

SIR ISAMBARD OWEN AND THE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE IN CARDIFF

24th March 2007

Chepstow Hotel, Chepstow

A symposium celebrating the life and times of Sir Isambard Owen, was held on 24 March 2007 at the Chepstow Hotel, Chepstow, a few minutes' walk from 'High Trees', Sir Isambard's birthplace. Described in the Dictionary of Welsh Biography as 'medical man, scholar and architect of universities', his influence in the establishment and early development of the Cardiff Medical School was immense. While dean of medicine at St George's Hospital Owen launched an appeal among the Welsh of London for funds to establish a preclinical school in Cardiff and advised the authorities at University College, Cardiff on how to set up such a venture, finally brought to fruition in 1893. Ten years later, and by now principal of Armstrong College, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Sir Isambard (knighted in 1902) was the moving force whereby the University of Wales, in 1906, secured the right to confer degrees in medicine and surgery. This was one essential prerequisite for establishing a full medical school in Cardiff, offering clinical as well as preclinical instruction, and the concentration of the whole school close to the King Edward VII Hospital was another. His advice in 1912 to the authorities of University College, Cardiff in this respect was crucial. Finally it was Sir Isambard's evidence in 1916 that persuaded the Royal Commission on University Education in Wales to recommend that the full medical school should separate from University College, Cardiff and become an independent entity within the University of Wales. Later repudiating this advice Owen spent the rest of his life defending the status quo.