Dr JOSHUA PARSONS (1814–1892) OF BECKINGTON SOMERSET GENERAL PRACTITIONER

SPENCE GALBRAITH

A new surgery for the general practice in Beckington, a village near Frome in Somerset, was opened on St Luke’s Day, 18 October, 1995 by Dr Robert Fleming, a former general practitioner in the village. He had practised from Abbey House in Goose Street, a lovely old building built in the 16th century, rebuilt in the 17th century and added to in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is now a private house, but had long been the doctor’s house and surgery in Beckington (figure 1).

Fig. 1 Abbey House, Goose Street, Beckington, in 1994.
Dr Joshua Parsons (figure 2) was a previous practitioner in Beckington who lived in and worked from this same house from about 1845 to 1862. The material about him and his family presented here was assembled during recent research into the early career of a close friend of his, Dr John Snow, who became a famous epidemiologist and anaesthetist. The following information is necessarily incomplete because the focus of the enquiry was on John Snow rather than Joshua Parsons. Nevertheless, Mr Michael McGarvie, a prominent local historian in Somerset, suggested that it was timely to record this account of Joshua Parsons and his family, if only for the benefit of future researchers.

Fig. 2 Joshua Parsons about 1850 from a portrait in possession of Mr. Christopher Parsons, Westbury, Wiltshire.
Joshua Parsons was born on 30 December 1814, son of Joseph Parsons a maltster of Laverton, a small parish about 4 ½ miles north of Frome and 1 ½ miles from Beckington. In 1821, there were 36 inhabited houses in the parish, with a population of 133 spread around the little parish church of St Bartholomew, now named St Mary’s. The Will of a Joseph Parsons, maltster of Laverton, who died on 8th April 1837, mentions his wife Elizabeth and four children, Mary Ann, Prudence whose married name was Coombs, Joseph who was also a maltster of Laverton and William who was a printer of Wine Street in Bristol. The deceased may have been Joshua’s grandfather and Joseph, the son, his father. Unfortunately, no further information about this family was obtained. Joshua’s parents were baptists associated with the baptist chapel in Laverton built in 1814. It was probably extended in 1836, the date being upon the facade of the building. As might be expected, there were no records of the baptisms of the children of this non-conformist family in the baptismal register of the parish church of St Mary’s Laverton.

Joshua was educated at Radley near Abingdon, about four miles from Oxford, in a baptist school established in 1819 by Mr Benjamin Kent with the help of the Revd. Kershaw. It was known at first as the ‘Radley House Seminary’ and then as ‘Radley Hall Academy’, lasting for 25 years, until 1844. Three years later, in 1847, the present well-known public school, Radley College, was founded in the same premises which still stands today. Radley Hall was a large country house, built in the 1720s, surrounded by an attractive park landscaped in 1770 by the famous Lancelot (Capability) Brown. Two watercolours of the Hall, now in the Clore Gallery in London, were painted by JMW Turner in 1798 when at the age of 14 years he visited his uncle Mr Marshall in the nearby village of Sunningwell.

A prospectus of Benjamin Kent’s school for 1832 survives and reads –

‘The advantages of a Grammar School are combined with those afforded by a more comprehensive system of instruction; and while utmost attention is paid to intellectual cultivation, religious principles are affectionately inculcated; the moral habits are watched over with unremitted care; and whatever may promote the social and domestic comfort of the Pupils is anxiously consulted’

The fees were 25 guineas per annum for boarders aged less than 10 years, 30 guineas over 10 years and 60 guineas for ‘Parlour Boarders’ (boarders who lived with the headmaster’s family), with additional charges of 4 guineas for Latin and Greek and 2 guineas for mathematics. French, drawing, music and dancing were extra, while washing cost a further 3 guineas. The prospectus also tells us that single beds were provided without additional charges. There were 54 pupils in 1832, about half of whom were local boys but some of them came from as far afield as Devon, Kent and Worcestershire and three were from overseas. Unfortunately, no school documents from the 1820s survive so that the dates when Joshua Parsons attended the school are unknown. Even so, he must have left by 1828 to begin his apprenticeship to an apothecary in Southampton.

Joshua was probably a contemporary of Benjamin Archer Kent, the headmaster’s son, who was educated at the school. He left in March 1824 in order to start a career in medicine as an apprentice to an apothecary in nearby Oxford for 5 years, and then went to Edinburgh University in 1829 where he obtained an MD degree. Joshua would have known him either as a fellow pupil or as the apprentice apothecary who must have returned home to the school from time to time during his training. It is even possible that Benjamin Archer may have influenced Joshua in his choice of a medical career.

