

# John Eskdale Fishburn: First Graduate Dentist of the University of Malta

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The regulation of dental surgery developed slowly during the nineteenth century. Warrants for licence to practice as surgeon dentists were initially issued by the Government on the recommendation of the Medical Board. The University by the new Statute of 1907 was empowered to examine and award a Diploma in Dental Surgery. John Eskdale Fishburn, a student from Guy's Hospital serving in the Royal Navy was the first to be awarded the Diploma in Dental Surgery. Recent contacts with his family have produced details of this colourful and remarkable person.

It is likely that the practise of dentistry in Malta during the early nineteenth century was not much different from that of the rest of Europe. The European picture of dental treatment in Europe at that period is now being carefully studied and many old misconceptions are being clarified.<sup>1</sup> Dental treatment was mainly surgical, predominantly dental extractions, together with the use of herbal and patented medicines, mostly of spurious value and at about this time there were the initial steps in the development of prosthetic and restorative dentistry. Persons attending to diseases of the teeth and mouth did not comprise one single professional group but were persons of varied background, training, and capability including graduate physicians, surgeons, apothecaries and semi-professionals such as dentists and surgeon dentists, phlebotomists, tooth-drawers, charlatans and quacks.

We know very little about the management in Malta of dentally related disorders at that time. The majority of persons providing dental treatment in the towns and villages during the nineteenth century must have been Maltese but there were also a number of continental, mostly Italian, dentists who worked in Malta for varying durations. The new British Authorities had inherited the rich legacy of medical organisation and practice from the Knights of St John.<sup>2</sup> Once the British Administration with a sizeable number of British military and civil personnel was established in Malta, it was only natural that British dentists will have set their eyes on Malta. The first such person we know of was a surgeon, Mr. Thomson, a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, who worked in Malta in 1832.<sup>3</sup>

A few more followed, but these must have catered mostly to British residents and the Maltese higher classes.

Medical, and presumably dental practice in Malta, was still regulated by the Code de Rohan of 1784 when new regulations were enacted in 1854.<sup>4</sup> The local British administrators must have been influenced to follow, and where possible copy, medical

## Keywords

Fishburn, University of Malta, dental graduate

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**Figure 1:** John Eskdale Fishburn

and dental developments in the United Kingdom. The authorities were cognisant of the unsatisfactory situation regarding dental treatment in Malta as well as of the relevant legislation being enacted in the United Kingdom where, in 1860, we find the first dental graduates. The new Police Laws of 1883 required surgeon dentists to obtain a licence from the Head of Government.<sup>5</sup> There must, therefore, have been a mechanism whereby a person could petition the Governor for such a licence and, in fact, we find that Calcedonio Azzopardi successfully petitioned for such a Warrant to practise dentistry in 1888.<sup>6</sup> However, this did not exclude unlicensed persons from carrying on with their dentistry and the Chief Government Medical Officer expressed his worries during the Debates of the Council of Government in 1899.<sup>7</sup> In the Second Sanitary Laws of the Government Ordinance (Chap VI) of 1901, the Regulations on Dentists and Phlebotomists state that the Licence to practice shall be granted upon the production of a certificate from the Medical Board showing that the applicant has undergone an examination, and received a diploma from the University or other apparently authorized school in these islands.<sup>8</sup> Vested rights were preserved to dentists and phlebotomists who were then already in practice. These regulations are similar to UK legislation with attempts to control dental practice but not yet in a position to completely exclude non-qualified personnel. The Government authorities outlined the requirements for the issue of a Licence but there was no training programme in Dentistry at the University or other recognised school to be able satisfy these requirements. Finally, in 1907, the University, after some

pressure, issued the regulations for the granting of the Diploma in Dental Surgery and it was now empowered to set up an Examination Board and award such a diploma to suitably qualified candidates.<sup>9</sup> The candidate sitting for the examination had to produce certificates showing that he pursued his studies in dentistry in a recognized institution abroad, had been engaged for four years in professional studies and had received three years instruction in mechanical dentistry from a recognized practitioner or at a dental hospital. However, although the mechanism was there, it was only 12 years later that a candidate benefited from this legislation.

