

The Westminster Medical Society  
by  
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The Westminster Medical Society is of particular interest to anaesthetists, because it was at its meetings in the early months of 1847 that John Snow laid down the basic principles of the science and art of inhalation anaesthesia; but it is of considerable importance in its own right too. As one of the three major medical societies in existence in London in its time – the others being the Medical Society of London and its breakaway, the Medical and Chirurgical Society – it provided a well-regarded and influential forum for the discussion of a wide range of medical problems for more than forty years. There are several misconceptions about the Society, especially in its later days, which I hope this account will correct.

#### Primary Sources

The records of the Westminster Medical Society were originally held by the Medical Society of London, with which it amalgamated in 1850. What remains of them is now in the care of the *Archives* Department of the Wellcome Library. They consist of Attendance Books, Minute Books of Committee Meetings, and Minute Books of General Meetings, and I am grateful to archivist Helen Wakely, for making them available to me.<sup>1</sup> (Fig.1) They are, of course, hand-written, and not always easy to read, and there are a number of volumes missing; so to augment them and fill the gaps I have used the reports of the Society's meetings published in the *Lancet*. The *London Medical Gazette*, possibly regarding the Society as already moribund, announced in 1840 that it did not intend to continue to report its meetings routinely; but in any case the *Lancet* provided better coverage, reporting not only the papers but also the discussion that followed, which is valuable for revealing the depth of knowledge or ignorance, and prejudices and conceits, of the members.<sup>2</sup> Because these reports of clinical meetings are readily available in medical reference libraries, the main focus of this paper is on the mechanics and problems of running a medical society in early Victorian times.

### The First Thirty Years

The Society was founded in 1809 by Benjamin Brodie and C. Mansfield Clarke, as an adjunct to the Hunterian or Great Windmill Street Medical School,<sup>3</sup> which they owned, probably inspired by the long-established and highly respected Scottish student society, the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh,<sup>4</sup> and the Guy's Physical Society.<sup>5</sup> The earliest archive is the Minute Book of General Meetings between 7 December 1811 and 6 May 1815. It contains some familiar and distinguished names; among those occupying the Chair were W. T. Brande, who succeeded Humphry Davy as professor of chemistry at the Royal Institution in 1813, Charles Bell, and Peter Mark Roget, whose name we now associate with his eponymous Thesaurus. On 17 October 1812 the distinguished Swedish chemist Dr Berzelius was elected a corresponding member, which gives one some idea of the Society's view of its own stature.

### Membership and Finances

Students at the Hunterian School could be nominated for life-time membership, which was secured by a fee of one guinea [21 shillings; a pound = 20 shillings]. Because the Society had the use of the facilities of the Hunterian School its expenses were not great, so no annual subscription was required, although there is an indication that after Dr. John Epps took the School over in the 1830s the Society had to pay for the use of the premises. A balance of income and expenditure was recorded annually in the Minute Books during the 1830s, at the end of the second weekend in February. The sum in hand fluctuated between about £30 and £50, the main income coming from new members. In 1836 only six new members were admitted, and cash in hand amounted to £17/17/8 [pounds/shillings/pence], while the following year new members brought in £17/17/0 and the Society enjoyed a positive balance of £47/3/11. Rent of £31/12/0 was paid for the use of the premises, and £4/15/11 for stationery, postage, and the porter's gratuity. In 1836 an attempt by a minority to establish the independence of the Society from the Hunterian School by moving its meetings to a venue in the vicinity of London University as being 'of easier access to the mass of students' was defeated after a long discussion.<sup>6</sup>

### Reports of Meetings<sup>7</sup>

The *Lancet* commenced publication at the beginning of 1823, and it is an indication of the changing attitude towards work and leisure during the 19th century that the publication day was Sunday. It began to print regular reports of meetings of the Westminster Medical Society in 1826.

