

THOMAS VICARY  
A FAMOUS MAIDSTONE SURGEON

By JOHN W. BRIDGE

THOMAS VICARY was born about 1495. In Manningham's *Diary* he is described as being first "a meane practiser in Maidstone" until "the King (Henry VIII) advanced him for curing his sore legge." This took place about 1525 when the King was passing through Maidstone, and the successful treatment so pleased the King that Vicary was "advanced" to the position of Junior Warden of the Barber Surgeons' Company, and in 1526 was receiving £20 a year as the King's Surgeon.

At that time, barbers officiated as surgeons, especially for the phlebotomy operations which were then so frequently done. The well-known staff or "barber's pole" which is often seen outside a barber's door commemorates this, as it was customary for the patient about to be bled to hold a staff at arm's length in order to make the blood flow more freely during the operation. The red colour on the pole denoted blood, and the white spiral the bandages. A cup at the top of the pole represented a cupping-glass, and at a later date, when its significance was forgotten, a representation of an acorn was added to give it a more finished appearance, and probably also to act as a charm against damage by lightning.

In the *Liber Albus*, p. 236, the following regulation appears: "And that no barbers shall be so bold or so daring, as to put blood in their windows openly or in view of folks, but let them have it carried privily unto the Thames, under pain of paying two shillings unto the use of the Sheriffs."

By a grant dated April, 1530 (21-22 Henry VIII), Vicary was made Sergeant of the King's Surgeons, and chief Surgeon to the King, with allowances when attending the King's household, and of wine, etc., for cures, his salary then being 40 marks, or £26 13s. 4d. a year. He held this position under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth until his death in 1561 or 1562.

The King granted to Vicary the tithes of grain, glebe lands and chief house of the Rectory of Boxley, Kent, also ten pieces of land, Boxley field, Squire's and Carter's Crofts, Great and Little Harpole, Wheat Park, Blackland, the Hale, Rishett and Hoyton meadow (except all big trees and woods, and the advowson of Boxley Parish Church) for 21 years from March 25th, 1539, at the rent of £40, the King covenanting that Vicary should hold the premises free from



Henry VIII presenting a Charter to the Barber Surgeons of London  
(From the painting by Holbein.)

other charge, Vicary agreeing to keep the buildings in good repair and to thatch them with straw, but not shingle, tiles or slates, etc. The King also granted to Vicary sufficient wood for hedges, firing, and repair of ploughs and carts.

As the head of his profession, Vicary was appointed in 1541 first Master of the newly amalgamated Companies of Barbers and Surgeons, and a picture by Holbein (Plate I) now in the possession of the Barbers' Company, shows Vicary, in the company of other Surgeons, Barbers, and Physicians, receiving the Charter of the Company from the King.

Pepys writes of this picture on 29th August, 1668: "Harris and I to Surgeons' Hall where they are building it new, very fine, and there to see their theatre which stood all the fire, and, which was our business, their great picture of Holbein, thinking to have bought it, with the help of Mr. Pierce, for a little money. I did think to give £200 for it, it being said to be worth £1,000, but it is so spoiled that I have no mind to it, and it is not a pleasant, though a good picture." A copy of this picture is in the possession of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, who have kindly given me permission to reproduce a photograph of an engraving from the original painting.

On October 5th, 1542, Henry VIII granted to Vicary and his son William the post of Bailiff of Boxley Manor, and all other manors lately belonging to the Monastery of Boxley "for the good service done to us by our Surgeons Thomas Vicary and his son William, for the life of the longest liver of them." (Eng. Text Soc., *Vicary*, 1888.)

In the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 1547-1580, p. 14, we find a letter dated Feb. 11th, 1549, Warwick to Cecil, in favour of Harry Mackerall, the King's Surgeon, to be joined in the patent with "Old Vicars." He also asks for a farm for his servant Turpin, and sends Cecil the half-year's fee of his patent.

In 1546-7, Henry VIII handed over St. Bartholomew's Hospital, with others, to the City of London together with an endowment of £333 odd, most of which was used as pensions for parsons. The small balance left was only enough to keep "thre or foure harlottes, then being in chyldbbedde" as patients. The City raised £1,000 for repairs, etc., and in 1548 appointed Vicary as one of the six new governors of the Hospital, when he was provided with a Livery gown and had his house repaired.

In the same year Vicary published his book, *A profitable Treatise of the Anatomie of Mans Body*, which is thought by some to be based on a transcript of a fourteenth century MS. which was taken from still earlier medieval authorities. It probably contains some original research, however, as in 1540 Vicary, with other Surgeons, requested the Sheriffs of London to allow all those hanged at Tyburn to be given up for dissection. Some thirty years before the discovery of the circulation

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of the blood by William Harvey, Vicary writes : " I fynde that Arteirs have two cotes as one cote is not sufficient nor able to withstande the violent moving and steering of the spirite of lyfe that is caryed in them." He does not, however, give away all his knowledge, for his book ends " And this sufficeth for young Practitioners."

Vicary's book was the first to be published in English on Anatomy, and a reprint of this, in black-letter, by the Surgeons of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, is included in *The English-mans Treasure* of 1633, a copy of which has been recently acquired by the writer for the Maidstone Museum.

In his will, dated 27th January 1560, Vicary left his house and land next Boxley Church, and his leaseholds in Boxley under Sir Thomas Wyat's lease, to his nephew Stephen Vicary. Among many other bequests he also left 40s. a year to be distributed half-yearly to the poor of the parish of Boxley, and 13s. 4d. a year to the repair of Boxley Church.

Several members of Vicary's family are mentioned in the Registers of Boxley Church, and in Lambert Larking's transcript of the Oxenhoath papers in the Maidstone Museum.

It is remarkable that so little is known of such an eminent surgeon in his native town of Maidstone. This is probably owing to the fact that apart from Hasted's brief note that Vicary was one of Henry VIII's surgeons, he appears to have been completely ignored by all other writers of the histories and records of the town.