CONCERNING 1654 AND 1756.

By Colonel R. H. Firth.

The above figures are not register numbers of some new synthetic drugs, but dates which mark important periods in the history of the English in India. They are more than this to us, for they are dates associated with the names of two doctors whose connexion with, and the initial part they played in, the sequence of events which led to the consolidation of British power in Bengal is liable to be forgotten by the present generation. The names of those two doctors are Gabriel Boughton and John Zephaniah Holwell. True, neither were army surgeons, but their claim to a place in the pages of our Journal rests on the fact that both were men possessed of that adventurous spirit, that wide outlook on affairs which sees in the rôle of a doctor something more than the mere practice of physic, and that essential versatility which makes the army surgeon to be a man among men, and renders his career at once fascinating, honourable, and unique.

Of Gabriel Boughton it is difficult to learn much. Son of a well-to-do yeoman, and born at Newton-le-Willows, in Lancashire, in 1623, he was originally intended for holy orders and proceeded to Merton College, Oxford. Abandoning theology, he graduated there in medicine. The attractions of the profession appear to have been small, as in 1648, through the influence of his uncle, he obtained a writership in the newly formed Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies and, in the following year, found himself at their factory at Surat, where he seems to have been both a clerk and the doctor. At that time Shah Jehan was emperor of Delhi. It so happened that in 1654, the emperor's elder and most favoured daughter, Jahanara Begum, was badly burnt in endeavouring to save a dancing girl whose skirt had caught fire. Shah Jehan was so distressed that he sent a message to Surat, commanding that the doctor of the English factory there should come to court immediately. Gabriel Boughton went at once and succeeded in saving Jahanara. When Shah Jehan bade him name his reward, Boughton would take neither gold nor jewels, neither place at court nor grant of land. All he asked, in return for his services, was permission for the East India Company to trade in Bengal from that date. Shah Jehan granted this, and Boughton's name comes down to us as not only the man who primarily secured
for England a right of entry into Bengal, but also as one of that band of Englishmen who at all times have been content to spend themselves, without personal reward, for the sake of their country. Boughton subsequently returned to England, prospered as a merchant, and died at Bath in 1689. He was not the first Englishman to visit the court of the King of Delhi and solicit a trading concession. In 1593, during Akbar's time, three Englishmen had reached Fatehpur Sikri, bearing a letter from Elizabeth. One died, one remained in Akbar's service, and the third, Ralph Fitch, returned to London, traded as a merchant and founded the Company, to which a Royal Charter was given in 1600, and in whose service Boughton was in 1654. Subsequently, in 1609, Captain Hawkins gained access to the emperor Jehangir, and, later in 1615, he was followed by Sir Thomas Roe. In spite of autograph credentials from James I, neither of these men secured any real concessions for the Company to trade beyond the Gujerat area, and it was left to Doctor Boughton, by virtue of his rôle as a medicine man, to secure that first permit to trade in Bengal which ultimately led to the consolidation of British power in India. For that achievement, pregnant with little foreseen consequences, his memory is preserved.

Of John Zephaniah Holwell we know more, and rightly so, for his name is associated gloriously with one of the saddest incidents in our history in India. He belonged to a prosperous Devonshire family which had suffered severely in support of the Stuart cause during the Commonwealth. His father was a London merchant, and his grandfather an Astronomer Royal. J. Z. Holwell was born in Dublin on September 23, 1711, and at an early age was sent to school at Richmond in Surrey, where he showed an aptitude for classics. His father intended him to be a merchant and sent him later on to Holland, where he learnt French, German, Dutch, and book-keeping. He next passed into a banker's office in Rotterdam, but owing to his bad health he returned to England and expressed a decided aversion to mercantile life. His father decided to make him into a doctor and accordingly articled him to a surgeon in Southwark, from whom he passed to the care of Mr. Andrew Cooper, the senior surgeon of Guy's Hospital. On leaving hospital, Holwell engaged as surgeon's mate on board an Indiaman, which arrived in Calcutta in 1782. From here he made four voyages in the Company's ships as surgeon, visiting Mocha and Jeddah and acquiring a fluent knowledge of Arabic. Subsequently, he was employed on shore, going twice with the escort which accompanied
the annual trading column to the Company's factory at Patna. On these occasions, Holwell had the rank of surgeon-major. For a while he was surgeon to the factory at Dacca, but returned to Calcutta at the end of 1736, where he was elected to an aldermanship in the mayor's court. In the spring of 1740, Holwell was appointed assistant surgeon to the hospital, and having been brought on the fixed establishment by a despatch from the Court of Directors, dated March 22, 1742, he soon became principal surgeon to the Presidency, and for two years in succession he was elected mayor. Owing to bad health, Holwell returned to England in 1748, and, during the voyage home, drew up a scheme for correcting abuses in the zemindari Court at Calcutta; this scheme he presented to the Court of Directors, who, adopting it, appointed him perpetual zemindar with fiscal and magisterial powers and a seat in Council, twelfth in seniority. This post he accepted and returned to India in 1751.

