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JOHN HALL OF MAIDSTONE

A FAMOUS SURGEON OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

By JOHN W. BRIDGE, F.S.A.

AN entry in the register of All Saints' Church, Maidstone, noting the death of John Hall, "the surgian," in 1568 appears to be the only local record of this remarkable surgeon of the sixteenth century.

He was one of the educated men, who with Thomas Vicary, Gale, Clowes, Banister and Read, did so much to raise the status of surgery in late Tudor times.

We know very little about him apart from the fact that he was imprisoned for taking part in Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion, and was afterwards pardoned and released, also that he was a staunch Protestant with a keen sense of humour.

His writings, however, are well known, and include "The historiall Expostulation against the Beastlye Abusers both of Chyrurgerie and Physyke in oure Time."

He had an intense dislike of quacks, whom he treated unmercifully, calling them: "Beastly deceivers, hell-hounds, devilish and ignorant beasts, hellish beguilers, ruffians and vagabonds."

Hall tells of one, William, a shoemaker, who pretended to be very cunning in curing diseases of the eye, and promised to do great things for a friend of Hall's.

The friends of the "party diseased" desired, however, that Hall should talk to the shoemaker before the treatment began.

Hall writes: "I asked him whether he were a surgeon or physitian. He answered no, he was a shoemaker, but he could heale all manner of sore eyes. Well, sayde I, saying that you can heale sore eyes, what is an eye? Whereof is it made, of what members or parts is it composed? And he sayde he knew not that.

"Then I asked if he were worthy to be called a shoemaker that knew not howe or whereof a shoe was made? He said no. Then, sayde I, how dare you work on such a precious and intricate member of man as is the eye, saying you know not the nature thereof, and why it doth see more than a man's nose or his hande?

"He answered he could not tell, but could cure all manner of sore eyes, and could do what Master Luke could not do.

"Thus bragged the proud varlette against and above that reverent man of knowne learning and experience, and I sayde I thought so, for Maister Luke, sayde I, is no shoemaker.

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“ ‘ Well,’ sayde he, ‘ I perceive you do but skorne me,’ and flunge out of the doores in a great fume, and since that time I have heard nothing of hym.”

Hall was frequently in demand for consultations. His “ frendd,” John Coldwell, writes in 1566 of a patient :



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“ Both she and I desyer your helpe and presence forth with, and your paynes shall be consyderyd.”

In 1565 Hall published a volume of verses called “ The Court of Virtue containing many Holy or Speretual Songs, Sonnettes, Psalmes, Ballets and Short Sentences as well of Holy Scripture as others with Music Notes,” in which he tried to popularize religious subjects by setting them to tunes suited to the illiterate.

At the same time he wrote much against the follies of the age.

In a long sonnet "inueyinge agaynst the abuses and pryde that reyneth among vayne women," we find :

" If they commyt synne that doo but desyre
 Much more do those women through theyr attyre,
 Whych curlyng theyr hear, & painting their face,
 Tempt and entice men, vayne loue to imbrace.
 To daly and dance, suche women delyght,
 Inuentyng newe tricks, from mornyng to nyght.
 And some to be small, so streyneth theyr lace,
 That they cleane depriue from colour their face
 The ryght course of bloud, so stoppyng wythall,
 That often they faynt, and to the ground fall."

After fifty verses of this, interspersed with much moral advice, he ends :

" My prayer therefore shalbe day and nyght,
 That eche parte may mende and walk here aright,
 That I may report the maydes of my countrey,
 Thankes be to God have learned honestye."

Hall was a member of the United Company of Barbers and Surgeons created in 1540 and one of Maidstone's worthiest citizens.