

Physicians, Surgeons, Apothecaries and Chemists in Birmingham

The top part of the plate represents Hygeia, the Greek Goddess of Health, strewing her medicinal virtues over the earth. The Romans used the name Salus for the goddess. Birmingham General Hospital stands in the background. Eight physicians, all M Ds, are listed and seven have addresses. Five are located in New Street or Temple Row, but one Edward Johnstone resides at Edgbaston Hall, the former residence of Dr William Withering, one of the Lunar Men.

The lower compartment depicts an emblematic device of the Good Samaritan who aided an injured traveller at the roadside. The story would be familiar to readers of the Directory from the life of Jesus in the New Testament. Twelve Surgeons are named with their addresses, one of whom is described as a dentist and another as an oculist who would perform operations on the eye. The names and locations of three apothecaries and chemists follow the list of surgeons.

The advertisement accurately presents the medical class structure by the early 19th century. Physicians were the aristocracy of medical practitioners; university graduates who could command high salaries. Their training in what we now call science gave them an insight into the body and disease, but there were huge variations in the standards of medical education and no regional regulation of medical licensing. Surgeons were not usually graduates, but were apprenticed and learned their craft of surgery whilst working. Traditionally a low status occupation, they were shaking away their origins as barber surgeons who cut hair as well as performed operations. The advent of anatomy classes, textbooks on surgery and general infirmaries in the late 18th century "contributed to surgery's emergence from a manual craft into a scientific discipline involving physiological investigation" (Porter, 1997, p 280-281). Apothecaries who dispensed drugs were licensed in London, but "unregulated chemists and druggists blossomed, together with quacks and unorthodox practitioners" (Porter, 1997, p 288).