Interestingly, Benjamin Archer Kent played an important part in the introduction of ether anaesthesia into Australia in 1847. He must have been very familiar with John Snow’s work on ether anaesthesia and his design of an inhaler at that time, as well as the famous occasion when Snow was called upon to anaesthetise Queen Victoria at the birth of Prince Leopold on...
7th April 1853. Earlier, from 1836 until 1839, Dr Kent practised at 20 Harley Street, London, before leaving for Adelaide. Joshua Parsons and John Snow were students in London in 1836 and 1837 and they may well have met Dr Kent at that time.

MEDICAL TRAINING 1828-1837

In the early part of the nineteenth century, following the Apothecaries' Act of 1815, a formal scheme of medical education had begun to evolve. Surgeon-apothecaries, who first became known as general practitioners in the 1820s, started their student careers with an apprenticeship to an established practitioner for at least 5 years. The student then underwent a period of hospital training, known as 'walking the wards', often under a well-known hospital physician or surgeon in London, and was also required to attend prescribed courses of lectures. On completion of this instruction, the student was then permitted to sit the examination for a licence to practice. This examination was the responsibility of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the qualification then granted was Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries (LSA). Many students also sat the examination for Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS). Having passed both these examinations, practitioners became either assistants in a general practice or set up in practice directly on their own account.

The training of Joshua Parsons followed this pattern. The records of the Society of Apothecaries show that he was apprenticed to an apothecary, Mr Northon Thompson of Kingslere, Southampton for 5 years. The indenture is dated 13th November but the year is not clearly legible on the document, although it was probably 1828, when he would have been about 14 years of age. This was the usual age at which apprenticeship began at that time. His friend John Snow, for example, began his apprenticeship in Newcastle in 1827 at the same age of 14 years. Joshua Parsons then undertook his hospital training for 12 months, beginning in July 1835, at the North London Hospital which had opened in the previous year and later became known as University College Hospital. This was an obvious choice of hospital for a student with a non-conformist upbringing because the hospital was the medical faculty of University College, founded in 1828, in order to provide university education without reference to religious creeds or distinctions. Joshua completed his medical education by attending a course of instruction in 1836-37 at the well-known private medical school in Great Windmill Street, London. He passed his LSA examination on 12th October 1837 and obtained the MRCS at about the same time. His entry appears in one of the earliest editions of the Medical Directory 10 years later in 1847.

'Joshua Parsons, Beckington, Somersetshire. General Prat. MRCS. 1837; L.S.A 1837; Surgeon in the Frome Union.'

Amongst the friends of Parsons in his student days, referred to in his obituary in the British Medical Journal, were Mark Lemon and John Snow. Mark Lemon (1809-1870) achieved fame as the editor of Punch and a playwright. He was born in London near Oxford Circus, but after his father died in 1817 he lived with his Uncle, also Mark Lemon, a farmer in Hendon. He was educated at a school in Cheam under the Revd. James Wilding. At the age of 15 years he began training in the brewing trade under another uncle, Thomas Collis, a hop-merchant in Boston, Lincolnshire, and later was the manager of Verey's Brewery in Kentish Town. In 1835, he left brewing and began his career as a playwright, actor and author becoming the editor of Punch in 1841. He died in 1870 at his home in Crawley, Sussex. It must have been in 1836 or 1837 when Joshua was training in London that he met Mark Lemon and they became friends but, unfortunately, the account of Mark Lemon's life in the Dictionary of National Biography does not reveal anything about this friendship. More is known, however, about Joshua's other student friendship, with John Snow.
A STUDENT WITH JOHN SNOW 1836–1837

John Snow (1813–1858) was born in York. Little is known of his early education, except that he went to a private school in York. In 1827, he began his medical training as an apprentice to William Hardcastle in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Here he gained experience of cholera in 1832, soon after the disease had entered the country. He left the practice in 1833 and then worked as assistant first to John Watson an apothecary in Burnopfield, County Durham and then to Joseph Warburton an apothecary of Pateley Bridge in Yorkshire. In 1836 he moved to London to complete his medical education and to sit the qualifying examinations.

