



Did Charcot visit the West Riding Asylum at Wakefield in 1869?

(Letter to the Editor)

Andrew J Larner¹

¹ Department of Translational Neuroscience & Stroke, Institute of Neurology, University College London, London, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:

Andrew J Larner - ORCID iD (0000-0003-0128-8010)

E-mail address: ajlarner241@aol.com

Neurology as a clinical discipline in Great Britain is generally understood to have emerged from 1860 onwards at the National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic located in London's Queen Square (Shorvon and Compston 2019). However, a case may also be made for the West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum located in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, during the Superintendency of James Crichton-Browne (1840-1938) between 1866 and 1876, when neurology as an experimental science was established, principally through the work of David Ferrier (1843-1928) in the dedicated West Riding Asylum (WRA) laboratory (Adrian 1939, 433; Larner 2026).

What had prompted Crichton-Browne to construct a "Pathological Institute" with a laboratory and a photographic studio for the scientific study of brain disease in a remote county asylum? Although he was inclined to credit his Edinburgh teacher Thomas Laycock (1812-1876) as inspiration, it was pointedly remarked by another contemporary alienist, John Batty Tuke (1835-1913), that at WRA the "sciences are applied in a manner diametrically opposed to the theoretical method of Laycock" (Batty Tuke 1874, 109). Hence one must look for other templates for the research ethos exemplified by Crichton-Browne.

One possibility is the work of Charcot. This supposition is partly based on the circumstantial evidence that Crichton-Browne visited hospitals in Paris around 1862-3, immediately after he had first qualified, although it is not known if the Salpêtrière was included in his itinerary. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that Crichton-Browne's "choice of Paris influenced the rest of his career, for clinical observation in hospital or asylum wards and the performance of autopsies, on the French model, became Crichton-Browne's basic approach to psychological medicine" (Oppenheim 1991, 61-62).

Another date for a possible interaction between Charcot and Crichton-Browne, at a time when the latter's plans for WRA were still in development, is 1869, specifically in the context of the 37th Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association (BMA) held in Leeds, West Yorkshire, between 27th and 30th July 1869, an event which included a general invitation to the delegates

from Crichton-Browne to visit WRA. Charcot's name appeared in the list of "Members present at the Leeds Meeting" (BMJ 1869;2:279), but did he avail himself of the opportunity to travel to Wakefield?

Several accounts of the afternoon excursion on 28th July (by train from Leeds to Wakefield, then by omnibuses to the Asylum) appeared, initially in local newspapers (Anon. 1869a, b, c, d) and later in the medical press (Anon. 1869e, f). All of these reports noted that about 100 gentlemen were shown round the Asylum before enjoying a cold collation lunch, listening to music played by the Asylum string band, followed by speeches, then listening to the Asylum Church Choir before returning to Leeds. No report contains a complete list of the names of the attendees; the greatest detail is to be found in *The Wakefield Express* of 31st July: "Amongst the other guests were Sir William Jenner, Physician to Her Majesty [Queen Victoria] and the Royal Family, Professor Acland, of Oxford, Drs. [Harrington] Tuke, Maudsley, B.W. Richardson, Wood, of London; Dr. Sankey, of Cheltenham, Dr. Wilkinson, of Manchester, &c." (Anon. 1869c).

In addition, there is Crichton-Browne's handwritten entry in the WRA Medical Director's journal for the Quarterly Meeting held on July 29th 1869, which reads:

Having been requested by the President and Council of the British Medical Association which is now meeting at Leeds to permit a deputation of that body to inspect the Asylum I obtained the sanction of the Visitors [...] Spencer Stanhope, the Chairman of the last meeting, received them yesterday. A party of 100 gentlemen headed by Sir William Jenner, the Physician to the Queen, and including many of the most distinguished members of the medical profession in this country visited the Asylum yes[terday??] and expressed their admiration of its arrangements (Medical Director's Journal 1869, unpaginated [my transcription; ?? = uncertain]).

Hence, in not one of these various reports did Charcot's name appear. Absence of evidence is of course not equivalent to evidence of absence, but it seems improbable that had Charcot attended the WRA visit his name would have been omitted from all these sources. Moreover, had it occurred, Crichton-Browne was not the type to miss a publicity coup of this kind.

Nevertheless, it remains possible that Charcot and Crichton-Browne may have conferred at some time during the Leeds meeting: Charcot had good English, and Crichton-Browne probably reasonable French; he later published in a French medical journal (Crichton Browne 1876). It certainly does not rule out the possibility that the example of Charcot's methods as pursued at the Salpêtrière was instrumental in stimulating the developments at WRA which, principally through Ferrier, contributed to the origins of the experimental aspect of the profession of neurology in Great Britain, hence "the period when neurology became a science" (Adrian 1939, 433).

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