

Dr Wyatt Wingrave – obituary

Dr Wingrave died on June 1st 1938.

He was the first honorary curator of Lyme Regis Museum (1921-35)

The text below is transcribed from an edition of the Pulmans Weekly News in the first week of June 1938.



Lyme Regis heard with deep regret on Wednesday, of the death at the age of 80, of Dr V Wyatt Wingrave who was made an hon Freeman of the Borough in January of this year. He founded the Lyme Regis Museum, was hon curator until 1935, and continued as trustee until failing health compelled him to resign. He died at the Cobb [today's Harbour Inn], Lyme Regis, having suffered patiently for many years.

Vitruvius Harold Wyatt Wingrave had a distinguished medical career. His devotion to duty was remarkable, and an infection contracted during the course of his work, ultimately caused him to lose the sight of one eye, and to become totally deaf and partially paralysed. For years he struggled with almost super-human determination to overcome his increasing infirmities, and did valuable work even when severely handicapped.

When he received the Freedom of Lyme Regis, the Mayor, Alderman W J Emmett, and other representatives of the Town Council visited him at his home, and the honour was conferred on him as he sat in his favourite armchair, unable to move from it.

Vitruvius Harold Wyatt Wingrave MD, MRCS, LSA
(photo from 'Men of the West' edited by Claude Stacey, 1926)

Dr Wingrave was a native of Coventry, and he was honoured in 1935 by being granted the Freedom of that city. This ceremony also took place in his own home, the Mayor of Coventry travelling to Lyme Regis for the purpose.

As the author of many works on diseases of the ear and throat, the doctor contributed much to medical science, and for 30 years he was a specialist at the London Throat and Ear Hospital. For a similar period he was a lecturer at this hospital and also at the London School of Anatomy.

During the war he performed pathological work at five London hospitals, and soon after the Armistice came to reside at Lyme Regis, a town he had admired and frequently visited for many years previous to that date. He was at one time president of the British Laryngological Society, and held numerous other appointments and offices. He conducted special research on the connection between tuberculosis and nasal disease, and presented the earliest known specimens of Saurian Rheumatoid disease to the Royal College Surgeons Museum in 1928.

As recreations he studied geology, archaeology and natural history, and it was on various expeditions in search of fossils that he visited Lyme Regis before he came to reside in the town. He eventually obtained a complete collection of all the specimens in the district, and brought them with him when he settled in Lyme.

He founded the Museum in 1920, later presenting a collection to the town. From small beginnings the Museum has steadily grown until it now attracts hundreds of visitors each year. Until a few years ago, Dr Wingrave regularly gave lectures to visitors and London and provincial school parties. When he was unable to journey to the Museum, visiting school children were brought to the doctor's cottage by their teachers and there he demonstrated on local history and fossils. He also gave special lectures on the anniversaries of the Charles proclamation.

The establishment of a formally constitutional trust placed the Museum on a firm foundation, and it is now not only a record of Lyme Regis history but also an exhibition of the world-famed fossils of the district. The Museum is entirely limited to objects of local interest.

An interesting discovery was made by Dr Wingrave in 1913, when the bridge at the mouth of the river was widened, and some dilapidated cottages demolished. During the demolition Dr Wingrave discovered on the south-western side indications of an ecclesiastical building, and portions of the masonry and timber were preserved. In the south wall was an arched recess suggestive of an aumbry. It was considered probable that it was a priest's chamber such as it is customary to find attached to early bridges, whose custodian in addition to his religious duties, could collect the bridge tolls and salt dues belonging to the Abbot of Sherborne.

For a long time no reference could be found which threw any light on it, but eventually the will of John Tudbold (1548), a wealthy merchant of Lyme Regis, was found to mention a 'Chamber in which our Lady's Priest sometime dwelled in'. The stones of the masonry were carefully numbered, and are now temporarily reconstructed in the Museum, with wood tracery, also found.

While searching for fossils under some cliffs beyond the cement works about seven years ago Dr Wingrave had a very narrow escape. He felt some stones falling and stepped back. As he did so a mass of rock fell and just missed his head. He was informed afterwards that there had been gun-firing in the neighbourhood, and this probably loosened the rock,

After the fall the doctor was delighted to discover magnificent ammonite formations beneath the surface which had been dislodged. He was particularly proud of the fact that one of Lyme's chief ammonites was named 'Oxynoticeras Wingravi' by Dr Spath, the great authority on ammonites.

In his younger days the doctor was a keen sportsman. When living in Coventry he rode the first cycle that was brought into England. He founded the first athletic ground in Coventry, and was captain of the Cycling Club. His chief interest however, was in Rugby football, and he was a member of the famous Coventry side in the 70s. When he was in Middlesex Hospital, where he began his training, he pulled bow in the boat that was victorious over all London Hospitals on one occasion. He also served for ten years in the Honourable Artillery Company.

'I love Lyme because it is peaceful,' he once said. 'It is a never-never land. People are never in a hurry; and they never die, they simply pass away. I came to this house because it was near the sea and nobody could build in front of me. It is one of the loveliest spots in England. There are very close connections between Lyme and Coventry. The tapestry in the Parish Church came from the same loom as that in

St Mary's Hall, Coventry. Then there is John Hassard, who built the gallery in the church: his son went to Coventry and founded the great Meeting House there. The old bell of the last town crier of Coventry is also in the possession of the Corporation here, having been presented to them by me.'

In addition to his medical writings, Dr Wingrave at one time contributed articles to *Pulman's Weekly News* on the historical associations of Lyme Regis and his many geological discoveries. He also kept in touch with his native city by contributing articles to the Coventry papers. It was a great loss to Lyme Regis when he resigned the curatorship of the Museum to undergo an operation in 1935, and in the following year as an appreciation of the many services rendered to Lyme, a testimonial signed by 101 residents of the town and contributions amounting to £140 were handed to him by the Rev G F Eyre, who was then Mayor. On that occasion the doctor wrote: -

'Mere phrases but inadequately express my feelings upon receiving the kindly and handsome tribute from friends, for what has been to me a beloved hobby and labour of love. I must ask you to accept these words as heart-felt acknowledgement pending a more favourable occasion. The list of contributors is to me overwhelming. I did not realise that I possessed so many friends, but apart from its purely personal significance is the evidence that it conveys goodwill to the Museum and that 'labour' has not been in vain. Coming as I did to Lyme soon after the Great War, worn out by pathological duties at five hospitals, I looked forward to at least two years rest and enjoyment of a lifelong hobby. But I was greatly deceived, and soon realised the truth of the saying that 'people do not die at Lyme Regis, they simply fade away.' The rocks, the Museum, and the kindness of everybody soon proved the accuracy of that proverb, and 'fading' continues, softened and lengthened by this much-cherished tribute. In assembling this Museum, one's objective has been ever present, viz, that of keeping it strictly as a local one. Local not only with regard to its world-famous fossils, but particularly with regard to its own historic and civic associations. Few towns can show such a wealth of historical, social, and literary association, and every object preserved in our Museum records something of real interest, not only to ourselves, but also to those who are our guests.'

The Doctor leaves a widow, his third wife, two sons, who are abroad, and a daughter, who resides at South Kensington. The funeral is at Coventry Cathedral on Saturday and a memorial service at Lyme Regis on Monday.



Dr V Wyatt Wingrave receiving the Freedom of the Borough of Lyme Regis at his home from the Mayor, Mr W Emmett, January 13, 1938. (Photo from Lyme Regis Museum archives)