

Warwickshire Local History Society (WLHS):

Dr John Conolly (1794-1866) in Warwickshire: physician, reformer and enigma -- Tuesday 16th October at 8 pm at FMH Warwick.

In the first talk, Dr John Wilmot (Vice-Chairman of WLHS), explored Dr John Conolly's activities during his years in Warwickshire. A native of Lincolnshire and an Edinburgh graduate (MD 1821), John Conolly arrived in Stratford-on-Avon in 1823. He had previously practised in Sussex, briefly in Lewes and for a year in Chichester. From his student days acquaintances were impressed by his charm and sociability, perhaps more so than his medical skills. Early friendships with Stratford practitioners may have aided his election in June 1823 to the Borough Council (followed in 1825 by selection as alderman and then mayor). Together with these colleagues and prominent local inhabitants, he founded a dispensary (based at 21 Chapel Street) to treat the sick poor.

In 1828 he was invited to become the professor of medicine at the new London University (now University College). In 1825 he had met the educational pioneer Dr George Birkbeck, whose favourable opinion together with the views of Henry Brougham, the Liberal politician, may have prompted his appointment. However the struggling infant institution was constrained by tight finances and some particularly difficult relationships. Conolly's lack of medical experience also became apparent in uninspiring lectures and falling attendances. Late in 1830 he resigned and in 1831 returned to Warwickshire.

Now in Warwick, Conolly resumed medical practice, as well as writing and public speaking. He was physician to the Warwick Dispensary from 1832 and collaborated in editing two publications with his old Chichester friend Dr John Forbes. He lectured at Mechanics' Institutes in Warwick and elsewhere, mostly on medical and related topics. He co-founded a local phrenology society and in 1836 the Warwickshire Natural History and Archaeology Society. But Shakespeare was always his particular enthusiasm. He was an active member of the Shakespeare Society and led efforts to restore the chancel and the poet's memorial in Holy Trinity church in Stratford. In 1838 he moved briefly to Birmingham, a poorly documented period of his life.

In 1839 he was appointed physician in charge of the large asylum at Hanwell, where he remained about ten years. He abolished the use of physical restraints, introducing 'moral treatment' based on sympathy and understanding. Similar changes had been made earlier in Paris, at the York Retreat, and at the Lincoln Asylum. However, Conolly's writing and lecturing ensured that in Britain his name became particularly associated with the movement.

Rumours have suggested mental illness in Elizabeth Conolly née Collins. In 1817 Conolly (then without any occupation) married this naval captain's daughter, ten years older than himself, and the couple had four children. After 1841 she was evidently not living at the family home, dying aged 82 of 'old age' in lodgings.

At a farewell dinner in Stratford in June 1839, Conolly was commended for his medical skills, his courtesy and his kindness, above all to the poor. Those present also recognised his contributions to 'philosophic' institutions and to honouring the name of Shakespeare.