was clear and decisive. In the theatre he was equally decisive. His technique was precise in detail and most gentle. His results, and notably freedom from infection, were the fruit of this care exercised in decidedly primitive surroundings. To serve under him was to learn by his example the true skill of a surgeon, to learn the handling of patients and to understand some of their fears and anxieties, and above all to learn something of his power to attract the deep affection and loyalty of all those who worked with him.

It was a great disappointment to this fine clinician and outstanding teacher—and, indeed, a misfortune for his teaching hospital and its students—that his beds, in common with those of other special departments, did not return to the main hospital till after he had retired under the age limit of sixty-five.

Higgs has never been addicted to writing. He early had a special interest in the foot, and he devised the now ubiquitous peg-and-socket, so-called spike, operation for hammer toe redescribed many years later by another author. A less well known contribution was his perceptive demonstration of the special value of cancellous bone as a grafting material, now well recognised but formerly too little appreciated until the wartime work of Higgs and his collaborators. It is a pity that this splendid teacher and clear thinker did not write more.

At Cambridge, before coming to Bart’s, Higgs was at St John’s and he rowed in the Lady Margaret first boat, winning his oar. Later in life he has been a keen and skilful devotee of sailing, and his “boat”, Lady Margaret, wearing the white ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron, is his pride and chief interest in his retirement at West Wittering on Chichester Harbour. His other chief outdoor interest has been salmon fishing. His achievement on the Wye once entered local lore, at all events for a time.

His presidency of the British Orthopaedic Association in 1950 and 1951 set a standard of natural dignity, good sense and friendly accord which was not lost on visitors from overseas or those at home. Besides a handsome presence, his outstanding personal characteristics have always been his great kindness and courtesy. He is still the best of hosts in every conceivable way. He is a man greatly loved by former patients and colleagues, an exemplar of our ideal of the true English gentleman—an unfashionable concept in this brave new world, but imperishable.

Ivor M. Robertson.
H. Jackson Burrows.