

The founding of the British Society for Haematology

written in 1989 by Harold T Swan

(retired as Archivist to The British Society for Haematology in 1993)

One hundred and sixty-three people from all parts of the country met in London on 19 November 1960 to consider forming themselves into a scientific society devoted to haematology. The signatures of those attending have been preserved. Although those present practised haematology as all, or part, of their professional commitment, there was no corporate body of haematologists in the British Isles to represent the specialty. It was agreed that a society should be formed and so the British Society for Haematology was born. A draft constitution was adopted. Another meeting was arranged to take place in Oxford in the following spring; and this would become the first meeting summoned by the newly constituted society.

Two decades later, in 1981, informal discussion was still going on about the age of the society. Had it in fact come of age in that year, and so was twenty-one years old and deserved the celebratory cake that had been made for it; or was it only twenty years old? Such doubts arose from uncertainty whether a congregation of individuals at an exploratory meeting in 1960 could correctly be called the first meeting of a corporate society when that society had not even existed when the individuals had come together. It would seem that British law does not legislate for societies, and in that sense does not recognize their existence and has never had to define what a collection of people of like interests must do to be recognized as forming a society. It is acceptable therefore when discussing the origins of the British Society to regard the earlier meeting of haematologists in 1960 as the true start of the society.

It is desirable to put on record what can be learned about the origins of the society before the documentary evidence on which this must depend has disappeared. Much correspondence has already been destroyed, it seems, and further delay in collecting what is left could leave the society in its future years groping unsatisfactorily for the initial spark that started its existence.

By 1960 other countries in Europe had national haematology societies, such as France (1930), Italy (1935), West Germany (1937) and The Netherlands (1952). An international European Society of Haematology had been initiated from Pavia in 1947.

About the same time as the Pavia initiative, but in North America, another international society was being formed, calling itself the International Society of Hematology. Its first meeting as a fully formed society was in Buffalo in 1948; but those who were present on that occasion resolved that they would describe the preceding meeting, held in Dallas, Texas, in 1946, as the first meeting of the International Society.

Individual haematologists from other countries of the world could join the International Society of Hematology only when nominated by their own national society, although the rule was eased later to help those who did not have a society in their own country. In 1948 at the Buffalo meeting members came from 21 nations. This society, founded in America, early showed its international intent, and began to hold meetings in countries outside its own continent, the first of these being in England, in Cambridge in 1950, under the presidency of Sir Lionel Whitby.

Some years later, in 1959, the International European Society of Haematology held its 7th European Congress, also in this country. Great Britain was not the first country without a national society of its own to act as host to one of the European Congresses. The 1959 congress took place at Bedford College, London, from 7 to 12 September, with J. F. Wilkinson as President, E Neumark as Secretary and J. W. Stewart as Treasurer, together with a committee of 14, which included A. Piney, a Vice-President of the European Society. The event was significant, as will be explained later.

Because Great Britain had no national society for haematology at that time, nor any organization prepared to provide a regular and exclusive platform for haematology under the control of haematologists, those who had papers to read in the specialty and wanted to read them in the United Kingdom did so where they could. This was commonly at meetings of the Association of Clinical Pathologists, though that Association was generalist and did not take the initiative in catering for haematologists as a special group. Papers on haematological subjects were also read to the Association of Physicians and to the Pathological Society.

