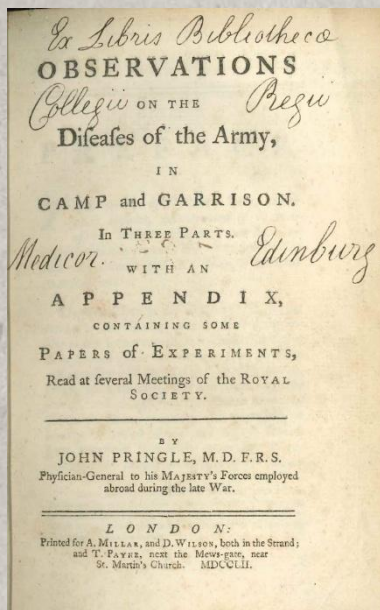




**You are warmly invited to attend
our second Talk of the New Year
at Millbank (and on Zoom),
1830hrs, Friday 27 February 2026**

Our guest speaker, Iain Macintyre, presents

Sir John Pringle (1707-1782); bringing Enlightenment thinking to the battlefield



Pringle's ability to present the strongest case for change was achieved through case studies, each of which was written specifically for a different type of military leader, and was subsequently highly successful in instigating major reforms.

Hilary Morris, PhD thesis, p.167

This talk will demonstrate some of the ways in which Sir John Pringle brought Enlightenment thinking to the Battlefield, both during his army career as physician-general and for decades afterwards through his highly influential book, *Observations on the Diseases of the Army*. It will explore how Pringle's thinking and the reforms he brought to the army contributed much to our understanding of communicable disease and its prevention.

(More detail below)

Proceeds will support the Museum of Military Medicine

Prior registration required. Refreshments from 1730hrs; Supper at 2000hrs

Register [HERE](#) or via www.friendsofmillbank.org



info@friendsofmillbank.org



www.friendsofmillbank.org



More about Sir John Pringle

John Pringle's education was crucial in enabling him to make the observations, to ask the questions and to formulate the hypotheses which he applied to the diseases he dealt with in his army career. Before his medical career Pringle studied philosophy at the University of St. Andrews for five years. His last year was devoted to the study of the reasoning of Francis Bacon and this was to have a powerful influence on his thinking throughout his professional life. In his medical studies at Edinburgh and Leiden he learned about and adopted the medical philosophy of Thomas Sydenham, another important influence. In Leiden he was also inspired by Boerhaave's emphasis on clinical observation.

His background in philosophy led to his appointment, at the height of the Scottish Enlightenment, as a Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University, a post which he combined with his medical practice.

The patronage of the Earl of Stair, commander of the British forces based in Flanders saw his appointment as physician-general to the army. In the campaigns in Flanders and during the later Jacobite rising, his observations on diseases led to his greater understanding of their causes and this in turn allowed him to develop and implement their prevention. His preventative measures included improved hygiene, greater spacing and ventilation and fumigation of what are now called fomites.

The talk gives specific examples from 'malignant fever', 'flux' and 'itch' which we now know to be typhus, bacillary dysentery, and scabies. The hypotheses which he formed and the conclusions which he drew were set out in *Observations on the Diseases of the Army*, published 1752, regarded as the first textbook of military medicine (as opposed to surgery).

After his military career Pringle continued to develop methods to prevent and to treat what are now called communicable diseases. His experiments on antiseptics earned him the Copley medal (the most prestigious award of the Royal Society). It is noteworthy, and hardly surprising, that he was elected President of the Royal Society in London in 1772, holding this role until 1778, and in which capacity he delivered six annual discourses, afterwards collected into a single volume and published posthumously (1783).

The talk will show how Pringle's work contributed to the concept of germ theory of communicable disease and summarise the many contributions which Pringle made to military medicine and beyond. It will argue that it was his focus on observation and his adoption of inductive reasoning that enabled him to make these contributions.





Our Guest Speaker



Iain Macintyre

Iain Macintyre MB ChB MD FRCSEd was successively Director of Education, Secretary then Vice President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, the latter during its 500th anniversary celebration in 2005. His consultant practice in Edinburgh was in general and upper-gastrointestinal surgery, latterly becoming Clinical Director, surgical services, Lothian. He served as surgeon to the Queen in Scotland until he retired in 2004.

He now researches, writes and lectures on the history of medicine. His books include [*Surgeons' Lives*](#), [*Scottish Medicine – An Illustrated History*](#) (joint author) and [*Chamber of Curiosities, a guide to Surgeons' Hall Museums*](#). He has published over 120 peer-reviewed papers, which in recent years have been on history of medicine topics.

His work on military medicine and surgery includes [*Scotland's Contribution to Naval and Military Medicine and Surgery*](#) (joint editor; Helion, 2024; this includes contributions by several Friends of Millbank), and *Medicine and Surgery in the 1745 Jacobite Rising*. J. Soc. Army Historical Research, 2024;102;16-58

Iain is a past President of the British Society for the History of Medicine. He delivered the first John Blair Trust Lecture '[John Blair and his Legacy to the History of Medicine](#)' at the BSHM Congress in Leeds on 13 September 2025. You can view the recording on our Tributes page, and here too: <https://youtu.be/1B8J3WydVpE>. The John Blair Trust actively promotes the study of the history of medicine by undergraduate students of medicine and allied sciences, see <https://bshm.org.uk/about-us/john-blair-trust/>

Former hobbies like gaining a private pilot's licence to fly light aircraft and sailing his 10-metre yacht have now given way to gentler pursuits like Wikipedia editing and Pilates.





