

# King Henry VIII

If it wasn't for a man with six wives, a lusty appetite for food and a passion for hunting, then Barts Hospital could have ended up as a footnote in the history books.

the vault

**T**oday, King Henry VIII is often remembered as a tyrant, a cruel king who executed anyone who opposed him – including two of his six wives.

Yet the 16th-century Tudor monarch – in his youth, a handsome, athletic and cultured man who composed music and wrote poetry as easily as he hunted and jousted – also played a key role in the survival of Barts Hospital.

In the last issue of *The Link*, we highlighted famous figures associated with the Trust's hospitals (including Joseph Merrick – the 'Elephant Man', and Edith Cavell).



Over the next few issues, we will be profiling some of the most notable – and notorious – of these key figures.

Originally founded with the Priory of St Bartholomew in 1123, Barts, Britain's oldest hospital, had provided care for the sick, poor and needy in London for several centuries. By the 1540s, however, the hospital faced an uncertain future.

Refused a divorce from his first wife by the Pope, King Henry had responded by taking over the church in England and beginning the religious Reformation.

Monasteries were dissolved and priests, nuns and monks thrown out on the streets. Hospitals for the poor had traditionally been run by these religious orders but they swiftly disappeared – or, like Barts, were barely able to function.

People power intervened. Concern about the lack of provision for the sick, compounded by the risk of plague, led citizens to petition the King for the grant of four hospitals to the City – Barts, St Thomas' in Southwark, Bethlam or Bedlam, England's only 'madhouse', and Bridewell, near Fleet Street.

No one knows why Henry suddenly decided to act to

preserve Barts. Some historians speculate he was influenced by his own distinguished surgeon, Thomas Vicary, a Barts supporter until his death in 1561.

But in December 1546, shortly before he died, Henry signed over to the City Corporation 'the late hospital of Saint Bartholomew', its church and all its estates, income and possessions. The agreement detailing the gift secured the hospital's financial future and even set out staffing requirements. The constitution, finalised a few weeks later, remained until the founding of the NHS in 1948.

The start was rocky. Staff were quickly appointed (although no physician until 1567) but with repairs and restocking desperately needed, charitable donations were required to bridge a £130 shortfall in the £800 annual budget to provide care for 100 sick poor men and women at a time.

Yet by 1552, a book called *The Order of the Hospital of St Bartholomew*, claimed that in its first five years under the City's control, Barts had 'healed of the pox, fistulas, filthy blains and sores' 800 patients, and cared for 172 people who died in hospital and otherwise



## The cost of running 16th century Barts

Product/service	Cost
Food for patients	£300 a year <i>(just under 1p a day)</i>
Wood, coal, candles	£83 a year
Matron	£3.34 a year
Sisters	£2 each a year
Priest	
<i>(the Hospitaller)</i>	£10 annually
Steward	
<i>(provides food and drink)</i>	£6.68
Receiver and collector of rents	£6.68
Porter	£6
Butler	£4
Cook	£6
Eight beadles	
<i>(to bring in patients)</i>	£3.34
Physician	£20 a year
Surgeon	£20 a year

'might have died and stunk in the eyes and noses of the City'.

As for Henry, he died sad, lonely, grossly overweight from compulsive eating and in pain from an ulcerated leg due to an old jousting wound. Perhaps it was the recognition of his own mortality that prompted him to create in Barts a legacy that lasts till this day.

Walk through the Henry VIII Gate of Barts and there is a reminder of the man who played a key role in revitalising the hospital – albeit 460 years ago. On top of the 1702-built gate is the only public statue of Henry in London. It is by Francis Bird, whose sculptures grace Westminster Abbey and St Paul's and honours the King who refounded Barts in 1546. Just recently, Henry VIII was honoured again – as Statue of the Week in London's *Time Out* magazine!

