Of the hundreds of students and postgraduates who walk past the statue of Thomas Guy in the entrance court of the Medical School at Guy’s (fig. 1), I wonder how many of them know anything at all about the founder of this great and venerable institution? Thomas Guy was born in Southwark in London, not far from his hospital in 1644 or 1645. His father, also Thomas, was a lighterman, collier and barge builder, owning coal barges that transported coal from the North country to London, and was a man of comfortable means. Young Thomas was apprenticed to a bookseller and book binder, later becoming a Liverman in the Stationers’ Company.1

His third and greatest financial success was his purchase of stock in the South Seas Company, established to trade with the Far East. Guy purchased £45,000 of stock in the company when if stood at £60; it rapidly rose to £300. By 1720, Guy wisely realised that the great rise in value of the shares might well be due to iniquitous management on the part of the company directors, he sold his stock at the top of the market price - just before the South Sea Bubble burst!2

By now, Thomas Guy would have been in today’s terms, a multi-millionaire (fig. 2). He remained a bachelor, lived a simple, unostentatious life, dressed humbly and was considered by many, who did not know him well, to be something of a scrooge:

Having finished his apprenticeship, Guy opened a bookshop near the Mansion House and soon made his first fortune. This was initially by importing bibles from Holland and then by printing cheap, but nicely produced editions of the bible and the book of common prayer. Both these books were in high demand. By 1694, Guy was a sheriff of the City of London and in 1704, the year of Marlborough’s victory at the Battle of Blenheim, he became a governor of St. Thomas’s Hospital. He soon began his philanthropic effort by endowing, among other benefactions, three new wards at St. Thomas’s.

Around this time Guy found another means to increase his fortune. The empty purse of the National Exchequer at the period of the Dutch Wars resulted in Naval seamen being paid with promissory notes, paying 8% until such time as the debt could be redeemed. Naturally, the common seaman, short of cash to purchase the bare necessities of life, including his grog, was only too willing to sell his promissory ticket at a discount of 30 to 40%, and Thomas Guy, along with other men of wealth, took advantage of this long-term, but highly lucrative, investment.

This last was far from the truth, for in fact he was one of this countries greatest benefactors. He donated generously to schools, alms houses and to many individual needy cases. This included the release of poor debtors incarcerated in prison. He presented large sums of money to the Stationers’ Company for the support of its pensioners. But of course, his greatest charity was the future Guy’s Hospital. The long-established St. Thomas’s Hospital was for the acutely sick; there was no provision for chronic incurables a problem that continues to beset the N.H.S. in UK today. There is little doubt that Guy’s attention was directed to this lacuna in the needs of the sick poor by Richard Mead, physician to St. Thomas’s.

Mead, was the most celebrated physician of the time. He retired from the staff in 1715 and was appointed a Governor, coming into close contact with his fellow Governor, Thomas Guy. By 1721, the minutes of St. Thomas’ Hospital read: “Our worthy Governor and benefactor, Thomas Guy, intending to fund and create a

Figure 1. Guy’s Hospital 1734, the statue of Thomas Guy is seen in the forecourt.

Figure 2. Thomas Guy 1706, portrait by John Vanderbank.
Hospital for Incurables, in the close of this hospital, in the parish of St Thomas', we have agreed to grant him a lease.” The ground which lay to the south side of St. Thomas’s Street was covered with small houses. These were demolished by the end of that year. By 1722, the foundations of the new hospital were laid, and building work progressed with such speed that Guy was able to see his 435-bed hospital roofed before his death on December 27th 1724. He was 80 years old. On January 6th 1725, the doors to Guy’s Hospital opened and 60 patients were admitted.

Guy’s body lay in state in Mercer’s Hall and was then buried in the Parish Church of St. Thomas’. In 1778, his remains were moved to the newly completed chapel at Guy’s and interred in its crypt. The plaque reads: “Underneath are deposited the remains of Thomas Guy, citizen of London, Member of Parliament and sole Founder of this hospital in his lifetime.” The statue of Guy, in the centre of the front quadrangle at Guy’s Hospital, was erected in 1731.

Following numerous benefactions to many charities, the residue of Thomas Guy’s estate, amounted to the enormous sum of £220,124, 2 shillings 7 1/2d. Guy left this for the maintenance of the hospital. In today’s terms, you need to multiply that figure several hundredfold when you remember that a man could marry and live comfortably on income of a few hundred pounds per year. Perhaps, the only other benefactor to Medicine in this country to vie with Thomas Guy was William Morris, later Lord Nuffield. Like Guy, Morris was a self-made, rather effacing person. He started his career building, racing, and selling bicycles in Oxford. He then went on to manufacture Morris cars in that city. His donations to Medicine were immense to my old Medical School Oxford; these included the Nuffield Professorships, the Maternity Department and the Orthopaedic Centre. Here at Guy’s he endowed Nuffield House, the private block. Like Thomas Guy, he too is remembered by a statue on the campus; his stands on the west side of the colonnade.

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References