Snow enrolled at the Great Windmill Street School of Anatomy in the autumn of 1836, and it was here that he met Joshua Parsons. This medical school was founded in 1767 by William Hunter who purchased No. 16 Great Windmill Street and rebuilt it as a school of anatomy, the first purpose-built medical school in London. Originally, the school provided courses in anatomy and surgery, but at the time Joshua Parsons and John Snow were students the curriculum was more extensive including general medicine, materia medica and midwifery. The site of the school is now occupied by the Lyric theatre, but a piece of the wall of William Hunter's original school building remains and bears a blue plaque commemorating that this was the home and museum of Dr William Hunter anatomist from 1718 to 1783. The choice of this private medical school by both Joshua Parsons and John Snow was probably because of its high reputation. By 1836, however, many of the eminent senior teaching staff had left to take posts in the developing hospital medical schools and the school closed by the end of the decade. It is possible that the two students were influenced in their choice by the lower fees usually charged by the private medical schools compared with the schools of the London teaching hospitals.

John Snow died young at the age of 45 years in 1858. His biographer and friend Benjamin Ward Richardson corresponded with Joshua Parsons when writing the biography. Parsons wrote to him about John Snow –

"Our acquaintance commenced in 1836, at the Hunterian School of Medicine in Windmill-Street, where we were both dissecting at that time. It happened that we usually overstay our fellows, and often worked far on into the evening. The acquaintance thus grew into intimacy, which ended by our lodging and reading together. We were constant companions from that time until I left town, in October 1837."

Snow was then living at 11 Bateman's Buildings, Soho Square, so this must have been where they shared accommodation. It was a short alley way leading south from Soho Square and which remains today, although none of the original buildings has survived. Joshua also wrote that John Snow was at that time a strict vegetarian and recalled a long walk they made together –

"At the period of our co-residence he was a strict vegetarian, and many and great were the controversies held between us on the subject. These led to trials of our comparative strength and endurance, in one of which, on Easter Monday 1837, we walked to St Alban's, and back to town through Harrow, — a distance, I believe, of rather more than fifty miles. On reaching the Edgware Road, my companion was fairly beaten, and obliged to reach home in an omnibus."

ROBERT KEATE 1777—1857

Robert Keate was a well-known London surgeon who was born in Laverton on 14 March 1777, the son of William Keate the rector of Laverton. Although 37 years senior to Joshua, Robert may have known him and would certainly have known the Parsons family living in the same small parish. Robert entered the medical profession at the age of 15 years in 1792 when he was apprenticed to his uncle, Thomas Keate, a surgeon at St George's Hospital in
London. In 1800, Robert was appointed assistant surgeon to his uncle at St George's Hospital and succeeded him as full surgeon in 1813. He was Sergeant-Surgeon to Queen Victoria and twice was President of the Royal College of Surgeons. He continued to practice well into his 70s, until he was eventually persuaded to retire in 1853 by the Governors of St George's Hospital. He died in London on 2nd October 1857, aged 80 years.

John Snow certainly knew Robert Keate towards the close of his surgical practice in London because Snow recorded in his casebooks eleven occasions between 1848 and 1852 on which he gave anaesthetics for Mr Keate or that Mr Keate was present at the operation. Evidence is lacking, however, that Robert Keate and Joshua Parsons were known to each other or, in particular, that Keate had any influence upon Parsons' career.

GENERAL PRACTICE IN BECKINGTON 1837–1862

Joshua Parsons left London in October 1837 after obtaining his two qualifications and settled in Beckington. This was then on the turnpike road between Frome and Bath about 3 miles north east of the former and 10 miles from the latter. In 1821, there were 246 inhabited houses in the parish, with a population of 1,645, although, by 1841, this number had fallen to 1,173. It had formerly been a town of considerable importance concerned with the manufacture of woollen cloth, some of which was still being made in 1821 when the industry was obviously in decline.

Joshua may have been at first an assistant to an established practitioner. At the census taken on 6 June 1841, however, there were no other physicians, surgeons or apothecaries shown in the enumerator's returns either in Goose Street or elsewhere in the village. Most of the houses in Goose Street were occupied by people in the weaving trade or by labourers. It is possible, therefore, that Joshua set up in practice on his own and may even have been the first practitioner to reside in the village. The census returns show Joshua Parsons, Surgeon, aged 25, living in Church Street with a Mary Parsons aged 35, probably an elder sister or another relative, and a male servant. In this census the enumerators expressed ages over 15 years to the lowest term of five years, ie 15, 20, 25 etc.