The first appearance of what became the recurring grumble that all was not well with the Society was conveyed in a letter from a 'Member' that appeared in early January 1923, complaining that attendance had fallen off. 'Four or five years ago, we might generally reckon 40 or 50 members . . . now it is no uncommon occurrence to observe but 10 or 12 . . . . Our Society has for many years ranked high in the Metropolis; let not its members see it fall for the want of support.' Apart from climatic conditions – attendance usually fell off in January – the audience varied with the speakers and the subjects; few turned out for an utterly unintelligible paper on the contagiousness of dysentery, but the following Saturday 'there was a full attendance of the members.' A paper advocating the need for legislation to restrict the practice of midwifery to competent persons brought a numerous attendance of members and visitors. Heated and specious arguments for and against make for a very entertaining report. Reading between the lines, lack of interest in the subject and the tendency of some members to monopolise the proceedings were reasons for poor attendances; also some men were members of more than one society, and had to make a choice. A talk on 'The means of preserving the health of Europeans in warm climates,' was thinly attended, but the summary, 'Keep your head cool, your feet warm, and your bowels open' was warmly applauded. A very active discussion followed, on the effect on health of flannel clothing, of a change of air and of scene, the influence of the moon in its several stages, and on sunstroke.

The *Lancet's* reporters were not welcomed by medical teachers or societies during its early years; teachers especially were not happy to see their lectures available gratis in print, but by 1826 the reporters signed the attendance book openly.<sup>8</sup> Generally meetings took the form of one or more case reports, followed by a discussion. Topics I have picked at random included iritis; hydrophobia; descriptions of new apparatus; an outbreak of influenza and the problems of treating it; icterus, fatal on the third day, in a female patient with no obstructive cause found at postmortem; and the classification of skin diseases. Speakers were required to submit their proposed subjects, which were peer-reviewed. On 20 April 1839, for example, Mr. Costello requested the Committee to sanction an extra meeting to be held on 4 May, in order that Mr. --- might read a paper on 'Physical Love.' Sadly, 'the Committee did not deem it prudent to grant Mr. Costello's request.'

In 1832 a succession of meetings was devoted to the outbreak of cholera that had started in Newcastle and spread south. In the words of the *Lancet's* reporter who described the meeting held on 7 April, 'If it be true that "hope deferred maketh the heart sick," there must be not a few "sick hearts" among the members and visitors at the museum in Windmill Street.

Every Saturday brings with it an expectation that the CHOLERA discussion will lose its claims to eternity; yet every Saturday it again stalks forward, perhaps in a new dress – another, but the same. This evening the gaunt visitor was present as usual.; he had, however, a very thin audience, his “ravages” having, it seems, terribly decimated the members, who have either been overthrown in the contest, or have forsaken the field of battle to avoid the flying arguments.’

The start of this particular meeting reveals the relationship between the Society and the reporters. The Hon. Secretary having been called away unexpectedly to Norfolk before he had had time to prepare the minutes of the previous meeting, he had suggested to his deputy, Mr. Greenwood, that the minutes might be taken from the *Lancet’s* report. This provoked much adverse comment, but certain alterations having been made, the minutes were read and approved. It also appears that the Hon. Secretary expected to receive ‘proof sheets’ from journals carrying the Society report before publication. The *Lancet’s* detailed account of this incident occupied the best part of half a page, but in the Minute Book it reads as follows: ‘Mr. Greenwood rose to reply but owing to cries of Chair! and Order! his explanation was not heard sufficiently distinct (sic) to be noted down.’ Comparison of the Minutes with the published reports shows that correspondence between the two was not always exact, the journal’s generally being fuller. Where they coincide closely it is likely that the Minutes have been cribbed from the Reporter’s account.

A notable event in the history of the Society, indicative of the importance with which it was regarded, or regarded itself, was the presentation of the Anatomy Petition to the House of Commons. This related to a Bill introduced as a reaction to the illicit and sometimes murderous activities of the suppliers of cadavers to the teachers of anatomy. The proposals, in the view of the Society’s members, were unnecessarily bureaucratic and restrictive, limiting the teaching of anatomy to the medical schools associated with hospitals, and requiring complex registration and the purchase of an expensive certificate for each individual dissection. The Bill did nothing to increase public safety, and would create a closed shop in the teaching of anatomy, outlawing the very valuable private medical schools such as the Hunterian.

