

The First British Illustrated Surgical Catalogue

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Summary

Surgical instrument catalogues are valuable documents, which help in both the identification and dating of instruments. A rare copy of the first British illustrated surgical catalogue was offered for sale in 2003. This paper gives brief details of the catalogue and its author, JH Savigny.

Résumé

Les catalogues d'instruments chirurgicaux sont des documents précieux qui aident, à la fois, à l'identification et à la datation de ces instruments. Un exemplaire rare du premier catalogue chirurgical illustré a été vendu, en 2003. Cet article donne quelques détails sur le catalogue et son auteur.

Surgical instrument makers' catalogues are valuable documents. Medical historians, museums and collectors all appreciate their usefulness. Apart from their historical merit, such catalogues provide reference points for recognising and dating surgical instruments. One of the most comprehensive collections of these catalogues is in the Library of the Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine. Another is in the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons in London. During the last few years, the Thackray Museum in Leeds has developed an impressive collection of medical and surgical catalogues, especially of the 20th century.

It is not often that a rare surgical instrument catalogue appears for sale on the open market. When it does, it causes a ripple of excitement among collectors of rare books, museum curators, and librarians. In 2003, Nigel Phillips, the London antiquarian bookseller, offered an opportunity to buy a copy of the first illustrated British surgical instrument catalogue. The book was sold to a private buyer for £7200.¹ The *English Short Titled Catalogue (ESTC)* lists this publication as the first British surgical instrument catalogue and also records brief additional information about the book.

The book is generally referred to as *Savigny* after its author, JH Savigny of London. During the last quarter of the 18th century, Savigny worked with many surgeons in London, designing and making surgical instruments to specific order. This was a time when surgical instruments were not standardised and surgeons relied on skilful cutlers and instrument makers to construct tools suited to their needs.

Using his knowledge and experience, Savigny prepared a catalogue of his instruments, titled *A collection of engravings, representing the most modern and approved instruments used in the practice of surgery, with appropriate explanation*. It was published by T Bensley in London at the Letterhead Press, (fig. 1). The year it was published is not recorded anywhere in the publication, but the *ESTC* and other cataloguers have recorded the date as 1798. Some of the plates carry a date, eg plates I and III are dated 1793 and on plate XXX a date of 1795 is recorded. There are no records of further reprints after

the first edition, nor is the number of copies printed originally known.

The book is in large format, measuring approximately 37 cm by 54 cm. The index at the end of the book shows 38 engraved plates, but the total number of plates should be 39, as plate XVI appears twice. The text is written on the left and all the illustrations appear on the right side of the large folios. The instruments are illustrated natural size and the figures are accompanied by numbers and legends (figs. 2 and 3). The pages are not numbered but are 86 in total. At the right lower corner of each plate are the words *Hery Sculp.* The text describes interesting details of the methods used to make the various instruments. The book also lists the names of the surgeons who devised the instruments, before these were made by Savigny. In the preface, the author puts great emphasis on the need for and the usefulness of such a catalogue.

At present, seven copies of this catalogue have been traced by the author, who would be grateful for information about the existence and whereabouts of other copies.

Two copies are in the Wellcome Library. One is not in good shape and requires extensive conservation, while the other is in fair condition. Two copies are recorded in different libraries in the USA, but their condition is unknown. An excellent copy is held by the Royal College of Surgeons in London. One copy in premium condition was acquired, about 5 years ago, by the Thackray Museum in Leeds. The seventh copy, in private hands, is the one referred to in this article. I have not been able to check that there is one in the British Library. There may be other copies in libraries in Europe and America but the book remains a rare article.

Not much biographical detail is available of Savigny, who was probably of Huguenot origin. His name is not in the Dictionary of National Biography. A list of his writings appears in the *Bibliotheca Britannica; or a General Index to British and foreign Literature* by Robert Watt, published in 1824,² which gives four entries under his name.

- a) A booklet, '*On the use and management of the Razor!*' London, 1786.
- b) A paper, '*Description of a new key instrument for the extraction of teeth!*'; Medical Facts p. 90 1787.
- c) '*Description of a portable Apparatus for the recovery of Persons apparently drowned.*' London, 1790.
- d) '*A Collection of Engravings, representing the most modern and approved instruments used in the practice of surgery with appropriate explanation!*'. London, T Bensley, 1798.

There is another title not listed by Watt, but which is in the Catalogue of the Wellcome Library as, '*Description of the construction and uses of a portable apparatus for recovery of the apparent dead; as recommended by Mr Charles Kite and approved by the London Humane Society, made by John Savigny!*'. London: 1789.

This apparatus was described in a comprehensive paper published in 1972,³ which however, contained no biographical information about Savigny.

Although Savigny is described as the first illustrated British catalogue of surgical instruments, there was an earlier un-illustrated catalogue.

In the Royal College of Surgeons in London, there is a copy of a catalogue entitled '*Laundy, Surgeon's Instrument-maker to St Thomas's and Guy's Hospital!*' which is inscribed '*Higgins, pupil to St Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals, 1795!*'. Laundy was listed as a Surgeon's Instrument-maker, 12 St Thomas's Street Borough, in Kent's Directory for 1794⁴ and his catalogue was a 14-page pamphlet, without illustrations. Unlike Savigny's catalogue, it gives the price of every item.

Acknowledgement

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References

- 1 Patrick N., Nigel Phillips Catalogue; 2003 p. 53.
- 2 Robert Watt, Bibliotheca Britannica; or a General Index to British and foreign Literature. Edinburgh. Archibald Constable and company and Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orome, Brown and Green 1824.
- 3 Lee RV, Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation in the 18th Century. Journal of History of Medicine and allied Sciences. 1972.vol xxvii; pp. 418-433
- 4 Kent's Directory for the year 1794. Cities of London and Westminster, Borough of Southwark.

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