Joshua married on 10 April, 1845 and probably then moved to Abbey House in Goose Street. John Snow stayed with him for 2 weeks in the autumn of 1845 but the small houses in Church Street would hardly have had sufficient room to accommodate him, again suggesting that the move took place before this date. Snow's visit is recorded in his biography and followed an illness which was probably acute nephritis—

'In the autumn of 1845 he paid a visit to his friend and old colleague, Mr Joshua Parsons, at Beckington, with whom he stayed a fortnight, enjoying himself very much. The friends resumed their old controversies, and the Doctor admitted that he had been obliged to relinquish his vegetable diet in favour of a mixed regimen. He improved greatly, says Mr Parsons, during his stay: but it was obvious that London life and hard study has a hold of him.'

When the next census was taken on 30 March 1851, the enumerator's return shows Joshua at 37 Goose Street which was likely to have been the number of Abbey House at that time. His wife's maiden name was Williams. (Figure 3) She is recorded as Lititia (sometimes spelt Latitia or Letitia), born in Bath, while Mary Parsons was no longer in the household. Joshua and Lititia had a large family, the first four children being listed in the return – Henry F Parsons aged 5 years, Alfred W Parsons aged 3 years, Joshua F Parsons aged 1 year and Catherine E Parsons aged 4 months. All four were born in Beckington. At the next census in 1861, Joshua's house was recorded as No 30 Goose Street, almost certainly the same house re-numbered in the street. The eldest son Henry was aged 15 and a scholar but neither the second son Alfred nor the third son Joshua were at home at the time of the census; the
daughter Catherine, aged 10 years, was also a scholar. There must have been six more children in the family but only five were recorded in the census, John aged 8 years, Samuel aged 5 years, Latitia aged 3 years, Herbert aged 2 years, and Edith aged 11 months. Alice Mary who was then aged 7 years and is recorded in the 1871 census aged 17 years, must have been away from home on census day.

Joshua Parsons, during the early part of his career in Beckington, was a strong supporter of the campaign for introducing the penny postage and he acted as agent to Rowland Hill in
promoting petitions to Parliament on the subject. He also advocated the repeal of the Corn Laws. According to his obituary in the *British Medical Journal*, these were the only political matters in which he ever publicly took part.

**THE ROAD MURDER OF 1860**

On the morning of Saturday 30th June 1860, William Kent aged 15 years arrived on the doorstep of Abbey House asking Dr Parsons to come urgently to Road Hill House on the edge of Road village (sometimes spelt Rode). This was about a mile distant, the home of Mr Samuel Savill Kent, a well-to-do civil servant who worked as a factory inspector, and his family. Dr Parsons dashed there in his carriage arriving just before 9.0 am, to find the scene of one of the most horrific and bizarre murders of the 19th century. William Kent's stepbrother, Francis Savill Kent aged 3 years and 10 months, had been brutally murdered. His body had been found clothed in his nightshirt and pushed into the garden privy with his throat cut almost from ear to ear. The murder not only shocked the neighbourhood but the whole country. Several books about this extraordinary killing were subsequently published, the first in 1861 by Dr Stapleton, a local factory doctor and friend of Mr Kent. The most recent book is a meticulously researched account by Bernard Taylor which provides the only complete explanation of the events in 1860 and of those that followed.

Dr Parsons, who performed the post-mortem with Dr Stapleton noted other injuries, namely, bruising around the mouth, a stab wound which penetrated three-quarters of the way through the chest and two small cuts on the finger of one hand. It was Dr Parsons who astutely observed the lack of evidence of blood flowing from the cut vessels in the neck and concluded correctly that the child had first been suffocated and the wound in the throat had been inflicted after death. Dr Parsons gave his opinion at the inquest in that followed. The Coroner, however, apparently paid little attention to his very important statement and the inquest closed with the cause of death 'Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown'. Francis Savill Kent was buried on 6th July 1860 in the family grave in St Thomas a Becket's churchyard at East Coulston, Wiltshire. There were three suspects, Mr Samuel Savill Kent, his daughter by his first wife, Constance Kent who was then aged 16 years and Elizabeth Gough, a children's nurse aged 23 years employed by the Kents. The murdered child had been taken from her room on the night of 29th June without her seemingly being aroused. There followed two trials at both of which Dr Joshua Parsons was called to give evidence. The first was of Constance Kent in July and the second of Elizabeth Gough in October; both were acquitted.