The Society set up a sub-committee, and adopted and submitted its proposal that public safety would be enhanced by making the sale of cadavers illegal. It also suggested that dissection, as the final component of the sentence of execution for murder, stigmatised the practice in the eyes of the public by associating it with criminality. In the words of one member, ‘medical men should not be *the finishers of the law*. If it were intended to

appeal to the public for the voluntary donation of their bodies, then the practice of dissection must be dissociated from execution.’ The discussion of the Petition was more fully reported in the *Lancet* than in the Society’s Minute Book. The arguments for and against the Act are dissected in Ruth Richardson’s classic; where is also described the disbelief, after the passing of the Act, that anyone would voluntarily donate their body for dissection, which led to the arrest of the deceased donor’s brother for murder.<sup>9</sup>

The Society also initiated enquiries into the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning from stoves in closed spaces, and of arsenic poisoning from cheap stearin candles, to which John Snow contributed his expertise in analytical chemistry; but fear of a libel action by manufacturers played a part in inhibiting the Society from publishing a public warning. Nevertheless Professor Brande, at the conclusion of his lecture on the chemistry of fatty substances and the constituents of candles at the Royal Institution on 26 January 1838, was able to claim that in consequence of the exertions of the Westminster Medical Society, no manufacturer in London now used arsenic in the manufacture of candles.<sup>10</sup>

#### Closure of the Hunterian School – finding a New Home

The Hunterian School closed after the 1837-8 session, John Snow being among its last students, so the Society had to find a new home.<sup>11</sup> Where medical societies might meet in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is an interesting but unexplored question. The Westminster Society met for a while at the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, on Saturday evenings, but the accommodation was described as cold and cheerless on a winter’s night, and sufficiently dreary in appearance as to prevent all but the staunchest of the friends of the Society from attending. The problem was finance; the funds of the Society were insufficient to meet the current running expenses, and a Special General Meeting was held on Saturday 14 April 1839. Since its founding thirty years earlier some 1200 members had joined, so it had been able to run like an inverted ‘pyramid’ scheme, funded by the admission fees, and without the need to charge an annual subscription; but the nature of the Society had changed. Because of life-time membership it was no longer a students’ society; as could be told from the nature of the meetings, the majority of the members had graduated and were in practice. They desired to rent more comfortable rooms, render the Society more useful, and raise its respectability in every way, so it was proposed to break with precedent and raise an annual contribution from London members of ten shillings and sixpence; and the admission fee was to be increased to two guineas.<sup>12</sup>

The minutes of the committee meeting on 16 July 1839 record that several pairs of members undertook to investigate accommodation in a house in Sackville Street, in Blenheim Street School, and in the Westminster Dispensary. Other places considered were the Literary Institution in Leicester Square, and the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, but this would be very expensive.

Failing all these, it was resolved to place an advert in *The Times* newspaper in the name of an old established Medical Society seeking two rooms, one able to hold 100 persons with lighting, heating, and seats provided. Since the average attendance rarely exceeded twenty members the provision for one hundred seems optimistic.

Whether as a result of the advertisement is not clear, but at the committee meeting on 6 August the proposal to rent accommodation at Exeter Hall was carried unanimously.<sup>13</sup> It was agreed to rent Room No. 6 for six months for a fee of 25 guineas, the only extras being 5 shillings per night for gas light and one shilling for fire when wanted. An extra room for half an hour before the meeting could be available without charge. It was also decided to place announcements of the start of the new session in the *Times*, the *Morning Herald*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Athenaeum Literary Gazette*, the *Lancet*, and the *London Medical Gazette*; also to print 250 cards with details of the session's programme, to be laid on the table for the benefit of members, and to issue personal invitations to a number of the leaders of the profession.

The beneficial effect of these measures, which were repeated in successive years, were seen in the *Lancet's* report of the first meeting of the new session, 'which was held on Saturday 19 October 1839 in the Society's new rooms in Exeter Hall. The well-founded objections which existed to the Hunterian Museum, as a place of meeting, prevented many of the old members of the Society from attending . . . . The meeting room in Exeter Hall, on the contrary, possesses an air of comfort, and is so well warmed and lighted, that no such objection can be raised against it. We trust the coming session will be more profitable than has been usual, and that discussions will be less desultory than they have been during some former sessions. The Westminster Medical Society numbers about 1200 members, among whom will be found the names of many distinguished men. With a little industry, its proceedings will bear comparison with those of any similar institution.'<sup>13a</sup> Reports show that the first meeting of each session was mainly devoted to the election of members to various offices.

