


 the  
vault

Joseph Merrick,  
Sir Frederick  
Treves and the  
cardboard church  
Joseph made for  
a visiting actress

# The Elephant Man and The Royal London

**S**urrounded by crowds mobbing him, Joseph Carey Merrick, the so-called 'Elephant Man,' must have cut a tragic figure when police arrived at Liverpool Street Station in June 1886. Yet a surgeon's calling card tucked in his pocket would lead to lasting sanctuary at The London (now The Royal London) Hospital.

With his head out of all proportion to his body, Joseph Merrick had been earning his living for several years in the travelling 'freak' shows of the time.

Seeking his fortune on the Continent, he was abandoned in Belgium by a sideshow owner and robbed of his savings. A nightmarish journey back to London followed, ending in the distressing and chaotic scenes at Liverpool Street.

Luckily, Joseph had kept the business card of Sir Frederick Treves, the distinguished London Hospital surgeon who had examined him two years earlier. Uncertain what else to do, the police brought him to the hospital, and so began the happiest period of Joseph's adult life.

Without doubt, Joseph Merrick remains the best-known 'patient' of The Royal London, his life story immortalised in David Lynch's 1980 film, *The Elephant Man*, several stage plays and fiction and non-fiction books.

Born in Leicester in 1862, both Joseph and his sister were born with disabilities and the young boy experienced skin and bone changes while still a child (Treves diagnosed 'a case of congenital deformity').

Needing to earn a living from an early age – first as a cigar maker and then hawking trinkets – the attention he drew made this impossible. In 1879,

he entered the Leicester Workhouse and the two periods he spent there left him with a permanent dread of the institution.

Eventually, Joseph approached two showmen, Sam Torr and Tom Norman (known as 'The Silver King') with a plan to exhibit himself in a travelling show that arrived at an empty shop in the Whitechapel Road, opposite The London Hospital in 1884.

Treves' students, aware he had published articles about cases of 'monstrous' disease, alerted him to Joseph's presence. He examined the young man in 1884 and presented him to the Pathological Society, but Joseph returned to the sideshows.

When he eventually ended up at The London two years later, Joseph's plight moved even the hard-hearted Victorians. After a plea from hospital chairman Francis Carr Gomm, readers of *The Times* sent in £250 (with a donor providing a £50 annuity) so he could remain at the hospital. Hospital bylaws, which permitted admission of only the acutely ill, were altered, and a bedroom and bathroom (Joseph bathed daily to stop extruberences on his skin becoming foul) were converted for his use in the basement of the East Wing facing Bedstead Square.

For the last four years of his life, Joseph was looked after by the devoted Nurse Ireland, visited regularly by Treves and his students and enjoyed country holidays and outings. He loved making presents for visitors, including a cardboard church for the actress Madge Kendall that survives in the hospital museum, along with his hat and veil.

Many myths and mysteries survive him. Some sources, including the David Lynch film and even Treves' own book *The Elephant Man and Other*

*Reminiscences*, refer to Joseph incorrectly as John Merrick.

What caused his condition? Certainly, it wasn't the inflammatory elephantiasis recorded at the time. Modern tests have been inconclusive. Two contenders are Proteus Syndrome or Neurofibromatosis Type 1, which could have caused overgrowth or tumours.

On 11 April 1890, aged 28, Joseph was found dead on his bed. The official cause was asphyxia occasioned by the weight of his head. Treves writes that Joseph had always wanted to sleep 'like other people' but spinal problems meant he slept with his head resting on his knees.

The movie version has Joseph deliberately lying down for his last sleep: effectively committing suicide.



The Royal  
London  
Hospital  
Museum

publishes a 56-page  
book **Treves and the  
Elephant Man**,

including a transcript of Frederick Treves' reminiscence, commentaries and illustrations, costing £3.50.

This can be purchased from the museum on Newark Street or ordered by sending an email to [jonathan.evans@bartsandthelondon.nhs.uk](mailto:jonathan.evans@bartsandthelondon.nhs.uk)

