

This biography by courtesy of Dr Michael Whitfield, from his fascinating book, *The Victorian Doctors of Victoria Square: The Medical Occupants of a Square in Clifton, Bristol 1835-1901* . Whitfield publishing 2011. ISBN 978-0-9571167

Dr Robert William Coë

He was born in Bath in 1823, the eldest son of Joseph Coë who was a draper. Robert was trained at St George's Hospital, London and obtained his MRCS in 1844. He settled into practice in Bristol and was elected to the Medical Reading Society in 1847 but resigned in 1850.

Apparently he decided to leave Bristol and travelled to Australia, where he rode on horseback hundreds of miles through the country and would probably have stayed there, but decided to come back to Bristol taking his FRCS by examination in 1852 and was elected surgeon to the Bristol General Hospital replacing John Cash Neild, who curiously enough, had decided to emigrate to New South Wales, Australia! He held the office of surgeon for 22 years and then was elected Consulting surgeon in 1874.

In 1861 he was still single and was living with two servants at 3 Great George Street and in the census return was described as a teacher of anatomy at Bristol Medical School in Old Park. His personal attributes are described in his obituary in the Bristol Medico-chirurgical Society Journal¹.

He was one of the foremost surgeons of his day, a good operator, calm and self-reliant when unforeseen difficulties arose, a man of sound common sense and good judgement, so that his professional colleagues frequently sought his advice when surgical consultations were not so common as they are today. Mr Coë was most careful in the treatment of his cases and spent much time in personally attending to the various details of after-treatment. He was a martinet in keeping his dresser and nurses up to the standard of efficiency he required.

Mr Coë was a man of striking personality, holding strong opinions on most subjects, a keen conversationalist, a good fighter, and capable when the occasion arose, of expressing himself in vigorous language. These qualities, together with his firmness of purpose, made him a formidable adversary in any controversy, and were of service when as a member of the preliminary committee for establishing the University College of Bristol, now the Bristol University, he insisted on the claims of the Medical School being duly and amply safe-guarded.

Unsurprisingly, he was not the kind of man to remain quiet under a real or supposed grievance. In conjunction with Dr Beddoe he brought before a branch meeting of the British Medical Association what he thought was a just cause of complaint against the authorities of Clifton College on the question of medical attendance on house boys. Apparently a boy had been specially sent to the College to be under Coë's care, but he found he couldn't take care of the boy as it was required that the boy must be under the care of the College medical officer, Dr Long Fox. Coë

brought forward his case in strong and vigorous language and feeling ran high. The obituary remains silent on the outcome, but I am sure it was to no avail!

In the 1870 Coë was one of the people in Bristol opposing the Contagious Diseases Acts that had been brought in to try to control venereal disease. He argued in favour of the voluntary admission of affected women to proper treatment in a well-managed hospital, rather than the compulsory examination under the Acts. At this time there was no public treatment available as the by-laws of the Infirmary and General hospitals precluded them admitting such patients. As a result of Coë's advocacy, a Lock hospital for women was established in Bristol and he gave much time for many years to the patients of that institution. A house in Old Park on St Michael's Hill was used and two Misses Duck lived in it and ran it as a hospital.² As it was the only hospital in England for these diseases it received patients from Plymouth and Cardiff as well as Bristol. In 1887 the Old Park house became too small and a larger building was purchased at 87 Ashley Road.

In 1875, when 52 years old he married Katherine Borrett aged 24 and they had three children, Robert b 1877, Percy b 1878 and Katherine b 1881. In 1881 they had moved to 14 Berkeley Square and by 1891 to 7 Pembroke Road, Clifton. Their elder son was killed in the Boer War and Mr Coë died in July 1910 in Bristol.

¹ Obituary *Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society Journal* 1910;28; 285

² *Bristol Voluntary Lock Hospital Annual Report 1915 Bristol, JW Arrowsmith*