Finance continued to be a problem. On 30 November 1839 the appointment of a Collector to pursue subscriptions was discussed, and on 11 April 1840 William Beamish was appointed, on a commission of 5% of the

sums collected, having agreed to provide a guarantor for a surety of £100. He undertook to attend Committee meetings when required, and was supplied with a list of defaulting members. After some small initial successes, and the alienation of some members, this appointment appears to have lapsed.

The condition of the Society at the beginning of each Session, which ran from mid-October to early May, can be gathered from the presidential address. In October 1840 the President congratulated members on the prosperous condition of the funds. In 1841 there was a full attendance; but the following year the President, Dr Golding Bird, reported difficulties due to the apathy of members. This, he said, was one of the oldest institutions of its kind, but many senior members had left, and the Society needed new blood. He called for more exertion to prevent this being the last session of the Society. To increase attendances it was decided to meet fortnightly instead of weekly, and to continue the session into May and June, as some of the other societies did.

Meanwhile, following the migration of the affluent classes, the centre of gravity of the medical profession was moving west also, from Finsbury Square to Harley Street, so Exeter Hall was too far east for many members.<sup>14</sup> At the Committee meeting on 1 April 1843 it was decided to look for different accommodation, and on 15 April it was reported that the Committee Room at 32 Sackville Street, owned or managed by a Mr. Skinner, could accommodate WMS meetings at a cost of one pound, provided that 'the room shall not be occupied beyond half past ten o'clock at night.'<sup>14a</sup> On 1 July it was decided that the place of meeting be changed from Exeter Hall to 32 Sackville Street.

Consequently the *Lancet's* report of the first meeting of the 1843/4 session stated, rather grandly, that it was held in the Society's rooms at 32 Sackville Street, and the President's opening address provides a valuable indication of the ethos of the Society. After mentioning its prosperity and the advantages of the new meeting place, he continued: 'This society is essentially a practical one; our object, in assembling together, is simply to increase our stock of knowledge by listening to the narration of cases, or essays on any professional subject of interest . . . . Without assuming the appearance of a debating society, we meet to discuss freely, yet without acerbity, the relative value of the facts presented to us, and the deductions drawn from them, and I think few will be found who will not at once admit that they have reaped much advantage occasionally from these discussions . . . . One of the most valuable contributions to these meetings has been the occasional exhibition of specimens of morbid anatomy with a history of the case attached to them . . . . Another . . . is the varied experiences which

may be made available by members in their varied pursuits in the different branches of the profession . . . and another, of considerable value to professional men, is the opportunity afforded us of meeting together, and cultivating friendly feelings . . . .’ Mr. Snow then read a paper on a fatal case of poisoning with carbonate of lead.<sup>14b</sup> So clearly it was a society of practitioners seeking to widen their knowledge, and their ability to treat their patients, by the exchange of experiences.

During the following months the Committee was concerned with the revision of its Laws and the collection of subscriptions. In March 1843 a new Collector, Mr. Jacques, was appointed, but before letting him loose all members in arrears were written to individually. However, on 1 February 1845 there was only 18/6 [18 shillings/6 pence] in the Treasurer’s hands, and rent was owing for the current session. On March 11 it was decided to raise the annual subscription to one guinea, payable on the anniversary of election to the Society, and rather than being a deterrent, the *Lancet* reported that at the beginning of the 1845/6 session there was a full attendance of members. But although the Collector was able to hand over ten guineas the financial problems continued, to the extent that on October 10 1846 the Committee received a letter from Mr. Skinner refusing to allow the Society to meet in the Sackville Street house until the balance of £25/4/0 was paid to him. To keep the Society going the committee members resolved to dip into their own pockets and make up the difference between what the Collector was able to obtain from outstanding subscriptions, and the amount due, by a whip round among themselves.

At this point an offer was received from Dr Richard King, Secretary of the Ethnological Society, of rooms at 27 Sackville Street, including lighting, fire, and attendance, for 15 shillings a meeting, which it was speedily resolved to accept.<sup>15</sup> So the Society was on the move again, meeting in the rooms of the Ethnological Society, 29 Sackville Street (as the *Lancet* erroneously reported). ‘The attendance of members was numerous, and the greatly increased comfort and accommodation offered at the new place of meeting gave great satisfaction to the members present. Dr. Snow read a paper on alkaline urine and phosphatic calculi.’<sup>15a</sup>

Measures introduced in October 1846 reveal the surprisingly amateurish way in which the Society’s finances had been managed; it was resolved to appoint a Finance Committee; in December 1847 to keep an Income and Expenditure Account Book; and in 1848 the Treasurer was asked to lay the Book on the table at each meeting.

