

Mark Pickering, in the first of a new *Triple Helix* series, looks at the CMA, the first precursor of the Christian Medical Fellowship, and at its founder, Dr Golding Bird

Golding Bird (1814-1854), physician and natural philosopher. Oil painting by Alexander Craig, 1840. Enhanced by S2 Wellcome Collection.

GOLDING BIRD

AND THE CHRISTIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

key points

- The requests for help by medical students in 1853 spurred Dr Golding Bird to set up the Christian Medical Association to bring Christian medical students in London together for fellowship, Bible study, and prayer in 1854.
- While initially successful, the CMA struggled to keep meeting and folded in 1871.
- The legacy of Golding Bird and the CMA inspired some of the students who had benefitted from the association to form the Medical Prayer Union in 1874.

CMF was founded in 1949, and 2024 will be its 75th anniversary. However, its roots go back much further, and there is plenty to learn from the people and organisations that came before it. This is the first of a series of articles featuring some of the main highlights.

In the mid-19th century, Charles Dickens was at the height of his career, and Queen Victoria was not far into her long reign. London was changing rapidly with the arrival of the railways, and the squalor and disease that Dickens so vividly brought to light was all around.

At the southern end of London Bridge, not far from today's CMF office, was the original site of St Thomas' Hospital. Dating back at least to the 1100s, this ancient place of healing emerged from the monastic church that is now Southwark Cathedral.

It served weary travellers who were approaching London from the south and Europe, or were on pilgrimage to Canterbury, when London Bridge was the only fixed crossing of the River Thames.

It is a place steeped in history: the first printed English Bible was produced here in 1537; Florence Nightingale began her nursing school here in 1860, shortly before the expansion of London Bridge railway station forced the relocation of St Thomas' Hospital to its present site by Westminster Bridge.

Over a century earlier, Thomas Guy, a governor of St Thomas' Hospital, endowed a new hospital next to St Thomas', for chronically sick, incurable, and mentally ill patients. Guy's Hospital was founded in 1721 and remains there today, retaining many of its historic links with St Thomas's, such as joint student teaching, and now being a single NHS Trust.¹

The early 19th century saw rapid developments in western medicine, and the trading and military expansion of the British Empire; together these produced fertile ground for the birth of modern medical mission, which also had numerous links to Guy's Hospital.²

A lonely voice in the BMJ

In the 1840s, there were 16 separate medical schools in London alone, and only eleven others in the rest of the UK. In addition to the older medical Royal Colleges, the British Medical Association had recently begun in 1832 and was gaining momentum through its *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), launched in 1840.³

The socially aware, active, evangelical Christianity that characterised the Victorian period was advancing, and many doctors were committed Christians. But as yet there was no national movement to unite or equip Christian medical students or doctors to live or speak for Jesus Christ.

In those turbulent times, an anonymous student wrote to the *BMJ* in October 1853.⁴ Titled *'What can the Association do for Medical Pupils?'*, he made a passionate plea for students to be somehow incorporated into the BMA. He spoke of isolation and temptation, surrounded by colleagues who *'laugh at his religious scruples'* and by others who are *'ever ready to corrupt him'*. Medical students in those days were *'usually described as immoral and depraved... and certainly with some reason'*. Craving the support and mentorship of senior colleagues, he voiced the vulnerability of many contemporary students: *'with the many temptations which surround him... can we wonder if he fall?'*

Golding Bird reaches out

This anguished cry aroused the compassion of a young Christian physician at Guy's Hospital, Dr Golding Bird. He responded promptly in the *BMJ* letters section, urging the BMA to do something about the *'moral and ethical training of our students during the years of their most serious temptations'*.⁵

However, he was also *'convinced that no great improvement will ever take place in the ethics of our profession'*, until serious attention was given to *'the religious training of our pupils'*. He referenced the positive influence of the Young Men's Christian Association on many in different trades, and advocated something similar amongst medical students, adding that it had the potential to transform the whole medical profession.

