

James Parkinson – East End doctor who discovered shaking palsy

As an angry young political activist and government critic in 18th-century Britain, this pioneering doctor went under the alias of Old Hubert. His true identity was James Parkinson, the London Hospital surgeon who gave his name to the shaking palsy.

Accused of plotting to kill King George III; an anonymous writer of anti-government propaganda; member of secret societies; surgeon; geologist and expert on fossils – welcome to the everyday life of East End lad James Parkinson.

Today, we really only know this remarkable doctor through his description of Parkinson's Disease – the shaking palsy – yet his high principles and wide-ranging interests led him to a life far beyond the boundaries of medicine.

That he was shaped by being born and bred in the poverty-stricken East End is certain. Young James started life in Shoreditch in 1755, the son of an apothecary and surgeon with a practice in Hoxton Square, which he would eventually take over.

Practical experience

In 1776, Parkinson became a 'dressing pupil' of Richard Grindall, Surgeon of the nearby London Hospital. There was no medical college – that came in 1785 – so his experience was practical –

attending rounds and helping change patients' dressings twice a day. This was followed by an apprenticeship with his father, qualifying in 1784, after which his name appeared on a list of surgeons approved by the Corporation of London.

Along the way, he developed a powerful sense of social justice and, by the early 1790s, was a radical thinker, outspoken critic of the government and strong advocate of the underprivileged. These were revolutionary times – Parkinson's zeal followed hot on the heels of the French Revolution – and he published numerous controversial pamphlets under the pseudonym 'Old Hubert'.

The Pop-gun plot

His agenda included reform and representation of the people in the House of Commons, annual parliaments and universal suffrage. In 1794, he wrote an influential pamphlet called *Revolutions Without Bloodshed or Reformation Preferable to Revolt*.

This was published just before the so-called Pop-gun Plot, reportedly a plan to assassinate

King George III by poison dart at the theatre. Parkinson admitted to membership of societies implicated in the plot and was questioned about it by the Privy Council under oath. Luckily, he escaped unscathed, avoiding imprisonment.

Politics' loss was medicine's gain. Parkinson accelerated his medical writing from then on, publishing a wide range of works. Public safety and the general health and wellbeing of the population remained key concerns. He would join The London Hospital staff in a campaign highlighting rabies, and showed his deep-seated compassion in 1811 in championing for regulation of madhouses and legal protection of the mentally ill.

In 1817, at the age of 62, he published his most famous work *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, because, he claimed, discovering the nature and cause of the disease "did not seem likely to be taken up by those, who, from their abilities and opportunities, were most likely to accomplish it." He included carefully documented case histories of sufferers, some of whom he met casually in the street.

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Honorary gold medal

Parkinson believed the disease that would eventually bear his name was a disorder of the medulla, or upper spinal cord, and described it as: "Involuntary tremulous motion, with lessened muscular power, in parts not in action and even when supported; with a propensity to bend the trunk forwards, and to pass from a walking to a running pace: the senses and the intellects being uninjured."

In 1822, he became the first recipient of the Honorary Gold Medal of the Royal College of Surgeons.

During the last 20 years of his life, he developed a love of geology and palaeontology (the study of fossils), publishing a three-volume series on the latter, which became the first standard book on the subject.

This clever, caring father of six, reformer, political agitator, natural scientist and doctor, was a classic Eastender – baptised, married and buried at the church where he worshipped, close to his childhood home and practice, where today a plaque erected by The London Hospital, commemorates one of its most remarkable sons.

Left: An apothecary talking to drinkers outside an alehouse. It's thought the artist may have had Parkinson in mind when he drew the image.