An important body that could have provided a suitable scientific platform for haematologists and given them an identity of their own during the earlier years was the Royal Society of Medicine. This almost came about. The minutes of the Council of the Society contain six relevant entries between 21 June 1949 and 16 May 1950. Dr A. Piney, Sir Lionel Whitby, Dr C. J. C. Britton and Dr R. R. Race submitted notice to Council of desire that it should give a hearing to their proposal that the society should form a Section devoted to Haematology. The detailed case in favour of the creation of such a Section was presented at the Council meeting the next month by A. Piney, J. V. Dacie and R. Bodley Scott, the latter two names appearing for the first time in this context, apparently because of their parts in drafting the petition. The wording of the document of some 500 words is recorded in the minutes of Council of the Society for 19 July 1949; but if there were any signatures appended to the original document itself they are not recorded in the printed minutes. The names of 44 Fellows and of 12 others were read out as promising their support for a Section of Haematology. The proposition that there should be such a Section within the Royal Society of Medicine was then put to the existing Sections for their opinions. In November of the same year, Council resolved that notice should be given announcing the proposed formation of a Section of Haematology "if no objection be received within three months of the date of the announcement". Objections were, however, received, and this demanded the convening of a Special Meeting of Fellows. At this Special Meeting the majority necessary to support the motion was not quite reached. The motion was lost.

Thus it came about that on 16 May 1950 a move towards the formation of a scientific platform that would be unique to Haematology in Great Britain received a rebuff from which the developing specialty did not wholly recover for ten years. In 1959 the 7th European Congress of Haematology was held in London. It was well organized, efficiently run, and a scientific success. It also made a profit. There was a precedent for the European International Society to allow profit, if any, from its meetings to be disposed in the interests of the host national society – but there was no such society in Great Britain. J. F. Wilkinson of Manchester was President of the 1959 congress and was aware of the precedent. Recently, he has kindly handed over some of his personal papers to become part of the archives of the British Society. Amongst them there is the carbon copy of a letter dated 5 January 1960 and addressed to L. J. Witts, though the name 'Leslie Witts' is merely pencilled on the carbon copy. The original top copy of this letter can be presumed to be lost, for there are no comparable L. J. Witts papers. In the letter Wilkinson described Witts and himself as 'two of the most senior haematologists' in the country, who therefore should initiate the formation of a British society. This copy letter is sufficiently important in the history of the society for it to be given in full below.

JFW/MGH

5th January, 1960

My dear [Leslie Witts, in pencil]

We are nearing the end of the accounts for the 1959 European Congress and two things have been worrying me to which I think we should give immediate consideration, hence my writing to you at home.

Firstly, I think we will have a large surplus of money and I am very loath to see it handed over to the continental treasurer because I think it should remain and be looked after in this country. Secondly, I have only been too well aware that we have not got a national society for haematology in the U.K. and it has been a matter of comment by our European colleagues. We must form a British society and the considerable surplus balance from the Congress could be used for this purpose. Since you and I are two of the most senior haematologists we should initiate this undertaking. Bodley Scott kindly lent me his flat in Harley Street to use as my headquarters so I had then the opportunity of discussing it with him and we have his support. I have also sounded out Piney, Jim Stewart and others. I said I would write to you so that we can discuss it at our next meeting together.

Kindest regards, etc.

At the bottom of the page came the pencilled names of eight people, each one ticked, a tick representing agreement with the sentiments of the letter. The names are those of Witts himself, R. Bodley Scott, E. Neumark, J. W. Stewart, A. Piney, C. J. C. Britton, R. G. Macfarlane and M. Hynes. Dr Wilkinson says that these were people he happened to ask, and had no other specific significance as a group.

This letter of J F Wilkinson seems to have been the spark that kindled dry tinder and led to action.

The possibility of forming a society had certainly been discussed during the ten years between the time of rejection by the Royal Society of Medicine and the letter from Wilkinson to Witts; but apparently most of such talk was among individuals and without action directly resulting from this. The most fertile forum for group discussion, apart from the opportunities provided by the regular meetings of the Association of Clinical Pathologists and the Royal Society of Medicine, is likely to have been in Oxford, because two overlapping communities of haematologists met there. One active group centred around Dr (later Dame) Janet Vaughan, who played an important part in linking the haematology of such people as L. J. Witts, A. M. T. Robb Smith, R. G. Macfarlane and others in Oxford. The other group arose from the regular meetings in Oxford of the Editorial Board of the *British Journal of Haematology* of which J. V. Dacie was the first editor from 1955 to 1962. He also acted as chairman. Dacie himself knew Janet Vaughan well, having worked with her, and he was highly regarded by her. This was an important link. The importance of the Board of the *Journal* as a forum in which to discuss the possible formation of a society is documented in relation to a later event now recorded.

