

“Then why not an Association of British Neurologists?”: British Neurologists and the Founding of an Elite Medical Society

On the evening of 28 July 1932, a group of British physicians and scientists gathered at 9 Wimpole Street, the private London-residence of the neurologist Gordon Morgan Holmes (1876-1966).¹ Most of those attending were from London, but others had come from Bath, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, and Oxford (see Table 1). All present held prestigious positions as teaching hospital consultants and some were University Professors of Medicine; most numbered among the influential doctors of the interwar period. By the close of the meeting, they had decided to form an Association of British Neurologists (ABN), an organisation of which the ‘membership’ was to be ‘limited to those actively engaged in any branch of neurology’.²

The idea for such an association was first suggested in the summer of 1931.³ Noting that a national-level society for neurology had not existed in Britain since 1907, an essayist writing in the *Journal of Neurology and Psychopathology* thought that such a body would be a welcomed complement to other national organisations, such as *The Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom* or the *Association of Physicians*. Admitting that the members of the *Neurological Society of the United Kingdom* had disbanded in preference for the London-based Section of Neurology of the Royal Society of Medicine, which in 1932 was acting as the national body for neurology, the author argued that the RSM was nonetheless mainly of benefit to consultants living in the Capital.⁴ A new medical society would correct this imbalance, by bringing neurologists from across the country together to discuss basic and clinical research and practice.

Despite these ambitions, in its early years the ABN functioned as an elite club. Although many of its members served on prominent professional committees or as advisors to the government, the Association rarely took positions that advanced a political agenda for neurology. As the number of its members grew, however, the ABN was increasingly able to influence the development of neurology in the health service.⁵ Meetings of the Association

furthermore allowed important guests – hospital and government administrators and representatives of philanthropies – to attend and judge the vitality of individuals and their research.⁶ This often had the valuable consequence of increasing the international prestige of the community and its resources. In addition, scientific reports at the general meetings disseminated therapeutic and technological innovations, and sometimes even spurred further scientific and clinical investigations (see Figure 1). Thus, in time the ABN became British neurology’s most significant social, scientific, and political body.⁷

In many respects, the biographies of early Presidents of the ABN illustrate the social and political status most members of this organisation enjoyed in both British medicine and wider society, while also illustrating their similar backgrounds and dispositions. The Association’s first President was Wilfred Harris, who was born in Madras, India, the son of William Henry Harris, the Surgeon General of the India Medical Service.⁸ Educated at Cambridge and St Mary’s Hospital, Harris qualified in 1894. Between 1901 and 1902, he was Resident at the *National Hospital for Paralysis and Epilepsy*, where he worked under such founders of British neurology as John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911) and William Gowers (1845-1915). In 1905, Harris was elected Assistant Physician in St Mary’s Electricity Department, which in 1907 became the first Department of Neurology in the United Kingdom. In 1909, Harris became Full Physician, and by then he also held a comparable position at the *Maida Vale Hospital for Nervous Diseases*, where he was known as a specialist in diseases of the nerves with interests in neuritis, facial neuralgia, and epilepsy.

Wilfred Harris’s successor was Edwin Bramwell (1873-1952).⁹ Bramwell was born in North Shields, the son of Sir Byrom Bramwell (1847-1931), a physician with interests

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Table 1: Founders of the Association of British Neurologists

Bath	Ronald Grey Gordon (1889-1950)
Edinburgh	Edwin Bramwell (1873-1952)
Liverpool	Henry Cohen (1900-1977)
London	William John Adie (1886-1935)
London	Anthony Feiling (1885-1975)
London	Charles Worster-Drought (1888-1971)
London	Gordon Morgan Holmes (1876-1966)
London	James Godwin Greenfield (1884-1958)
London	James Stansfield Collier (1870-1935)
London	Samuel Alexander Kinnier Wilson (1874-1937)
London	Wilfred John Harris (1869-1960)
London	William Johnson (1885-1949)
Manchester	Donald Elms Core (1882-1934)
Newcastle	Frederick John Nattrass (1891-1979)
Newcastle	George Hall (1879-1955)
Oxford	Edward Farquhar Buzzard (1871-1945)

Most Active Participants in the First Ten Meetings

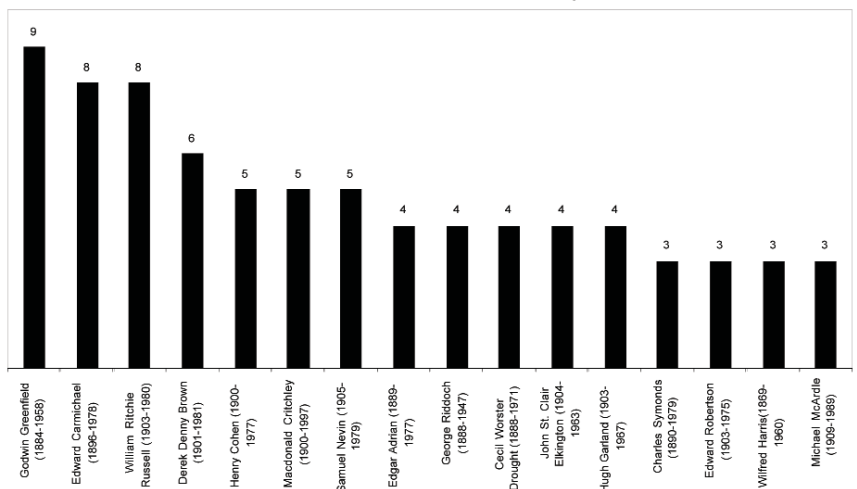


Figure 1: Between 1933 and 1947, there were ten general meetings of the Association of British Neurologists, with 141 papers given. Most members of the Association gave a paper at least once during this period, but some contributed more often. James Godwin Greenfield (1884-1958), Edward Carmichael (1896-1978), and William Ritchie Russell (1903-1980), for example, were the most active members of the society. Greenfield’s papers were often collaborative projects with more than one author, and they invariably focused on subjects relating to neuropathology. Edward Carmichael, by contrast, presented his own research, which he conducted as Director of the MRC-supported Neurological Research Unit at Queen Square. William Ritchie Russell, who would become the first Professor of Neurology at Oxford, worked in Edinburgh. His communications focused mainly on physiological matters.