Holwell was now a covenanted civilian on a salary of two thousand rupees a month, a vast change from his former status as a surgeon when to use his own words, "he could charge no more than fifty rupees for three months' attendance and medicine." Owing to the success of his administration, the Directors raised his pay to six thousand rupees a month and withdrew the prohibition against his rising in the Council, which was a condition originally imposed on his appointment. By 1756, he had risen to the position of seventh in Council. To appreciate the position it is necessary to go back a little. Consequent on the concession which Boughton had obtained from Shah Jehan, the Company had obtained a footing through Job Charnock, their agent in Madras, for trade at the village of Sutanutti on the bank of the Hughli in Bengal. This settlement went through many vicissitudes, but by the end of 1696 it included the contiguous villages of Calcutta and Govindpur. The fifty years which followed brought many ups and downs but a gradual extension of trade and jurisdiction for the Company. By Holwell's time, Calcutta had reached an advanced stage of industrial progress, and its area extended three miles along the bank of the river. Nearly midway between these limits were the factory and a little fort. This, from a military point of view, was faulty, in bad condition, and weakened by propinquity of warehouses and other buildings which limited effective defence.

The year 1756 brings us to the close of the viceroyalty of the Nawab Ali Verdi Khan, who ruled Bengal for the king of Delhi.
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The Company had been on fairly good terms with this viceroy. He was succeeded by Siraj ud Dowla, who was not slow to find reasons for quarrelling with the English settled in Bengal, and early in June of that year led an army of 50,000 men to attack and sack Calcutta. The garrison of that place consisted of about 250 men, including Eurasians and Portuguese half-castes. In face of the threatened danger strenuous efforts were made to increase the garrison, and by the middle of June it mustered 515 in all, of whom only 196 were Europeans. Early on June 16, Siraj ud Dowla approached with his army and attacked. This attack was resisted successfully till the morning of the 18th, when a most fierce assault was made on the battery to the eastward and some outposts in the jail close to it. This post was held by a detachment commanded by Holwell who, after seven hours’ defence, had to abandon it and fall back into the fort. Here the utmost disorder prevailed, characterized by dissensions among the military and civilians accompanied by cowardice on the part of Mr. Drake, the Governor, various members of Council, and not a few of the military officers. During the 19th the situation became worse, and in the course of that day the governor, the adjutant-general, and chief civil and military officers embarked for the ships lying in the river. The remnant of the garrison now insisted that all ideas of command based upon official standing or seniority should be disregarded, and the absolute command given to the man best fitted for action in the crisis. Although he was not the senior member of Council left behind, the general voice of the garrison called on Holwell to take the command. This he did and, counting the numbers left after the great desertion, found that the garrison was but 171 all told. By noon of the 20th, twenty-five of these had been killed and many wounded. The enemy continued to attack fiercely and by four in the afternoon of June 20, 1756, the fort and whole settlement of Calcutta had been wrested from the English. For a due understanding of what was to come some explanation is necessary as to the arrangements of certain parts of the fort.

