‘Midwife’ is an Old English word meaning ‘with woman’. It is not clear exactly why men moved into the birthing chamber but ‘man-midwives’ were increasingly in practice by the seventeenth century. They began to write and circulate texts describing the best way to manage complicated labours and births, and to develop instruments, including forceps, with which to deliver babies.

One of the earliest English man-midwives to write about his work was Percival Willoughby (1596-1685), the grandson of Francis Willoughby who built Wollaton Hall in Nottinghamshire. Percival Willoughby established an extensive midwifery practice in Derby and the surrounding area between 1631 and 1672. He left notes from 150 of his cases, cautioning against the indiscriminate use of instruments. His Latin records were not published until they appeared as Observations on Midwifery in 1863.

His contemporary, François Mauriceau (1637-1709) achieved greater fame and influence through English translations of his work. Such men were called to help at births only when complications arose. By the nineteenth century however, ‘man-midwives’ were increasingly present at routine deliveries. Nevertheless, it was not until 1886 with the passing of the Medical Act, that doctors needed a qualification in midwifery as well as medicine and surgery before being allowed to work professionally. Midwifery became for most Victorian and early twentieth century doctors a regular element within a family practice, though attendance was generally limited to wealthier women, with poor women relying on their local midwife for care. It was not until the twentieth century that obstetrics began to develop as a distinct hospital based specialty.

Not just women’s work?

‘Man-midwifery’ and the science of obstetrics