

Dr. James Parkinson (1755-1824) was a London doctor whose famous essay entitled *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, published in 1817, established Parkinson's disease as a recognised medical condition.

James Parkinson was a remarkable man who was a pioneer not only in medicine but also in his scientific and political interests. He was born at 1 Hoxton Square, Shoreditch London, on 11th April 1755, the son of an apothecary/surgeon. For most of his life James Parkinson lived and later practised medicine in the house where he was born. This house no longer stands, but a commemorative blue plaque can be seen on the house that now stands on the site.

James Parkinson's Medical Career

James Parkinson studied at the London Hospital Medical College for 6 months when he was 20 and was then apprenticed to his father for 6 years, qualifying as a surgeon in 1784 when he was 29. A year and half after becoming a medical student, James became an honorary medallist of the Royal Humane Society for having assisted his father on 28 October 1777 in using resuscitation methods on a Hoxton man who had hanged himself.

On the death of his father in 1784, James Parkinson took over the practice at Hoxton Square. The practice was a large lucrative one that also cared for the poor of the parish. He also served as an attending doctor at a private local asylum for the mentally ill for over 30 years and took a keen interest in the welfare of people with mental illness.

He wrote extensively on medical subjects. Apart from the famous essay on 'the Shaking Palsy',

he wrote important papers and books on a diverse range of medical subjects, including:

- The effects of lightning
- the distinction between disorders of memory, dysphasia and true madness;
- texts to encourage parish fever wards;
- a report of the first case of appendicitis to be found in English medical literature which also was the first to recognise perforation (peritonitis) as the cause of death.
- Mental illness and reform in the Act regulating mad houses.
- Gout
- Education of medical students and apothecaries

James Parkinson was involved in many medical associations of his day, and served as President of the Association of Apothecaries for two years. At the end of his distinguished medical career, James Parkinson became the first recipient of the Honorary Gold Medal of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1822.

Other Achievements and Interests

As well as his medical achievements, James Parkinson had many other interests, including:

Geology and Science

James Parkinson is recognised as a founder of scientific palaeontology. He not only wrote several books on geology but was also one of the thirteen founder members of the British Geological Society, still in operation today. He was also an enthusiastic member of several other scientific societies.

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Social Reform

James Parkinson was a controversial social reformer and political activist who championed many causes and found it difficult to remain silent while people suffered. He lived during the reign of King George III, at a time when the standard of living was declining as a result of war and rising taxes. Representation in parliament for all citizens was non-existent and corruption was rife.

Under the pen name of 'Old Hubert', he wrote many pamphlets which were highly critical of the political system of the day and advocated the reform of popular representation in the House of Commons and universal suffrage. He also highlighted social concerns such as poverty, unfairness of taxes and wages, unfair imprisonment, poor prison conditions, education for the poor, and care for the elderly and disabled.

James Parkinson also became a prominent member of two outspoken societies at the time, the London Corresponding Society and the Society of Constitutional Information. The first aimed to bring about reform of the parliamentary representation of the people and some of their ideas were the foundation for the political system that exists in the UK today. However, in a time when there was no freedom of speech, many members of these societies were tried and convicted of treason, suffering severe punishment as a result.

As a result of his political activities, James played a key role in investigations into an alleged conspiracy to kill King George III, allegedly by firing a poisoned dart from the pit of a theatre (known as the 'Popgun Plot'). Five members of the London Corresponding Society were arrested for high treason in relation to this apparent plan, which never existed except in the mind of one man, Thomas Upton. Three of the others were accused based on letters forged by Upton, and one by being associated with Upton. James Parkinson was a witness for the defence during the Privy Council investigations and in the one trial which was subsequently held. All the accused were eventually freed. James Parkinson, in appearing for the defence and in

his writings, took significant risks with regard to his own career and life because he could have been prosecuted for his activities, the people and organisations he was associated with and for writing against the monarchy. His involvement in this affair shows that he was a man of principle and honour who believed these issues were too important to remain silent. This earned him the respect of the Privy Council and he was not prosecuted.

In later life, James Parkinson took on other responsibilities with humanitarian goals. This included highlighting the importance of the welfare of children who worked as apprentices, uncovering abuse and encouraging law reform governing apprentices to make review and inspection an integral part of the system.

Family and Church

James Parkinson married Mary Dale in 1781. They had 6 children and his son, John William Keys Parkinson's, also became a doctor and eventually took over the Hoxton practice.

James Parkinson was also churchwarden of St. Leonard's Church in Shoreditch, where he was baptised, married and buried. Although his grave is no longer identifiable, there is a memorial to him in the church, erected in 1955 to mark the 200th anniversary of his birth.

An Essay on the Shaking Palsy

In this famous essay, James Parkinson was the first person to make a clear description of the condition. This was based on observation of 6 cases he had either observed in his own practice or seen during walks in his neighbourhood. Only one of them did he examine and as such the description is incomplete. However, his account is still remarkable for its accuracy and clarity of expression. One of the aims of writing the essay was to encourage others to study the condition.

It was a French doctor, Jean Martin Charcot who really recognised his work some 60 years after James Parkinson wrote it and called the condition "Parkinson's disease"

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