In the Liber Aureus of the University, under the heading Odontoiatria for the graduation ceremony of 2nd Jan 1919, there is a faint pencil signature of J. Eskdale Fishburn. The University Register of Graduates 1916-1968<sup>10</sup> lists him as Eskdale Fishburn John whilst in a later edition he appears as Eskdale Tishman J.<sup>11</sup> Both Cassar<sup>12</sup> and Portelli<sup>13</sup> had made reference to Fishburn but nothing further was known about Malta's first dental graduate. Initial searches through archival records yielded no results and the breakthrough came through the Internet when, in answer to requests I had posted, I received an initial reply from Sue Powell who was able to give me the birthday of a John Eskdale Fishburn. Searches at the English Family Records Office and the Public Records Office in Kew only yielded his birth certificate. It was one year later when John Legg, from Northumberland, starting feeding me a series of details which eventually led to the home addresses of his two sons. Within two days of writing to them I received a phone call confirming

**Figure 2:** *HMS Asphodel in Grand Harbour.*



## Paper I

### Dental Surgery, Pathology and diseases of the Mouth

1. How would you treat Empyema of the Antrum of Highmore? Give the causes, signs and symptoms, complications, diagnosis and treatment.
2. Distinguish between Pyorrhea Alveolaris and Stomatitis, and what would be your treatment for each.
3. How would you treat a crowded mouth of a child aged 12 to 13 years, discussing the different methods you would employ?
4. What local anesthetics are used for the extraction of teeth? Describe fully the different methods you would employ?
5. What are the Bacteria most commonly found in the mouth? State also what you know of the Bacteriology of caries.
6. Describe fully the microscopical appearance of enamel and dentine in advancing caries.
7. Describe fully how to prepare a Black Cavity and fill a dead second Premolar, having mesial and distal cavities of fissure suspected stating what filling material you could use satisfactorily and why.
8. State complications liable to arise from an impacted lower third molar.

## Paper II

### Dental Anatomy, Histology and Physiology

1. State theories of the eruption of Teeth.
2. Describe the attachment of teeth and classify.
3. Give typical Mammalian Dentition.
4. State mammals having typical dentition.
5. Human Dentition. Milk and Permanent with dates of eruption.
6. Which teeth in typical mammalian dentition are missing in human beings?
7. What is Nasmyth's membrane and its function? How would you stain it? Describe its microscopical appearance.
8. Compare the development of enamel and dentine.
9. Describe the pulp diseases, its blood and nerve supply and describe briefly the microscopical appearance of a pulp undergoing calcareous degeneration.
10. Describe the structure of a salivary gland."



**Figure 3:** From right to left, Prof JM Portelli, Dean Faculty of Dental Surgery; Prof R Ellul Micallef, Rector; Mr J Dudley Fishburn; and Prof GE Camilleri

that John Eskdale Fishburn was indeed their father and had been awarded a Diploma in Dental Surgery from the University of Malta. They were, of course, able to give me valuable personal details.

John Eskdale Fishburn, (Figure.1) the second son of Joseph Fishburn and Mary Eleanor Eskdale, was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1894 in 742 Fulham Road, London. Both families were Wesleyans and the Fishburns were originally of Yorkshire yeoman stock who moved South with the shipping trade, settling in the Isle of Wight. A Fishburn built the Endeavour in which Captain Cook discovered Australia. The father, Joseph Fishburn was a Master builder who retired as an Art Dealer in Bond Street (The Dore Gallery). John Eskdale Fishburn had one year's education at a grammar school and in 1913 registered as a Conjoint (Medical and Dental) student at Guy's Hospital Medical School. The First World War overtook his studies and in 1916 he enrolled in the Royal Navy as an Acting Probationary Junior Sub Lieutenant Surgeon. He served in the Mediterranean on a number of small destroyers (HMS Asphodel (Figure.2), HMS Mimosa and HMS Chili) on the Gallipoli run. He must somehow have learnt of the University of Malta's regulations regarding the Diploma in Dental Surgery and amid the horrors of war and with his ships only occasionally calling into Malta, Eskdale mostly studied for these examinations on the high seas. But the University itself became the centre of his life on dry land and according to his sons, he recalled it with fondness all his life.