Following the support that Wilkinson received in his personal discussions, the next stage developed smoothly, much of it under the chairmanship of L. J. Witts, although Witts later described his part, modestly perhaps, as that of a figurehead. It was decided that the correct time to launch a national society would be after sounding the opinion of haematologists up and down the country. A circular letter was drafted, headed 'Proposed Society of [*sic*] Haematology'. This letter referred to an 'informal meeting' that had taken place, on an unstated date, of members of the Editorial and Advisory Boards of the *British Journal of Haematology*, at which L. J. Witts had taken the chair. L. J. Witts was a member of the *Journal's* Advisory Board, and was presumably invited to take the chair on this occasion because the question under discussion was not *Journal* business. It is not clear whether the meeting took place after an ordinary meeting or was specially summoned for the purpose. We are told that the minutes of the *Journal* Board make no mention of the matter.

It was to this informal meeting that the first sketch plan was presented concerning the formation of a British Society. The plan was unanimously accepted by those present. Their views were then to be circulated by Rosemary Biggs 'to as many of those likely to be interested as possible'. Her circular of 4 April 1960, 'Proposed British Society of Haematology', put forward three agreed discussion points, which have been summarized below.

1. **Meetings.** The proposed society should not as a rule meet more than once a year. The scientific programme should in the main be restricted to informal symposia on selected subjects. Meeting content should satisfy both clinical and laboratory interests.
2. **International Collaboration.** There seemed to be the need for a body representative of British haematological opinion. It was felt that the organization of international congresses in England would be much facilitated by the existence of a haematological society.
3. **The relationship of the proposed society to the *British Journal of Haematology*.** The publishers of the *British Journal of Haematology* would welcome a link with a British Haematological Society. Space might be made available for abstracts of papers and advance notice of meetings. Perhaps it might be

unwise to make subscriptions to the *Journal* compulsory for all members but an association between the Society and the *Journal* would be valuable. The annual subscription to the society (without the journal) would be a modest sum.

This letter was sent above the name of Rosemary Biggs without further explanation of her personal involvement; but she will have written as *ad hoc* honorary secretary. There was an enclosure to be returned to her; but the Society today holds no copy of this reply form. A large proportion of all the haematologists of the country attended the exploratory meeting, open to all British haematologists, held in the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on Saturday 19 November 1960. Sixty others expressed regret that they could not attend. The pioneer gathering of haematologists in November took place therefore eleven months after the initial letter of J. F. Wilkinson.

The primary function of the meeting was undoubtedly the business section, for which an hour was allocated on the programme; but 'in order to attract an audience' there were three scientific sessions with invited speakers, occupying a further four hours. The scientific part of the meeting was so much appreciated that it promised well for the future of the society. Credit for organizing this first scientific programme went to J. V. Dacie who had S. M. Lewis as the first meeting secretary. It is of interest to record the titles of papers in this first programme.

Methods for Studying Chromosomes
C. E. Ford

Chromosome Abnormalities in Human Leukaemia
A. G. Baikie

Problems of Cellular Kinetics in Leukaemia
L. J. Lajtha

MRC Leukaemia Typing Trial
L. J. Witts

Cytology of Leukaemic Cells
F. G. J. Hayhoe

Radiation and Leukaemogenesis
R. H. Mole

The Incidence of Leukaemia in Man
R. Doll

Epidemiological Evidence for an Inherited Variety of Leukaemia in Man
A. Stewart

The business section of the 1960 meeting was chaired by L. J. Witts. The agenda is given in full below. It relates closely to the original draft proposals:

