the vault

Ahead of his time

Poet, translator, physician – if anyone can lay claim to having bridged the gap between science and the arts, Sir Henry Head – blessed with the perfect name for a brain specialist – would be a worthy recipient of that honour.

With a social circle that included the author Thomas Hardy and poet Siegfried Sassoon, Sir Henry Head combined writing and publishing his own poetry with a prestigious medical career that spanned more than 30 years and embraced both teaching and research.

Born in Stoke Newington, London, in 1861, Head was educated at Charterhouse in Surrey before attending Trinity College at Cambridge University, where he graduated with a degree in natural sciences in 1884. As a young man, his interests varied from Greek drama and fine literature to rowing and even bell-ringing.

He chose to pursue a scientific career – first in Prague, where he was credited with making his first important discoveries, devising an effective method of recording respiratory movements and introducing the cuffed endotracheal tube, later widely used in anaesthesia. His other reputed achievement while there was introducing football to the city!

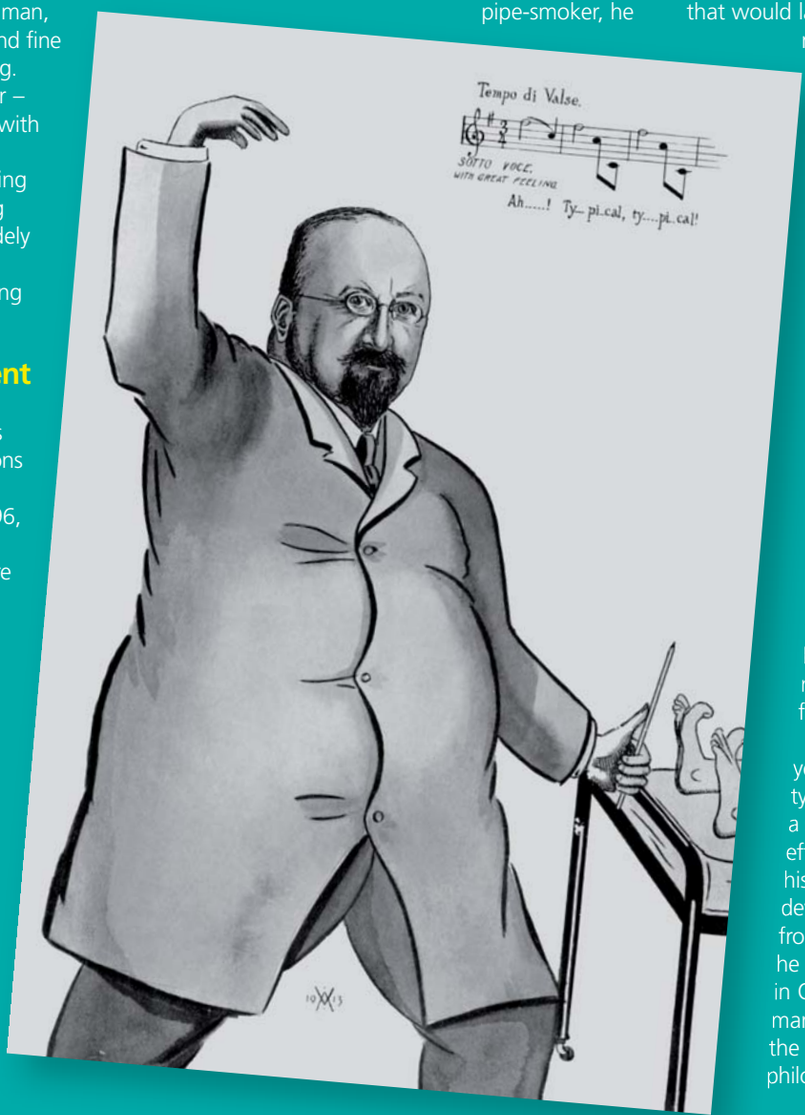
Extraordinary self-experiment

On his return to Britain, Head took up medicine, receiving his MD in 1892. His thesis established 'Head's Areas' – regions of increased cutaneous (skin) sensitivity associated with visceral diseases. In 1896, he joined The London Hospital (as The Royal London was then known) – where he would remain until 1919 – first as a registrar before eventually becoming consulting physician.

In 1897, he received the first of many career honours – the Moxon Medal awarded by the Royal College of Physicians for his research into clinical medicine. However, Head was always best known for his research into the human nervous system and an extraordinary self-experiment carried out in 1903. At his request, the cutaneous nerves in his left arm were severed in an operation performed by his surgeon colleague at The London, James Sherren.

Over the next several years, Head and his collaborator W H R Rivers charted the stages in which sensation returned, and the results were published in the journal *Brain* in 1908. Further awards followed, including the Royal Medal of the Royal Society for his work on neurology. Head, who was described as short and portly, but elegant in dress with a beard and moustache, went on to be editor of *Brain* from 1910 until 1925.

Putting scientific endeavour ahead of personal preference, he abstained from alcohol during the sensory testing period by Rivers to ensure that the response was clear and unimpaired. A hardened pipe-smoker, he also gave up tobacco, not without struggle, when he thought it was impairing his mental processes.



Saving lives

The First World War saw Head appointed civilian consultant to the Empire Hospital for Officers in London, treating those suffering from wounds to the nervous system. More ground-breaking research followed. With colleague George Riddoch, he produced a series of papers on the effects of gross injuries to the spinal cord – work that would lay the foundations for the management of traumatic paraplegia, save many lives and be developed further by Riddoch during the Second World War.

In 1919, at the first signs of Parkinson's Disease, Head and his wife – respected author Ruth Mayhew – retired to Dorset, where they were neighbours of novelist Thomas Hardy. Head continued with his dedication to both science and art. In 1919, he published *Destroyers and Other Verses*, a collection of his own verse and translations of German verses (he was a fluent speaker of the language).

Then, in 1926, *Aphasia and Kindred Disorders of Speech* appeared in two volumes. Based on the examination of a large number of men suffering from gunshot wounds to the brain, it is regarded as having broken new ground in examining the relationship between language function and its location in the brain.

Knighted in 1927, Head's last 20 years were blighted by Parkinson's. Yet, typically, he turned even this into a subject for research, recording the effects of the disease on his body. During his last years, he was sustained by the devoted nursing of his wife and by letters from patients, including paraplegic soldiers he had treated in the war. When he died in October 1940, this brave scientist and man of letters left most of his fortune to the Royal Society to continue with his life's philosophy – the advancement of medicine.