There matters rested until the sensational announcement in April 1865 that Constance, then aged 21 years, had confessed to the murder. She was duly charged, insisted on pleading guilty and was convicted and sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to life imprisonment. She served 20 years in prison and, on release, went to Australia with her brother William, trained as a nurse and had a long and successful career in nursing. She died aged 100 years in 1944. Taylor points out that her confession was not consistent with all the known facts of the case and that she made the confession partly to shield her father. Constance's motive and how her father and the children's nurse, Elizabeth Gough, were involved are vividly portrayed in Taylor's book.

**THE BECKINGTON PRACTICE**

Joshua Parsons left the Beckington practice in 1862 and moved to Frome. He was probably succeeded in the practice by Dr Carey Coombs who is listed in the 1866 Kelly's
Directory of Somerset as the surgeon in Beckington. This is confirmed by the Medical Directory of the same year, which also records his qualifications, MRCS and LSA 1863, MB London 1864, St Mary’s Hospital. In the 1872 Kelly’s Directory, however, Joshua’s son Henry Franklin Parsons is listed as MD and surgeon in the village. He had qualified in 1867 and had also been a student at St Mary’s Hospital and may have come to Beckington soon after qualification. Perhaps Dr Carey Coombs was a locum pending his arrival but, even if this was so, Franklin Parsons did not stay long, deciding on a career in public health and leaving Beckington by 1874. It seems that the practice was then vacant, there being no doctor recorded in the village in the 1875 Kelly’s Directory. By the time of the next Kelly’s Directory in 1883, Dr William Godfrey Evans had arrived. He and his son remained the practitioners in Beckington for more than half a century, until the outbreak of the Second World War. Sadly, William’s son, Tyrell George Evans, was killed in the war when the ship Jervis Bay was sunk in the battle of the Atlantic. Dr Robert Fleming then followed in the practice after the war during which several general practitioners stayed only for short periods.

GENERAL PRACTICE IN FROME 1862-1892

After leaving Beckington, Joshua Parsons continued in general practice in Frome at North End, Bridge Street, a Victorian house which still stands today (figure 4). From all accounts he became a well-known and much respected local doctor who was active in many fields. The 1866 Medical Directory records Joshua as a partner of Dr Edwin Bush, who had qualified LSA ten years before Joshua, in 1828, and had attended St Bartholomew’s Hospital.

At the census on 2 April 1871, the eldest son, Henry Franklin, who would then have been aged 25 years was away from home, presumably by then resident in the Beckington practice. The second son, Alfred, was recorded aged 23 years, landscape painter, and the third son, Joshua Frederick, aged 21 years, undergraduate student in medicine. There were four additional children in the family born since the previous census, Edward Theodore aged 9 years, Charles Octavius aged 8 years, Clement Valentine aged 6 years and Winifred Grace aged 2 years, who appears to have been the youngest in the family making altogether a family of 14. In the notice of Joshua’s death in the Somerset and Wiltshire Journal, however, there were said to be 15 children in the family.

In the 1870s, Joshua Parsons was not only a busy local general practitioner but also became the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) to both Frome Urban and Rural Districts when the appointment was created after the Public Health Act of 1872. In this new post – "he was instrumental in bringing about very great improvements in the sanitary conditions of the districts under his supervision, and more especially the introduction into Frome and many of the villages of pure water supplies from outside sources. Enteric fever, endemically present in Frome so long as its drinking water was furnished by local wells and springs, has almost entirely disappeared since a more wholesome supply has been provided." Dr Parsons clearly devoted much time and energy to the improvement of the water supplies in and around Frome and to his other public health duties in the district. It may have been that his friend John Snow influenced him in this direction. Perhaps Snow even discussed his ideas about water-borne disease with Dr Parsons on his visit to Beckington in 1845. If not, he must have been well aware of Snow’s pioneering epidemiological studies of water-borne disease. In the 1850s, Snow had demonstrated by epidemiological methods that cholera was spread by drinking water polluted by sewage from persons with the disease, although he had earlier come to this conclusion from his previous experience. By no means all the medical profession were convinced by his erudite studies of the water supply and cholera in Broad
Street, Soho and in South London. Eventually, however, he was shown to be right and was credited with the discovery that the main mode of spread of cholera was by contaminated drinking water.