He went on: *'Already does the nucleus of something of this kind exist in several of our hospitals. In more than one of them, several of the students meet together on one evening of the week for study of the Holy Scriptures and mutual edification.'* The Bible class at Guy's Hospital had been established in 1849 by Dr Samuel Habershon, a gastroenterologist and medical school lecturer at Guy's.⁶ Just a week prior to writing, Dr Bird had been shown some proposed rules for the wider *'medical Christian association'* that the Guy's students hoped to organise. These included:

- *That a medical Christian association be formed, composed of members of the profession and students.*
- *...to promote spiritual religion amongst its members; and to diffuse the same among all others who come within the sphere of their influence.*
- *That the means employed...be the study of the Holy Scriptures, devotional meetings, addresses, and any other means...*

There was a flurry of response in the *BMJ*. Some angrily accused Dr Bird of encouraging *'saponaceous piety'* and *'organised hypocrisy'*,⁷ whilst others could *'conceive of no proposal more promising...than...diffusing among the rising members of our influential profession, the precious truths of Christianity'*.⁸

One of the Guy's students responded himself, reminding opponents that *'the abuse of a remedy is no argument against its legitimate and necessary application'*. He thanked the many distinguished clinicians who had responded in support of Christian students, and reflected that, as he approached the end of his own studies, he had been *'encouraged to believe that to all my possible skill and knowledge...may be added the additional excellence of humble Christian piety – a guide through life, a safeguard from the evils of life, and a support in...the hour of his death'*.⁹

The transformation of Golding Bird

Golding Bird was a brilliant young physician, whose life shows the Lord's incredible timing in transforming him at just the right time. He had a prodigious mind and an incredible grasp of collateral sciences such as botany and electrochemistry; even whilst a medical student himself he was appointed to lecture other students. His precocious talent drew the notice of senior physicians such as Thomas Addison (of Addison's Disease). He became an authority on renal disease and was the first to describe oxaluria, also known as Bird's Disease.¹⁰ Accumulating multiple accolades, at just 28 years old his private practice was bringing in around £1,000 annually (currently worth around £80,000!).¹¹

He was an active Christian and was known to devote a significant part of his busy schedule to care for poor sick people for free. Despite this, there was a deep flaw in his way of life. His biographer notes that, *'he had never cared for money, but...his snare and idol was ambition – reputation.... He had a good deal of vanity, which led him constantly to seek his own exaltation.'* His own minister reflected, *'There was a little vanity in this...as if...God could not do without him'*.¹²

This tendency led him to overwork: his labours *'engaged him till evening; and many hours of the night – often, too often, the entire night – has passed in unbroken study'*. Overwork led to illness, and he succumbed to rheumatic fever with resulting rheumatic heart disease. His symptoms *'all pointed*

1841

Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society

1849

Guy's Hospital Christian Union

1854

Christian Medical Association 1854-1871

1874

Medical Prayer Union

1878

Medical Missionary Association

1942

Inter-Hospital Nurses Christian Fellowship

1949

Christian Medical Fellowship



The resting place of Golding Bird in Tunbridge Wells.

We can never know the lasting value of what is begun in faith

references (accessed 12/2/22)

1. My wife and I both trained at Guy's and St Thomas', so this history has a personal poignancy to me.
2. A future article in this series will focus on the birth of modern medical mission.
3. Both names evolved in their early years to what they are today. The *BMJ* was named the *Association Medical Journal* in 1853/4.
4. What can the Association do for medical pupils? *Association Medical Journal*. 1853; s3-1:1002. [bit.ly/3rOXKzK](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1853.3.1002)
5. Medical Students. *Association Medical Journal* 1853;s3-1:1042 [bit.ly/3GQmZpl](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1853.3.1042)
6. Some references state 1846/7, but current evidence seems to favour 1849, as Dr Habershon became tutor at Guy's medical school in 1849.
7. Medical Students. *Association Medical Journal* 1853;s3-1:1090. [bit.ly/34INnEX](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1853.3.1090)
8. Medical Students. *Association Medical Journal* 1853;s3-1:1153. [bit.ly/3Jydqxx](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1853.3.1153)
9. Medical Students. *Association Medical Journal* 1853;s3-1:1138. [bit.ly/3gQACew](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1853.3.1138)
10. Golding Bird. *Wikipedia* - [bit.ly/3JrP3KW](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golding_Bird)
11. Balfour J. *Biographical Sketch of Golding Bird*. Edinburgh, Thomas Constable, 1855: 16
12. *Ibid*: 19,21
13. *Ibid*: 18
14. *Ibid*: 18,19,42
15. A future article in this series will focus on the birth of modern medical mission.
16. Leading Articles. *Association Medical Journal* 1854;s3-2:959 [bit.ly/3uYud8](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1854.3.959)
17. Grainger RD. *An Address Delivered to the Christian Medical Association*. London, 1854
18. Johnson D. *The Christian Medical Fellowship - its Background and History*. London. CMF, 1987:8
19. *Br Med J* 1869;2:611 [bit.ly/3JxRMJv](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.2.611)
20. A future article in this series will focus on the MPU.

