

The Circle of Willis.

Contributors

Moore, Norman, 1847-1922.
Royal College of Physicians of London

Publication/Creation

London : Publisher not identified, 11 May 1911.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fpkgc5kn>

Provider

Royal College of Physicians

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by Royal College of Physicians, London. The original may be consulted at Royal College of Physicians, London. where the originals may be consulted. Conditions of use: it is possible this item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

MOORE (Siv. n.)

THE CIRCLE OF
WILLIS

MAY 11, 1911

—juvatque novos decerpere flores.

A dozen learned men used to meet for scientific conversation in Dr. Wilkins's rooms in Wadham College, Oxford, in the years when there was no king in England, but which a proper regard for our Constitution leads lawyers to call the early years of King Charles II. Each had his own particular turn, which attracted the others to him and contributed to the general sum of their knowledge or enlarged their sphere of experiment, so that the whole group might be considered the social circle of any one of its members. Four of them were physicians, of whom one was Dr. Thomas Willis, elected a fellow of this College in 1664. He composed many medical treatises, for the most part very full of hypotheses and rather involved in style, yet he was the first discoverer of diabetes, and wrote an 'Anatomy of the Brain' in 1664, which was the best treatise published in England on that subject. The anastomosis of vessels at the base of the brain, described by him in his eighth chapter, is well known to all of us as the circle of Willis, and the expression might justly be applied in another sense to the illustrious men who sat round the table of Wilkins at Wadham. Some of them belonged to our College, and others had friends within it. Seth Ward was one of these, a Cambridge man, devoted to mathematics, and the intimate friend of Sir Charles Scarbrugh, of Caius, who was elected a fellow of this College in 1650, and was himself a mathematician. They visited together William Oughtred, whose cheery countenance is shown in a fine engraving of Faithorne, prefixed to his 'Trigonometria' in our library. He explained to Ward and Scarbrugh some difficulties in his 'Clavis Mathematica,' a book once much read at Cambridge, of which we have a copy.

Oughtred's 'Trigonometria' was published in 1657. In an earlier mathematical book, a treatise on Conic Sections,¹ published in Paris in 1641, I lately found a single folio sheet, printed on the inner side only, which the mathematician who once owned the book had left there. It is a famous bit of mathematics, and he probably received it from another

¹ Claudii Mydorgii Patricii Parisini: Prodromi catoptrorum et dioptrorum sive Conicorum: Paris, 1641.

member of the circle of Willis, Sir Christopher Wren. It contains the solution of one problem and the enunciation of another. Jean de Montfert, a name which Pascal assumed, in 1658 desired that the most illustrious men, mathematical professors, and other distinguished mathematicians in England would deign to solve a problem, which he stated. Wren, then Professor of Astronomy in Gresham College, solved the problem, and printed his solution in full after Pascal's proposition. In return, Wren asked the chief mathematicians of France to solve a problem based upon one proposed by Kepler to geometricians: "Rogo igitur præstantissimos in Gallia Mathematicos, ut Problema Keplerianum solvere dignentur, Numerice quidem si fieri possit, saltem Geometrice."

Wren, as Willis tells in his preface, made the drawings of the brain for his 'Cerebri Anatome.' Sprat, whose 'History of the Royal Society' raises so much expectation and so thoroughly disappoints it, gives a poor reason for not telling us anything about the original fellows, most of whom he knew, yet cannot refrain from expressing his admiration for the extent, the variety, and the profundity of Wren's contributions. This well-deserved panegyric was written in 1667, before the present St. Paul's Cathedral, which reminds everyone in London of Wren every day, had been begun, indeed, before he was well known as an architect, the capacity in which most men have now heard of him. It seems to have been almost an accident that his Oxford studies did not lead him to become a physician.

Sir William Petty, elected a fellow here in 1655, whose 'Political Arithmetic' is the first English contribution to political economy, was another member of the circle of Willis.

The company that met at Wadham was one of the many groups of learned men in the formation of which the fellows of our College have had a large share.

Oldham's lines in his paraphrase of the "Ars Poetica" of Horace (1681) are commonplace, but show the esteem in which Willis was held in his own time:

"I've known physicians, who respect might claim
Tho' they ne'er rose to Willis his great fame."

NORMAN MOORE.