Dr Parsons took a great interest in Frome Cottage Hospital which was established in 1874 and was an honorary surgeon to the hospital. Although the hospital no longer exists, the building still remains in Castle Street and is now a private house. Yet another appointment of Dr Parsons was honorary medical officer to the Diocesan Home for Waifs and Strays. He was an active member of the British Medical Association and often attended the meetings of the Bristol and Bath Branch, occasionally contributing to the proceedings. He was listed at Frome in the Bath Branch, along with his son, Joshua Frederick Parsons, in the British Medical Journal of 26 February 1881. With these many tasks and interests, it is not surprising that he is still spoken of locally as the doctor who used to charge about the countryside in a pony and trap undertaking his numerous duties.

By the next census in April 1881, Dr Parsons had been joined in practice by his third son, Joshua Frederick. He had qualified in 1871, and after a junior post in St Mary's Hospital, entered the practice probably in 1872 or 1873. Joshua must have been glad of his assistance since he was by then over 65 years and his partner Dr Bush had probably retired. In the 1881 census, the enumerator's return lists him as being at 14 Bridge Street with three of his children, Katherine aged 30 years, Clement aged 16 years and Winifred aged 12 years. His
wife Latitia was not recorded and must have been away on census day. Dr Joshua Frederick Parsons was married and recorded as living with his wife and servants at 7 Pilley Vale, the old name for Willow Vale, a street very close to Bridge Street, where he presumably worked with his father.

In the 1883 Medical Directory, the practice is recorded as Parsons and sons and there is no mention of Dr Bush. The sons were Joshua Frederick of Willow Vale and Herbert Flowers of North End, who had qualified in 1879. He probably joined the family practice following a junior hospital post at St Mary's Hospital, like his elder brother, in 1880 or 1881, and may have been away when the 1881 census was taken on Sunday 3 April. The Kelly's Directory of Somerset for 1883 does not list Herbert Flowers Parsons and records the practice as 'Parson and Son, surgeons, North End' with another entry 'Parsons Joshua Frederick, surgeon, see Parsons and Son'. It appears that Herbert Flowers Parsons must have left the practice in about 1883. His grandson, Sir Richard Parsons, was told by his father that Herbert's elder brother Frederick pushed him out of the practice. Herbert emigrated to Uruguay and sadly died prematurely of tetanus in 1890.

Joshua Parsons was a keen gardener and had a particular interest in hardy perennial and rock plants, of which he cultivated a wide variety at a time when the Victorian craze of 'carpet bedding' had banished them from many gardens. He was a friend of the famous gardener William Robinson (1838-1935) who developed English border and alpine gardening. Robinson was a prolific writer of garden books and journals, many, of which were illustrated by Joshua's son, Alfred. One of the most influential and popular of Robinson's books was 'The English Flower Garden' first published in 1883, which went to fifteen editions the last of which was in 1933. Robinson visited many nurseries and gardens in the United Kingdom, as well as abroad, and it seems likely that he would have visited Joshua Parsons in Frome whilst on his travels. In particular, during the 1860s and 1870s, when Joshua's son Alfred was living at North End because Robinson would have had much to discuss with Alfred about the illustrations required for his publications. Joshua took an interest in and assisted with the local Odd Fellows Flower Show and was well-known in the area as a gardening enthusiast and expert. At least two of his family, his two eldest sons Henry Franklin and Alfred, carried on the gardening tradition.

Dr Joshua Parsons never retired and died suddenly at the age of 77 years whilst on a visit on 20 June 1892—

'It appears that as Medical Officer of Health to Frome Rural Sanitary and Highway Authority, Mr Parsons had driven over to Babington to examine the water supply at Newbury-house and Newbury-farm, the residence of Mr S.H. Champion. The latter gentleman met Mr Parsons at the front door of Newbury-house and with Mr W.W. Purnell, Surveyor and Inspector to the Authority, accompanied him to the courts, where samples of the water were procured from the pumps. Shortly afterwards Mr Parsons complained of shortness of breath and sat on a stool in the yard. As the attack did not pass off Mr Purnell assisted him to the front of the house and Mr Champion fetched a chair for him. Some brandy was administered but Mr Parsons got worse and died in about a quarter of an hour from the first attack. 