1. To propose the formation of 'The British Society for [*sic*] Haematology'.
 2. To consider the draft constitution.
 3. To elect Officers for the society – Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. [L. J. Witts, R. Biggs, J. W. Stewart].
 4. To elect six Ordinary Members of the Committee.*
 5. To fix an annual subscription.**
 6. To consider the relationship of the society with the *British Journal of Haematology*.
 7. To consider the relationship of the Society with the European Society of Haematology and the International Society of Hematology. [Under this item 7 the minutes refer only to the European Society of Haematology and to the International Society of Blood Transfusion.]
 8. To decide on the number of General and Scientific Meetings to be held annually.
 9. To fix a venue and date for the next General and/or Scientific Meeting of the Society.
- * J. V. Dacie, W. M. Davidson, R. H. Girdwood, W. d'A. Maycock, R. R. Race, J. F. Wilkinson. From 1961 Dacie remained on the committee but as representative of the *Journal*.
- ** This was fixed at £1 without the *Journal*.

L. J. Witts proposed that a Society should be formed. This was seconded by J. F. Wilkinson and the meeting reacted enthusiastically. It was decided that the ceiling membership should be 300. It was agreed to meet again the following year in Oxford. Witts himself was appointed chairman to cover the coming months and also the next meeting. R. Biggs agreed to remain as secretary until the 1961 meeting when she would hand over to S. M. Lewis. J. W. Stewart, as first treasurer, continued to hold the post until 1975. His *Report* for the year ending 31 December 1962 records the transfer to the Society of £747.10.1 from the VII Congress of Haematology as a 'Donation' from that Congress. A. A. Sharp was appointed meeting secretary for the 1961 Oxford meeting. Dr Biggs said recently that there were not many secretarial documents exchanged in the early period of the Society when she was in office. She told a story, perhaps against herself and certainly with some humour, that L. J. Witts had paid her a double-edged compliment by publicly expressing his admiration of the way that Rosemary had managed to do all this with no paper records to be seen!

The second meeting of the Society at Oxford in 1961 was also an undoubted success. The business meeting was brief, with Witts in the chair. The amended constitution of the Society was approved. The Chairman himself commented on the appropriateness of there being, in future, a president rather than a chairman in charge of the affairs of such a society. At that point C. J. C. Britton seconded by H. Lempert proposed that the Society should have a President. Thus, Professor Witts who had been Society Chairman for his first period of office 1960-61, became the Society's first President for a further year 1961-2. The membership booklet has perpetuated an initial small error of nomenclature concerning Professor Witts' chairmanship and presidency, though it is an error only to the punctilious. The first booklet, to be entitled 'British Society for Haematology – Constitution and Rules' was printed in 1961. L. J. Witts formally handed over the presidency to J. F. Wilkinson at the beginning of the third annual meeting in Manchester in 1962.

For many years following the Oxford meeting of 1961 the Society continued in the same pattern and increased in strength; but it is not the intention of this record to deal with anything other than the formative years. The Society will continue to retain its records in the care of the archivist, who is now Dr S M Lewis, but if any member has any papers of the 1959-1962 period pertinent to the formation of the Society, especially personal letters or personally addressed circulars of the period, the archivist would appreciate a copy of them if the originals themselves cannot be spared.

As an ending to this introduction it may be of interest to refer to the name of the Society, which has always been 'The British Society for Haematology' and not 'The British Society of Haematology' - provided one disregards the single exception in the early circular sent out by Dr Biggs already referred to. It is understood that the strong force behind the adoption of 'for Haematology' was L. J. Witts.

Acknowledgments

Much assistance has been received from past and present office-bearers and members of the Society, too numerous to name individually. Without such help it would have been impossible to prepare this record. Some have gone to considerable lengths to provide comments and papers.

The Society is grateful to the Royal Society of Medicine for permission to use information contained in its archive. Help has also been gratefully received from Professor R. L. Verwilghen, who has contributed from his wide knowledge of haematology in Europe.