By 1847 the Society had moved again, following Dr King and the Ethnological Society to 17 Savile Row, on the same terms as in Sackville Street; it was agreed to use two drawing rooms, which plans of the building

suggest were on the ground floor.<sup>16</sup> The properties at 32 Sackville Street (Fig. 2) and 17 Savile Row (Fig. 3) are still in existence, little changed.

#### Enhancing the Society's Status

Towards the end of the 1847 session the Society embarked on a complete revision of its constitution. The changes were discussed at meetings of the Committee on April 6 and 13 1848. The result was that henceforth 'The Society shall consist of the President, four Vice-Presidents, a Treasurer, two Honorary Secretaries, and Fellows. The Fellows shall consist of two classes, viz. Honorary and Ordinary.' It was resolved also that, in Law 3 and elsewhere 'the Committee be called in future the Council.'<sup>16a</sup> With this change of nomenclature it was putting itself on a par with the Royal Colleges. It was also decided that the Society should publish its Proceedings; a subsequent acknowledgement received from the Royal College of Surgeons shows that at least one volume was produced. At the end of the session the Society's finances were in a healthy state. After paying its expenses of £58/19/11 it was left with £44/7/5 cash in hand.

The beneficial effects of the constitutional changes were soon seen. On October 16 1848, 'The Society commenced its meetings for the session this evening. The rooms in Savile-row were completely crowded, reminding us of the Society in its most palmy days. About sixty fellows and visitors were present. The President, on taking the chair, gave an inaugural address on the state of the Society, which was in every way prosperous.'<sup>16b</sup> He traced the Society from its origin in John Hunter's drawing-room in 1773 down to the present time, remarking on its alternating phases of prosperity and adversity, and discussing their various causes. He enumerated the various public services the Society had rendered the profession, particularly alluding to the Anatomy Act, and its influence on measures adopted by government during the time of the cholera. All this was recorded in detail in the *Lancet*.<sup>16c</sup> In the Society's Minute Book it was summarized in one sentence! The Society continued to flourish. The attendance book shows an average turnout in the mid-30s.

And finally, on Saturday 6 October 1849, the commencement of the last session of the WMS as a separate entity, 'The rooms of the Society were crowded this evening – the first of the session – with fellows and visitors. The increasing prosperity of this useful institution may be judged by the fact that three new members were admitted, and seventeen proposals for new members were read from the chair. The Chairman, on taking the chair, said that the fellows had been called together a week or two earlier this session, in consequence of the prevalence of cholera, to give them the opportunity of discussing that important subject.'<sup>16d</sup>

Hence it was a Society whose fortunes had fluctuated, being kept afloat in bad times by the loyalty of a small core of devoted members, but it was ending the decade of the 1840s on a wave of success and prosperity, much different from the misleading account given in the rather unreliable autobiography of J. F. Clarke, a long-time reporter and sub-editor of the *Lancet*. 'When I joined the Society it was well attended, the papers were valuable, and the discussions animated and interesting. But when the Hunterian school broke up the Society began to decline: expenses increased, while income diminished. The Society at various times held its meetings in Sackville Street, Savile Row, and Exeter Hall. It was all but defunct at the latter place. I have been present on several occasions when the only persons present were the President, Mr. (now Sir) John Fisher, Dr. Sayer, and myself. But on the amalgamation things of course took a turn, and the Society has been flourishing in connexion with the "London" ever since.'<sup>17</sup>