Arthur Stanley Barnes



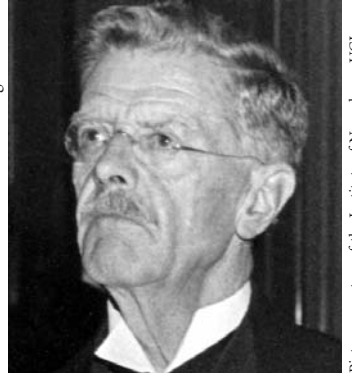
Edward Farquhar Buzzard



Wilfred Harris



Gordon Morgan Holmes



Pictures courtesy of the Institute of Neurology, UCL.

in the diseases of the nervous system and a Professor of Medicine in Edinburgh.¹⁰ Educated at Edinburgh University, Edwin Bramwell qualified in 1896, and then studied at La Salpêtrière (1899) under Joseph Jules Dejerine (1849-1917). Later he held a House appointment at the *National Hospital for Paralysis and Epilepsy*, where he too worked under Hughlings Jackson and Gowers. In 1907, he was appointed Assistant Physician at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, becoming Full Physician there in 1919, and Moncrieff-Arnott Professor of Clinical Medicine at the University in 1922. A clinician in the old-patrician style, Bramwell speculated on the nature of the nervous system in his private diary, but he less commonly engaged in laboratory research.¹¹

Edward Farquhar Buzzard (1871-1945), the third president, was born in London, the son of Sir Thomas Buzzard (1831-1919), renowned as a founder of British neurology.¹² Initially more acclaimed for his athleticism than his academics, Buzzard was educated at Oxford and St. Thomas's Hospital, qualifying in 1894. Training under Hughlings Jackson, whom he had known from a young age as a personal friend of his father's, Buzzard became Physician to Out-Patients in 1905 at the *National Hospital*.¹³ From 1910 until 1926, he was Physician at St Thomas's, a position he held until his appointment as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. A shooter and fisherman, the unusually silent Buzzard was created Baronet in 1929. He was an excellent clinician but was regarded as a ponderous lecturer.

The Association's fourth President, Arthur Stanley Barnes, was born in Birmingham, the son of Starkie Barnes, Headmaster.¹⁴ Stanley, as he was called, was educated at Mason Science College and Birmingham University, qualifying in 1899. Trained under Hughlings Jackson, Gowers, and Victor Horsley (1857-1916), Barnes was Resident Medical Officer from 1901 until 1903 at the *National Hospital* before being appointed Assistant Physician at Birmingham General Hospital in 1907. Later he was made Full Physician (1913), and he eventually became Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Birmingham. Barnes was remembered as a passionate advocate for his University and an outstanding lecturer, who 'mimicked' his past Queen Square teachers with startling accuracy.

Gordon Morgan Holmes, the son of Gordon Holmes, a gentleman farmer, was born near Castlebellingham, Ireland.¹⁵ He was the Association's fifth President. Educated at

Trinity College Dublin and qualifying in 1898, Holmes won a scholarship to study in Germany, where he worked under Carl Weigert (1845-1904) and Ludwig Edinger (1855-1918). A Resident Medical Officer at the *National Hospital* in 1903, he eventually became Full Physician there in 1909. He also worked at Charing Cross Hospital.¹⁶ A Fellow of the Royal Society, Holmes was a short-tempered teacher and practitioner, yet he was a marvelous diagnostician and an international figure in neurology, made famous especially by his studies during World War I of traumatic brain and nerve injury.

As these biographies illustrate, members of the ABN in the interwar and early post-war periods were distinguished figures, and accordingly, many neurologists, when asked even today, can readily recall the terror they experienced in presenting their first paper before the Association's members; the quality of delivery was generally regarded to be decisive for election to the membership.¹⁷ Communications were presented informally,¹⁸ but the audience was solemn and sometimes prickly. When John David Spillane (1909-1985) was elected President of the Association in 1974, it was recalled that his first paper had been greeted by Francis Martin Rouse Walshe's (1885-1973) barbed comment that "clearly *someone* [other than Spillane] will have to look into all this".¹⁹

In many ways, meetings in the early years were like those of today, although fewer physicians attended and the banquets were black-tie affairs. From the beginning, the Association alternated its meetings between London and provincial centres. Various institutions such as the *National Hospital* and the *Royal College of Physicians* hosted the Association's general meetings in London, while extra-metropolitan meetings tended to take place in cities with universities. In 1937, the Association held its first joint meeting with a foreign body, the *Amsterdam Neurological Society*. That year the Association also began recognising overseas Members, although initially these could only be former members taking up appointments abroad. The Association did not convene throughout the whole of the Second World War. An administrative meeting to discuss the government's plans for a nationalised health service was held in 1944, but 1945 marked the year when the Association's annual proceedings resumed. In 1950, the Association began meeting twice yearly, once in London and once in an extra-metropolitan centre. This pattern continues to the present day.

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