Recommended reading

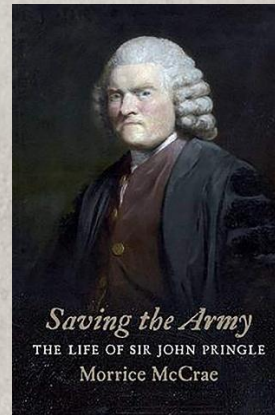
Pringle, John. *Observations on the Diseases of the Army, in Camp and Garrison. In Three Parts.* (London: Millar, Wilson & Payne, 1752)

Available via Internet Archive, see: https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_observations-on-the-dise_pringle-john_1753

McCrae, Morrice. *Saving the Army: The Life of Sir John Pringle.* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2014)

See book review at:

<https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/inr.2017.0153>



Morris, Hilary. *Military and naval campaigning on behalf of the health of society, with reference to eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain.* PhD thesis. University of Portsmouth.

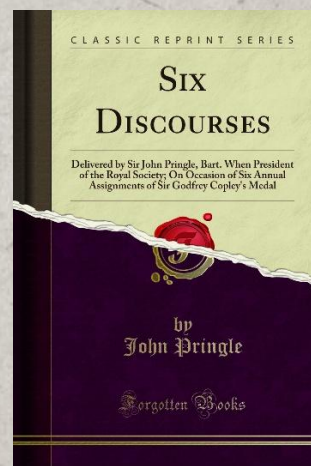
<https://pure.port.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/11009512/ThesisPDF.pdf>

(See especially Chapter Four: *The role of military and naval medical officers in the development of quantifiable evidence*)

Six Discourses, delivered by Sir John Pringle when President of the Royal Society... (1783). Available online and in the Classic Reprint Series.

Available via Internet Archive, see:

https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_six-discourses-delivered_pringle-sir-john-bart_1783/mode/1up



Friends of Millbank



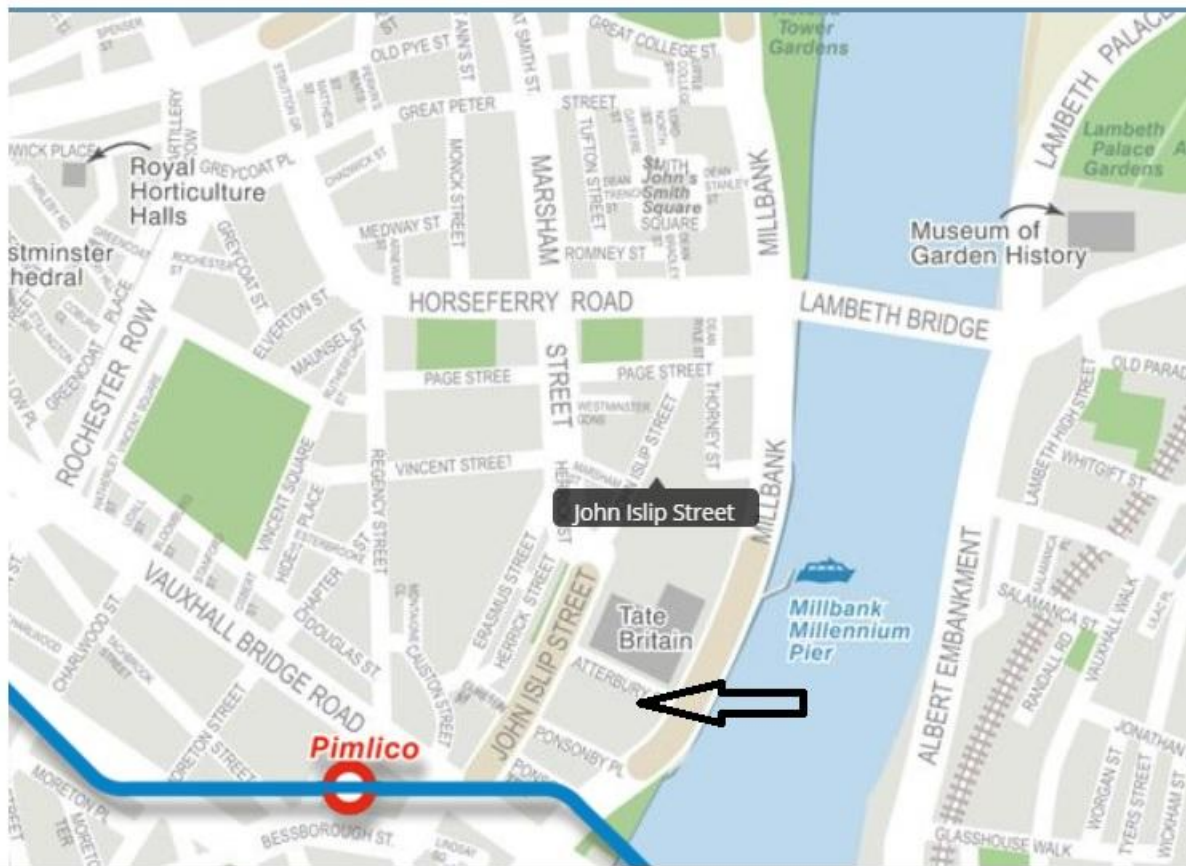
Directions for Millbank (Chelsea College of Arts, formerly the Royal Army Medical College)

The entrance to Reception is via Atterbury Street, opposite Tate Britain (arrowed on map below).

We meet for light refreshments at Reception from 1730hrs. The talk commences at 1830hrs.

Guests and non-members are always welcome. Everyone attending the talk, whether at Millbank or online via Zoom, is requested to register beforehand, see www.friendsofmillbank.org

LondonTown.com - John Islip Street Location Map



info@friendsofmillbank.org



www.friendsofmillbank.org