

GUTHRIE'S WAR

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Imperial Hotel, Llandudno

George James Guthrie is a forgotten legend of surgery. He was the youngest military surgeon ever to serve with the British Army, having qualified just before his sixteenth birthday! Robust, shrewd and a skilful doctor, he was said to have treated around 20,000 wounded and sick men in the Peninsular War, whose bicentennial commemorations are at present ongoing.

After a quiet five-year sojourn in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he married and became surgeon to the 29th (Worcester) Regiment, he landed with Wellesley's force in Portugal in August 1808. He treated over a hundred casualties at the Battle of Roliça and was slightly injured at the Battle of Vimeiro. Whilst Sir John Moore's Army was chased to Corunna by a superior French force, Guthrie remained in Lisbon. After Wellesley landed back there, Guthrie went up to Oporto, where Wellesley chased Marshal Soult's army out of Portugal. Here he saved a Portuguese regiment from destruction and captured a piece of French ordnance. He had much work to do after the Battle of Talavera and on retirement to Portugal, he fell sick and spent most of 1810 convalescing in England. He was promoted Staff Surgeon to Lowry Cole's 4th Division and fought at Albuera, Badajoz and Salamanca in 1812. Present at Toulouse, his surgical results were impressive - his hospital admissions suffered only an 11% mortality. He had developed skills in conservative orthopaedic operations, the proper management of arterial injuries, treatment of thigh fractures and chest wounds. He was present in the Brussels hospitals after the Battle of Waterloo, where he performed a successful disarticulation at the hip joint on a French prisoner of war. In peacetime he became an ophthalmic surgeon and consultant surgeon at the Westminster hospital. He refused a knighthood and was elected an FRS. He was five times Vice President of the Royal College of Surgeons of London (later England) and thrice elected President. He was implemental in many changes in surgical politics and in the introduction of the Anatomy Act of 1832. Predeceased by most of his family he died of bronchiectasis in 1856. This great and innovative military surgeon brought fairness, integrity and commitment into the practice of mid-19th century surgery.