On 12 June 1918, whilst staying at the Savoy Hotel, Sliema, Fishburn applied to the Rector to be examined for the Diploma in Dental Surgery.<sup>14</sup> He did not have the requisite certificates with him and was willing to take an oath prior to their arrival. The Rector wrote to each Council member, the majority of who were of the opinion that the matter should be postponed until after the receipt of the certificates.<sup>15</sup> These must have eventually arrived from London because on 18<sup>th</sup> July the Council appointed the Special Examination Board which was then approved by the Lieutenant Governor.<sup>16</sup> At that time the University was administered directly by the Lieutenant Governor's Office and

all decisions were to be approved by the Lieutenant Governor.

The original members of the Board of Examiners were the Rector, Dr. Enrico Magro (ex-officio), Dr J.S. Galizia, Professor Salvatore Cassar, Professor of Surgery, and Major AB Wills Rust. In the meantime Dr. Galizia died and was substituted by Professor Carmelo Mifsud, Professor of Medicine. Major Rust was in the Dental Corps of the RAMC (the RADC had not yet been formed) and his position is listed as Officer i/c Dental Institutes in Malta. He was probably the first Army Dental Officer to serve in Malta. Rust had studied at Guy's obtaining an LDS (Eng) in 1902 and retired as a Colonel in the RADC and died in 1959. The Lieutenant Governor had to obtain the permission of the Military authorities for Major Rust to sit on the Board which was forthcoming provided it did not interfere with his military duties. The Faculty Board of Medicine now requested the Examining Board to examine the testimonials which must have satisfied legal requirements and an examination date was fixed. Unfortunately Fishburn had to postpone the planned examination as his services were urgently needed at sea and he trusted that "the Gentlemen that would constitute your Examiners will understand the Naval attitude and forgive me. The ways of the King's Navy are difficult for us civilians."<sup>17</sup> The written examinations were eventually held on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> November and the examinations are recorded as Sittings 95 and 96 of the Faculty Board of Medicine and Surgery. The questions of the written examination were recorded in the minutes<sup>18</sup> and make interesting reading.

The Practical examination was held on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 (Armistice Day) at the Valletta Military Hospital which was none other than the Holy Infirmary of the Knights of St John. He was approved in all the examinations and awarded the Diploma in Dental Surgery. His Naval Duties must have precluded him from attending the graduation ceremony as an entry next to his name records that he had left the Island. He was never to return to Malta or to ever practise dentistry.

By 1921 he gave up medicine altogether and turned his back on Europe and for seven years travelled to Africa, India and the Pacific. On his return he became an inventor and developer of business ideas. He helped create the Tote for racecourses and the Automatic ticket machines for cinemas. He built up one of the largest U.K. printing firms and was also one of the first men to commute from New York to London. In the 1930's, whilst working in Wall Street, New York, he would catch the Cunard liner from Southampton on a Thursday evening and arrive in New York on Monday morning, work for a fortnight and return. He married in 1936 to a young beauty of English society, Bunting Stephenson and had two sons. His sons recall that throughout his life his language and personality remained intensely original and inventive. He died on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1972 at Eaton Square, London. In November 2003 his son J. Dudley Fishburn visited Malta and the University when he toured the various sites related to his father's stay in Malta (Figure. 3).

## Epilogue

Major Rust was to have an even more important role to play in Maltese Dentistry. A young Maltese volunteer member of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, Egidio Lapira was attached to him at the Dental clinic at the Military Hospital. There, Lapira obtained his first insight into dentistry and Major Rust encouraged his keenness. He arranged for Lapira to serve an apprenticeship with Mr. Banner H. Martin, an English Dentist practising in Malta. Fortunately, Martin had been a demonstrator at Guy's Hospital as well as a teacher at the Naval Hospital in Haslar, England and the University recognised him as an authorised teacher so that Lapira could sit for the Diploma in Dental Surgery Examination. In 1922 he was the second dental surgeon and the first Maltese to graduate in Dentistry from the University of Malta. Egidio Lapira became the first lecturer, and later first Professor of Dental Surgery of the University of Malta.

## Acknowledgments

I thank Ms. Sue Powell and especially Mr. John Legg for crucial initial information through the Internet. Mr. J. Dudley Fishburn and Mr. Dale C. Fishburn have been most generous in passing on information and the photograph of their father. I thank also the librarians and staff at the National Library of Malta, University of Malta Library and the National Archives of Malta for their help. The photograph of HMS Asphodel was kindly supplied by Richard Ellis Ltd.

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