Physiology in London: The Brown Institution

The Brown Animal Sanatory Institution was founded in 1871, closed in 1939 and destroyed by a bomb on 20 July 1944. It was operated by the University of London, from a bequest from Thomas Brown who died in 1852, to care for sick animals and research into animal diseases.

It was located at 149 Wandsworth Road, Vauxhall (the street has since been renumbered), and after the rebuilding of the site in 1877–78 it was fronted by shops with street numbers 143–155. There was accommodation for the Superintendent (who in practice did not live there), a Veterinary Assistant (with the qualification MRCVS), a porter/stableman and a housekeeper.

In a dispensary sick animals were treated, most as outpatients but about 4% as residents. In its early years 70% of the animals treated were horses, 20% dogs. In its first 20 years some 50,000 animals were treated, and the number per year rose from around 4000 to peak at 8000 in 1905–10. In a physiological laboratory research was carried out on experimental animals, distinct from the sick animals brought for care.

It was headed by a part time Professor-Superintendent, who provided his own equipment and had to give at least five free public lectures a year. There were seven successive ones followed by a full-time Superintendent:

- John Burdon Sanderson, 1871–78. He was also Professor of Practical Physiology and Histology at University College, Jodrell Professor of Physiology there from 1874 to 1883.
- William Smith Greenfield, 1878–81. He left to become Professor of Pathology at Edinburgh.
- Charles Smart Roy, 1881–84. He left to become first Professor of Pathology at Cambridge.
- Victor Horsley, 1884–90. He was also on the surgical staff of University College Hospital from 1885 and Professor of Pathology at University College from 1887.
- Charles Sherrington, 1891–95. He was also a lecturer at St Thomas' Hospital. He left to become Professor of Physiology at Liverpool.
- John Rose Bradford, 1896–1903. He was also Assistant Physician at University College Hospital from 1889, Physician from 1897, and Assistant Physician at the National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic from 1893.
- Thomas Gregor Brodie, 1903–08. He was also Professor of Physiology at the Royal Veterinary College and Lecturer on Physiology at the London School of Medicine for Women. He left to become Professor of Physiology at Toronto.
- Frederick William Twort, 1909–45. He took up the post at the age of 32 and spent the rest of his working life there, retiring in 1945 after the Institution had been destroyed by bomb damage the previous year.

Edward Emanuel Klein was appointed by Burdon Sanderson in 1871 as Assistant Professor and from 1873 to 1897 he was Assistant Professor of Comparative Pathology; from 1873 he was also a lecturer at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, from where from 1891 he did his main research work in a new laboratory.

Research on animals carried out in an animal hospital was a combination that some people had trouble with. In 1873 Burdon Sanderson and Klein (along with Foster and Lauder Brunton) published their methods with illustrations as the Handbook for the Physiological Laboratory, and this added to the concern. The Royal Commission on the practice of subjecting live animals to experiments for scientific purposes was set up, and Klein’s testimony before it was notorious for its callous attitude towards animals.