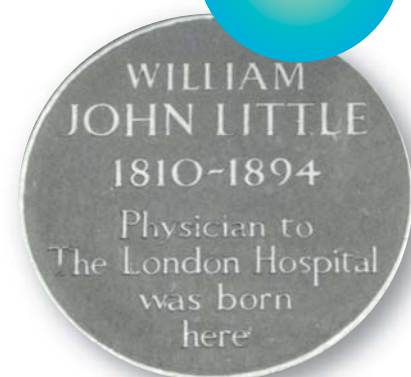


# William Little – orthopaedic pioneer

From humble beginnings as the son of a 19th-century East End pub landlord, William Little used his own disability to establish himself as the founder of British orthopaedic surgery during a long career at The London Hospital.



If anyone ever understood the phrase 'physician, heal thyself', it was orthopaedic surgeon

William Little. Born the son of an Aldgate publican in 1810 – his father ran the Red Lion Inn in Lemau Street – Little contracted polio as a small child.

It left him with paralysis in his left leg from below the knee, and caused talipes, a clubfoot-like deformity that would later provide the driving force for his surgical career.

Educated initially in Dover and then at a Jesuit College near Calais, he returned home at 18 to become a student at The London Hospital, qualifying in 1832.

## Constant search

From the start, he had a distinguished medical career, accompanying the hospital's renowned physician Dr Frederick Cobb to Newcastle to investigate the first outbreak of cholera in this country. But it was his constant search for ways in which his own disability might be treated that would define his professional life.

That quest took him to Hanover in Germany in 1836, where he studied a procedure pioneered by orthopaedic surgeon Louis Stromeyer, called a tenotomy (where tendons are cut to lengthen muscles shortened by the underlying condition). Little was so impressed with Stromeyer's results, that he decided to go under the knife himself to improve his clubfoot.

## Flourishing career

The operation was a success – so much so that Little stayed in Germany to train in the procedure and published one of the first papers on tenotomy.

By 1837, he was back in England, determined to forge his name as the leading advocate of tenotomy to cure deformities and he eventually rejoined The London Hospital. Here his career



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flourished. In 1839, he was elected assistant physician and then, in 1845, physician. He would work at The London for nearly a quarter of a century, resigning in 1863.

Little's reputation grew. He was also able set up as a consultant in Finsbury Square and mustered enough support – and funds – from like-minded

colleagues, that, in 1840, he opened the Orthopaedic Institution in Bloomsbury Square, the first-ever hospital in Britain dedicated to treating people crippled by their disability.

The need was great and bigger premises were bought for a 50-bed hospital that became the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital.

Alongside his practice, Little published several important papers. Today, we particularly remember him for giving his name to Little's disease. His description of congenital cerebral spastic diplegia (Little's disease) was published in *The Lancet* (in the 9th of his 'Lectures on deformities of the human frame') in 1843. His first investigation into the cause of spastic rigidity of the limbs of newborn children was presented in a paper to the Obstetric Society in 1862.

## Family followers

Orthopaedics turned out to be a family passion. Little's wife Eliza was herself the daughter of an orthopaedic surgeon, and two of his sons followed their father into the specialty. In fact, one of them, Louis Stromeyer Little (named for the surgeon who operated on his father), would tread much the same path early on – travelling to Germany, before joining The London Hospital as assistant surgeon. He also worked with cholera patients during the great East London epidemic in 1866.

William Little finally retired due to deafness, aged 74, and died at West

Malling in Kent, 10 years later, in 1894.

His brilliant career was commemorated in the 1960s, when a plaque from the London Hospital was erected on the Old Red Lion in Lemau Street acknowledging it as Little's birthplace and paying tribute to a life that began in an East End pub and ended as one of the true pioneers of British surgery.