

## THE CITY'S FIRST MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH

The Corporation of London's Annual Report for 1987/8 describes the origin of the City's Environmental Health Service as pre-dating the famous Poor Law Commission report in 1840. Certainly the Corporation had been active in what would now be called Public Health matters for a century or more but in a piecemeal and rather unco-ordinated fashion. Prior to 1840 the participation of the Medical Profession in matters of drainage, ventilation, housing, street cleaning and good quality water supply was not considered necessary. It was more the field of the engineer and the surveyor. However, the Commission's Report suggested the appointment of Medical Officers of Health in Local Authorities and after long and acrimonious debates the City made such an appointment in 1848. It was the second such appointment in the country — Liverpool had been the first, a year or so before.

Who was this first Medical Officer, a man later to be described as an illustrious figure in the history of 19th Century medicine. His career was the history of hygienic reform.

“Who was Who” sums him up in a few terse lines:

“Simon, Sir John, K.C.B. (cr.1887) F.R.S., born 1816 married Jane O'Meara. Officer of Health to City of London 1848-55, Privy Council 1858-76, President R.C. of Surgeons 1878-9, of Royal Society 1879-80. Address 40 Kensington Square, Club Athenaeum, Died July 1904.”

Happily for us his life and work are documented in rather more detailed fashion.

The Dictionary of National Biography gives more information and Plarr's “Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England” gives him a three page obituary, a lengthy tribute given to very few Surgeons before or since. Dr. Hugh John, the present Medical Officer of Health gives further details in his paper “The Medical Officer of Health, past, present and future” and there is also, a good reference in “Men and Women of the time”, 15th Edition, published in 1899.

However, the publication which gives us the greatest in-depth picture of Simon's life and work is the definitive study, published in 1963, Royston Lambert's, “Sir John Simon and English Social Administration”. There are also some very helpful family papers in the possession of Alderman Michael Graham, a Great-Great-Great Nephew of Simon.

John Simon (the accent is on the second syllable and pronounced ‘moan’) was born in the City, one of several sons of Louis Michael Simon and his second wife Matilda. His Father was a Stockbroker and wine agent of some substance.

Louis Michael was a member of the Stock Exchange Committee from 1835 to 1868 and by all accounts John Simon was brought up in a singularly happy and large family. Both John Simon's Grandfathers were born in France but both had settled in England at an early age in the previous century, hence the rather unusual pronunciation of the surname.

John was baptised at St. Olave's in Hart Street but at an early age his family moved to Blackheath as it was considered so much healthier than the City and his Father became a commuter some time before that term had been invented. John's Father's involvement in City affairs was not confined to business. He was a Liveryman of the Girdlers' Company and eventually became the "Father" of that Company and very influential in its affairs.

The move to Blackheath probably influenced the choice of John's education for he was sent to Dr. Burney's School in Greenwich. On leaving school he spent a year in Germany studying its language and sciences, before, at the age of 17, entering St. Thomas's Hospital as a pupil of Joseph Henry Green, one of the leading Surgeons of his day. Green was to influence Simon profoundly both in his Surgery and the direction his career was to take.

Simon was an apt pupil. At the age of 22 he was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy at King's College, London and two years later was elected the senior of two Assistant Surgeons at the newly opened King's College Hospital. Published work appeared early and a paper "A Physiological Essay on the Thymus Gland" led to his election as a Fellow of The Royal Society in 1845. As a Surgeon he belonged to the conservative school in that Profession, believing that amputations were a last resort and that all operations required meticulous planning and preparation.

Throughout his life he maintained his close connection with St. Thomas's. Switching to the study of Pathology, he became the Medical School's Lecturer in Anatomical Pathology in 1847. It was the first such appointment in this country. His election to full Surgeon at the hospital finally came in 1863.

His interest in Pathology was shewn by his original membership of the Pathological Society and an 1847 paper produced by him on "General Pathology as Conducive to the Establishment of Rational Principles for the Diagnosis and Treatment of Disease" was a watershed in his career. He himself said of this paper "I awoke to find myself famous, not as a surgeon but as a sanitary reformer". It made him known to a wider world and must have influenced the Court of Common Council in appointing him to their service the following year.

His work in the City over the next seven years was prodigious particularly when we remember that it was only a part-time appointment. He retained his hospital work and had a Private Practice. Between 1848 and 1855 it was said

that he drained the City properly and rendered it healthy. He abolished the system of central cesspools under houses, intra-mural slaughterhouses and conducted an active campaign against smoke, intra-mural graveyards, Thames pollution, impure water and overcrowded dwellings. Despite the vested interests who resisted many of his ideas — they were known as the “Filthy Party” on the Court of Common Council and their leader was nicknamed “Defender of the Filth” — the Corporation can surely take some credit for such an imaginative appointment and for its support for his work. He was only 32 years of age when he came to the City.

An example of his foresight is the City Cemetery at Little Ilford which the Corporation was persuaded to buy in 1853 and thus cease burials in the City itself. Today this serves not only City residents but much of North East London and South West Essex, a catchment area (if that is the right term) of a million people. The Cemetery and its associated Crematorium now has an international reputation, receives many foreign visitors and is a classic example of a wise decision proving its worth well over a century later.

Simon’s work in the City obviously fitted him for work on a wider stage and in 1855 he was appointed Medical Officer to the Local Government Board and in 1858 Medical Officer to the Privy Council, the Government’s Chief Medical Adviser.

For nearly half a century after leaving the City he was a dominant figure in public life and the medical world. To the end of his days he retained his connection with St. Thomas’s. He served as a Crown Member of the Medical Council until his eightieth year. He was President of The Royal College of Surgeons and The Royal Society. Numerous University degrees and medals from Learned Societies came his way. His published work continued to within a few months of his death.

In a life so dominated by work it seems remarkable to us today how wide were his interests outside his profession. His career naturally brought him in close contact with all the leading politicians and civil servants of the time but both Simon and his wife had a remarkable range of friends and acquaintances in the Arts and Literature. He had met Wordsworth on an early visit to the Lake District and later became a friend of Ruskin, Tennyson, Burne-Jones, William Morris, Kingsley and virtually every Pre-Raphaelite of note. He was a Classical scholar, an Orientalist and an excellent writer of prose. His wide interests undoubtedly gave the relaxation his busy life needed. It was complemented by a happy marriage and many supportive friends. Public Health was his life’s work but it was not his whole life.

Perhaps we can judge Simon’s achievements by looking at the life of a contemporary, Henry Rumsey. Rumsey was a fellow surgeon and one of the leading sanitariums of his generation. His advice was sought by Parliamentary

Committees and many others pressing for legislation on Public Health matters. His obituary has one telling sentence, "Lacking the science, philosophic insight, organising power and literary genius of Sir John Simon he (Rumsey) was none the less a great Man". Simon surely would have been content with that . . .

G.H.C.  
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