The main entrance to the old fort of Calcutta, which was on a different site to the existing Fort William, was through a fortified gate in the eastern curtain. At each side of this gate extended a range of chambers or barrack-rooms. These were built on to the curtain and divided into sections by light cross walls, the roofs of the rooms so obtained being the parapeted terrace of the curtain. We are concerned only with the rooms between the gate and the south-east bastion. The first was a guard-room, the next a barrack-
room, while, beyond it and separated by a partition wall, came another room adapted for and used as a cell for prisoners. In this room, which was eighteen feet by fourteen feet, there ran a raised platform just wide enough for men to lie. The door of this room opened inwards and communicated with the barrack-room. Originally, this room, like the other rooms, had opened by two arches into a twelve-foot verandah on the outer edge of which were two corresponding arches. To convert this room into a safe place for the confinement of prisoners, the two inner arches had been bricked up to two feet from the top, thus leaving to this chamber two small semicircular windows, which were heavily barred. This arrangement resulted in any so-called ventilation being only into the verandah. We thus conceive this chamber to be bounded on the east and south by dead walls, on the north by the partition wall and door leading to the barrack-room, and on the west by the bricked-up arches, the barred windows in which faced straight into the late afternoon and evening sun on a Calcutta day in June, and admitted only such air as circulated in the heated verandah similarly exposed to the west.

On the fort falling into the enemy's hands, 146 persons became prisoners; they were of all colours, many wounded, and all in a state of the greatest exhaustion. Among them was one woman, a Mrs. Carey, wife of a captain of one of the Company's ships who also was one of the captives. At nightfall, orders were given that all the prisoners should be placed in safe custody for the night. The safest place was deemed to be the prisoners' room just described, and which, from that time has been known as "the Black Hole of Calcutta." Holwell, having been amongst the first to be thrust into this confined and ill-ventilated room, gained a place by one of the windows. The horrors of what happened through that night can be well imagined; they are described in Holwell's own letters and graphically reproduced in "Echoes from Old Calcutta." By Busteed. As that night was the hottest and sultriest of the year, it needs little imagination to picture the agonies endured by those confined in that room for the ten hours which followed from 8 p.m. of June 20, 1756. Even in that charnel house, Holwell seems to have kept his head and acted as the chief of that forlorn party of 146. Ultimately, like many others, he became unconscious but, when the door was opened at 6 a.m. he was still alive. Of the 146 who entered that terrible room only 23 came out alive, and among these were Holwell and Mrs. Carey, but not the latter's husband. In the same holocaust, Mrs. Carey
lost also her mother and a sister aged 10; she herself was but 18 at the time, but lived for many years, dying in Calcutta on March 28, 1801.

It is questionable whether Siraj ud Dowla can be held to be directly responsible for the confinement of Holwell and his companions in the room in which so many met their death, as he appears merely to have given orders that they be held safely for the night; but he cannot be acquitted of callousness and want of care to see that they were not inhumanly treated, nor of want of concern for their welfare when he learned next morning of the terrible sufferings they had undergone during the night. All the interest he displayed was to order that the four chief survivors, namely, Holwell, Burdett, Court, and Walcot be detained to furnish information as to concealed treasure, and that the others quit the place before sunset under the penalty of cutting off their noses and ears. Most of these survivors made their way to the ships. The four detained were sent to Murshidabad; that journey lasted a fortnight, the prisoners being conveyed by river in a leaky boat without shelter for night or day. Their food was rice and the river water, and as all were covered with boils and heavily ironed, their sufferings even after release from the "black hole" must have been intense. On arrival at Murshidabad, they were led in chains through the crowded city. This ignominious treatment seems to have been imposed without orders from Siraj ud Dowla as, when he reached Murshidabad, he ordered the release of Holwell and his companions, directing that they be conducted wherever they wished to go, and that care be taken that they suffered no trouble or insult. On being released from Murshidabad, Holwell and his companions made their way to the ships at Fulta. A few months later, Calcutta was recovered by Clive, and Holwell returned to the scene of his recent troubles. Being shattered in health, he was sent home in February, 1757, and on the voyage wrote his account of the siege and loss of Calcutta, and the harrowing incidents which followed. In consideration of his remarkable and meritorious services the Court of Directors nominated him to return to Bengal as successor to Clive, this he declined, but accepted the appointment of second member in the Council. He returned to Calcutta in 1758, and succeeded Clive as acting Governor of Bengal on the latter proceeding home in February, 1760. He held the governorship but a few months, as he did not get on well with the Court of Directors. In consequence of persistent differences of opinion between the Council in Calcutta and the Court of Directors at home, the latter
ordered the instant dismissal of Holwell, Manningham, Frankland, and Mackett, all members of Council; but, before the despatch reached India, Holwell asked permission to resign the service. His letter, making this request, contains the following passage:

"The many unmerited, and consequently unjust remarks of resentment which I have lately received from the present Court of Directors, will not suffer me longer to hold a service, in the course of which my steady and unwearied zeal for the honour and interest of the Company might have expected a more equitable return."