The funeral which took place at Holy Trinity Church was recorded in detail in the Somerset Standard of 2 July 1892. The funeral procession must have brought Frome to a standstill. There were five coaches and numerous family members as well as representatives of the Board of Guardians and Local Board, the trustees of Frome Charities and friendly societies of the town. A great company of spectators assembled in the churchyard on the sunny July afternoon to pay their respects and to see the very many floral tributes. The grave is marked with a stone celtic cross, which remains in good condition today (figure 5). His wife Latitia and 11 of their children survived him. She died in 1897 and was buried in the same grave in Holy Trinity churchyard. As well as bringing up her large family she was also very active locally, being the Lady Superintendent of Frome Day Nursery.
Joshua Frederick Parsons succeeded his father both in the practice and as the MOH for Frome. After living in Willow Vale, he moved to Common-Hill, North Parade, now a solicitors office. The Kelly’s Directory for Somerset for 1894 records ‘Parsons Frederick, surgeon & certifying factory surgeon & medical officer of health to Frome urban sanitary authority, 3 North Parade’. He was also buried in the family grave in Holy Trinity Churchyard, Frome.
TWO FAMOUS SONS.

At least two of the sons achieved national fame. Henry Franklin Parsons, the eldest son, became a distinguished public health doctor and Alfred Frederick Parsons, the second son, became a celebrated illustrator and painter.

Henry Franklin Parsons was born on 27 February 1846 and died on 29 October 1913. He attended St Mary’s Hospital, London as a student and obtained many prizes and honours. He qualified MRCS (Eng) and LSA in 1867, and obtained his MB BS. London degree at about the same time. He gained his MD (1870) and DPH with honours (1876). Apparently, from the start of his career, he had an interest in public health and, after the short period in general practice in his father’s practice in Beckington, became, in 1874, MOH of Goole and Selby where he was responsible for improvements in water supplies.

Five years later, he joined the Government health department, then the Local Government Board, as a medical inspector. He served on numerous Government Committees and made many contributions to the Annual Reports of the Chief Medical Officer of the Local Government Board. In particular, he wrote on geology and public health, housing and health, medical inspection in schools, the provision of school meals, isolation hospitals, disinfection, smallpox, influenza and diphtheria. He was a member and frequent attender of the Epidemiological Society of London and President in 1899-1900. John Snow was a founder member of Council of this Society in 1850. From 1899 until his retirement in 1911, Franklin Parsons was First Assistant Medical Officer to the Local Government Board, a post equivalent to the present day Deputy Chief Medical Officer. Clearly, he was an important figure in British public health around the turn of the century. In the words of the Lancet, ‘he probably influenced the sanitary development of this country more than anyone else’. It is not known if he ever met John Snow, having been only 12 years old when Snow died. Even so, he would certainly have been very familiar with Snow’s work and it is quite possible that this and Snow’s friendship with his father may have persuaded him to follow a career in public health.

Henry Franklin Parsons inherited his father’s interest in plants and gardening, maintaining a lovely garden at his home in Croydon, Surrey. He had a wide knowledge of botany and geology and was a member of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. He published papers in the society’s proceedings on the geology and the flora of Somerset. He was a Fellow of the Geological Society assisting them on the subject of geology and water supply. He was also a member and, in 1913, President of the Croydon Natural History Society.

Alfred William Parsons was born on 2 December 1847 and died on 16 January 1920. He started his career in the Savings Bank of the Post Office but left after 2 years in 1867 and devoted himself to painting. His work first appeared at a Royal Academy exhibition in 1871. Subsequently, he was a frequent exhibitor at Burlington House and other London galleries. He illustrated many books including Miss Ellen Willmott’s well-known work on roses, ‘The Genus Rosa’, many of William Robinson’s books and journals and FD Millet’s ‘The Danube, from the Black forest to the Black Sea’. He became a member of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1905 and was President from 1914 until his death in 1920. He was elected to the Royal Academy in 1911.

Like his father and elder brother, he was an enthusiastic gardener and his art reflected his interest in flowers. His painting of an orchard ‘When Nature Painted All Things Gay’ is in the Tate Gallery. Recently a major work on Alfred Parsons was written by Nicole Millette. He never married and died at his home in Worcestershire being buried in the family grave in Holy Trinity, Frome.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This biographical sketch of Joshua Parsons owes much to Mr Michael McGarvie BA, FSA, local historian and archivist of Frome, Somerset, whose help and encouragement are gratefully acknowledged. Mr David Bromwich, Somerset Studies Librarian, Taunton, the staff of Somerset County Record Office, Taunton, Mr Money, Archivist, Radley College, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, the staff of the Guildhall Library, London, and the Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, London, provided invaluable assistance.

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