

Percivall Pott

With his plum velvet coat, lace ruffles, knee britches and sword, surgeon Percivall Pott cut a stylish figure at Barts Hospital 250 years ago. Yet he would eventually stand out for his dedication to making surgery more humane in a brutal age.

If you needed surgery in 18th-century Britain, the cure was almost certainly going to be worse than the disease – unless you were a patient of Percivall Pott at Barts. Today, we chiefly remember Pott for the conditions that still bear his name – ‘Pott’s fracture’ and ‘Pott’s disease’ (TB of the spine) – as well as Pott’s Puffy Swelling (extradural abscess). But his real legacy may lie in the fact that he tried to make surgery more bearable for his patients.

Born in London’s Threadneedle Street in 1714, he was the son of a solicitor from an old, established City family, with a mother who had links to the founders of the Bank of England. His private education in Darenth, Kent, was supervised by a relation, the Bishop of Rochester, and it is thought that because he came from a better background than most of his peers, he generally raised the status of surgery in London.

Consideration for patients

Potts was a lifelong Barts man. After showing an early interest in medicine, he became apprenticed to Edward Nourse in 1729 for 200 guineas and prepared dissections for anatomical lectures and sketched specimens. In 1745, he was appointed assistant surgeon at Barts and promoted to surgeon in 1749. He would remain in post until 1787.

During his long tenure in office, he became renowned for being intensely concerned with the basic comfort of both his private and ward patients and he actively sought to perform operations in a humane fashion, and avoided the use of cautery (where hot metal instruments were used to burn tissue and stop bleeding – a painful practice that caused extensive tissue damage). His consideration



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for his patients meant he built one of London’s largest and most fashionable private practices.

Then, in 1756, Pott fell from his horse on the Old Kent Road while visiting a patient at Kentish Lock Hospital, sustaining a compound fracture of the leg, near the ankle – still known as Pott’s fracture. He refused to be moved, lying on a cold pavement, until proper arrangements had been made and he could be stretchered to his home.

Surgeon colleagues recommended amputation of the limb. But he and his mentor Nourse succeeded in curing the leg without amputation by placing it in a splint (extending the muscles) – a major advance in treatment of fractures.

Controversial treatise

Pott’s accident began his writing career and he published a series of pamphlets that cemented his reputation including ‘Fractures and Dislocations’ (which described his injury among others) and the controversial ‘Treatise on Ruptures’. He also began

a lecturing career in 1761. To his students, he was lively, interesting and practical. Surgical books were all very well in terms of theory, but Pott valued experience and taught by the bedside.

Stop-watch surgery

He derided those who used lots of instruments instead of a few simple ones, and urged pupils to put dexterity before mere speed. Time, he felt had “produced a most absurd custom of measuring the motion of a surgeon’s hand as jockeys do that of the feet of a horse, viz by a stop-watch.”

Pott’s other claim to fame is describing the first occupational cancer, cancer of the scrotum in chimney sweeps – which, he believed, was caused by the lodging of soot in the scrotum.

Through it all, Pott took pride in being neat and stylish. The plum velvet coat and flashy accessories were always donned for important hospital occasions and, until the end of his life, he maintained a youthful appearance.

Barts really was Pott’s life. Only a year after leaving the hospital, he caught pneumonia from a patient and died. Honest and generous to those less fortunate, his own words sum up his life better than any others: “My lamp is almost extinguished; I hope it has burned for the benefit of others.”