The permission was given and he retired from the service in September, 1760.

Holwell, whose association with the profession of medicine had long been lost sight of, returned to England and settled down to literary pursuits, chiefly in respect of the mythology, cosmogony, fasts, and festivities of the Hindus. In these fields he soon became an authority. Holwell was twice married; three of his children survived him, namely, Colonel James Holwell, of Southborough, Kent, a Mrs. Birch, and Mrs. Swinny. Holwell himself died at Pinner near Harrow on November 5, 1798. An obituary notice of his death says he was one "in whom brilliancy of talents, benignity of spirit, social vivacity, and suavity of manners were so eminently united as to render him the most amiable of men."

Complimentary as that notice is, it does but imperfect justice to the merits and nobility of the man. No one can read the records of the survivors of the "black hole" and fail to be impressed by the obedience and affection which Holwell inspired, and which the sufferers maintained for him in that den of horrors. When the struggle for water at the windows had been going on for four hours, and Holwell's immediate companions were dead at his feet, he thought it useless to prolong his own pain and misery while being slowly pressed to death by the pressure of those struggling behind him. He, therefore, asked leave to fall back to the centre of the room and so make space for others nearer the window; there he fell down near the sleeping platform and was found still alive on the next morning, lying among a heap of corpses. As suggestive of the confidence which Holwell's abilities inspired, it may be mentioned that when, in November, 1759, Clive denuded Calcutta of fighting men, he did not hesitate to place the old fort in the command of Holwell with a small force of militia. But, probably, the best proof of his merits lies in the high estimation in which he was held by his fellows when they called on him to take the command, at a time when all was critical and alarming; if this
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be not enough, we have the unselfish veneration evinced for him by his struggling and suffocating fellow captives in the moment of their own great agony. And what was Holwell’s reward for being the gallant defender of Calcutta’s fort, and the asserter of the nation’s reputation, when all those who should have stayed had run away? Thanks, grudgingly given, and within three years, a sentence of dismissal.

Bad as was the treatment meted out to Holwell by the Court of Directors, succeeding generations of his countrymen in Calcutta displayed even less respect and tenderness for his memory. At his own expense Holwell erected a monument to the memory of those who had died in the “black hole.” This he placed over their common grave, which was in the fort ditch. One would have expected that every Briton in Calcutta would have regarded its preservation as a personal trust. No, it was allowed to go to ruin and all trace of it so lost that no knowledge survives of what became even of its inscription tablet. It was left to Lord Curzon to remove this reproach from the premier city of India, and to that viceroy Calcutta owes the erection of the present-day Holwell monument, and the inscriptions on it giving the carefully gathered names of those who perished during her short siege. The present monument is not on the site of the one erected originally by Holwell; it really marks the site of the prison in the old fort and known as the “black hole.” It was impossible to do more than this, as the site of the common grave has long been obscured by the erection of the Custom House which now stands where the old fort stood. All that is to be seen of the original fort are two lines of twelve arches, a portion of the piazza that was within the south curtain.

One hardly knows how far an article of this kind will appeal to the readers of the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, but the knowledge of men like Boughton and Holwell should ever be an asset. Both were doctors and both did their country good service. The only discordant note which forces itself on one’s ear, is that which brings home the fact that neither of these men really earned the repute they have by the sole merit of Physic as a profession. This is a characteristic defect of our calling too obvious even in our day. Wherein lies the remedy it is difficult to say; we can but hope that it will be found. Certainly neither Boughton nor Holwell would be known to us in this day on their actions as doctors; they come down to posterity as Boughton the trader, and Holwell the Governor. In fact, to this day, few men
in the Civil Service of India know or think of Holwell having been other than a covenanted civilian of Bengal. If too often, the practice of Physic mean but failure to gain the honours and glories of Society, we can console ourselves with the thought that the heroism of failure is often greater than the heroism of success. This may be a crude philosophy, but it is satisfying to the simple-minded, to the altruistic, and to the unambitious. The hardship lies in the circumstance that all doctors are not simple-minded, not altruistic, and not devoid of ambition. To many of these latter, it is to be feared that often the possession of a medical qualification is as a millstone round the neck.