out the necessity for caution, but his enthusiasm led him to neglect these warnings'.¹³

From 1848 he had periodic relapses that finally forced him to cut back on professional commitments, eventually transforming his outlook. *'Failing health appears to have been the means blessed by God in weaning him from worldly honours'*, and this *'ended in his mind undergoing a very decided and happy change'*. By summer 1853, a friend described him thus: *'Simplicity and godly sincerity...and an earnest zeal for the spiritual welfare of all with whom he associated'*.¹⁴

The formation of the CMA

Humbled through physical frailty, Dr Bird was now about to perform the service that God had prepared: to *'do what only he could do'*. At last, he was spiritually ready to respond to the anonymous medical student in the *BMJ*, and to support the fledgling Christian Union at Guy's; to support spiritually the place where he had laboured so hard professionally.

He acted rapidly. In November 1853, writing to the *BMJ* as outlined above, he gathered Christian colleagues from across London. They considered how they could replicate and unite these groups across the 16 London medical schools, and perhaps further afield.

His reply in the *BMJ* produced further unexpected encouragement. The committee of the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (formed in 1841)¹⁵ wrote, urging him to implement his plans. Their letter reached him on 17 December, just a few hours before the second meeting that he had called to consider how such an association might be formed.

With this momentum, the committee of the Christian Medical Association was formed by January 1854. It was not a month too soon for Golding Bird, for his health was failing fast. He resigned his post at Guy's and retired to Tunbridge Wells, where he died on 27 October 1854, at just 39-years-old.

The work of the CMA

During his final months of life, he supported the CMA committee with prayer and advice. The first public meeting of the CMA was planned for 10 November 1854. Indeed, the meeting was announced in the *BMJ* on the very day of Dr Bird's death!¹⁶ The event was a great success, bringing together around 50 doctors, and over 250 medical students. The speaker's text was published; outlining the vision and formation of the CMA, he mourned the recent loss of Golding Bird, concluding: *'we may hope, the Divine blessing resting on our exertions, that this Association may become the instrument of winning many souls to Christ'*.¹⁷

Regular London-wide meetings continued at least until 1869, but the difficulties of maintaining these central activities eventually supervened, and the CMA ceased to exist in 1871.¹⁸ But the fire had been

lit, the need demonstrated, and many individual students and doctors transformed. A brief report of an 1869 CMA meeting in the *BMJ* noted that the committee soon hoped to begin a medical mission in London (providing free medical care to the poor), as had been done in *'Edinburgh, Liverpool, and other places'*.¹⁹ The London Medical Mission was duly established in 1871, which proved vital in relaunching the movement that the CMA had begun, through the formation of the Medical Prayer Union (MPU) in 1874.²⁰ Several who benefitted from the CMA as students became leaders of the MPU.

What can we learn from the CMA?

The story of Golding Bird and the CMA has numerous lessons for us today:

- Students were key throughout. Guy's Hospital CU was begun to support students, and the student's letter in the *BMJ* galvanised Golding Bird into action. Students also led actively – the idea for a wider association came from the Guy's students, they defended the project in the *BMJ* and the students of the CMA later became the leaders of the MPU.
- Great knowledge and skill, even in the life of a Christian, can easily become idols unless they are dedicated to God's Kingdom and his purposes. The Lord may use sickness and suffering to humble us and turn us back to him, but his timing is also incredible. The eternal value of Golding Bird's work in forming the CMA was accomplished swiftly in what proved to be the final few active months of his life.
- We can never know the lasting value of what is begun in faith. Golding Bird died before the CMA had fully launched, and even those who led and supported it can have had little idea of the lasting legacy they had birthed, and what would spring forth from its ashes.

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This series will continue to sketch out the history of the modern Christian medical and nursing movements in the UK, as we approach CMF's 75th Anniversary in 2024. If any readers have an interest in this area, or relevant material to contribute, please contact Mark on admin@cmf.org.uk