#### John Snow's Contribution

In the General Minute Book covering the period 4 January 1834 to 31 March 1838 it is recorded that on 28 October 1837 Mr. Snow was one of three applicants balloted and admitted as an ordinary member of the Society.<sup>18</sup> He first signed in to a meeting on 25 November 1837, after which his signature appears regularly. He missed very few meetings during the whole of his life. John Snow was one of the pillars of the WMS during its years in the wilderness. He first attended a Committee meeting on 20 April 1839, but in what capacity is not indicated. He was next present as an elected member of the Committee on November 9 of that year, and was re-elected annually for the next ten. Apart from a spell of absence during 1845, when according to Richardson he was convalescing from a renal disorder, he was a fairly regular and reliable attender. He first took the chair, in the absence of the Chairman, on 1 July 1843, again on 2 November 1844, and several times during 1846. He was appointed one of the two honorary secretaries in 1847, and the President, in his inaugural address, complimented him by observing that during the last session the most philosophical, (meaning scientific) treatise on ether had emanated from the pen of one of the Society's secretaries. It is noteworthy that although Snow wrote in his own hand the minutes of the meeting of 18 January 1847, at which he first put forward his views on the requisites for the safe administration of ether, that part of the report, uniquely, was cut out and glued in from the *Lancet*.

At the beginning of the 1848 session he was elected one of the four vice-presidents, and on November 19 he chaired a very sticky meeting at which were discussed the many problems created by the previous Hon. Sec.,

Mr. Chance, who had violated the laws of the Society, adding his name to meetings at which he had not been present, and causing many other defects in the records, and problems for the other members. At a previous committee meeting, which he did not attend, he had been censured and voted out of office, but at his request it was agreed that the minute should be cancelled and he be allowed to resign voluntarily, on the face-saving grounds that he was moving to the country. At the end of the meeting it was 'Resolved unanimously that the best thanks of the Committee be presented to Dr. Snow for his impartial conduct while in the chair this evening.' In this connection it should be remembered that John Snow was still only in his early 30s, and is accurately represented by the Barker portrait of 1847,<sup>19</sup> not by the much better known photograph taken ten years later. Further evidence that his quality was recognised was his appointment as one of the three representatives delegated to negotiate the proposed amalgamation with the Medical Society of London. These were his administrative contributions, but of course he also read a number of important papers, and contributed to discussions.<sup>20</sup> Richardson reports John Snow's own expression of the importance of the WMS to him in his clinical life. 'I have often heard him say, both privately and publicly, that, upon this early connexion with the "Westminster Medical," his continuance in London depended, and all his succeeding scientific success.'<sup>21</sup>

#### Other Stalwart Supporters

For some twelve years the Westminster Medical Society, struggling against financial and accommodation problems, was kept going by the esprit de corps of a nucleus of devoted members. Even in the darkest days the Committee Minutes give no indication that the winding up of the Society was ever conceived. Among the most active were:

William Dingle Chowne (1791-1870), who often hosted committee meetings in his home. He was the most senior; his qualifications were MRCS 1813; MD Edin 1827; MRCP 1833. He was on the staff of Charing Cross Hospital, specialising in diseases of women and children. He was a Fellow of the Medical Society of London, had been its Orator in 1841, and succeeded Snow as President in 1856.

Golding Bird MD, FRS, had been a fellow student of John Snow at the Hunterian School. He became a physician on the staff at Guys, and lived at 48 Russell Square, which in the 1980s became the first home of the Royal College of Anaesthetists. He was the MSL Orator in 1847.

Francis Hird MRCS 1836; FRCS (Hon) 1843; was Chowne's junior colleague at Charing Cross Hospital. He, also, was a Fellow of the Medical Society of London, was its Orator in 1848 and 1850, and succeeded Chowne

as President in 1857. These men must have been part of Snow's social circle, and obviously held him in some considerable regard.

Amalgamation with the Medical Society of London.

It will be seen that there was a significant cross-membership between the Westminster Medical Society and the Medical Society of London (MSL), so it was probably no surprise that on 10 January 1850 the Committee received and considered a letter dated 5 January from William Smiles MD, 3 Bolt Court, Hon. Secretary of the MSL, proposing its amalgamation with the WMS. The attraction of an amalgamation would be permanent premises, with a library, and a reading room. The MSL's premises in Bolt Court, off Fleet Street, gifted conditionally by its founder John Coakley Lettsom, was even farther east than Exeter Hall, and the MSL was experiencing a fall-off of attendance and membership. The WMS Committee elected a deputation of three members, Mr. Hird, Dr. Chowne, and Dr. Snow, to enter into discussions with the MSL.

Mr. Hird and Dr. Snow reported on behalf of the deputation on 24 January 'that the Medical Society of London stated that that Society could not alter its name on account of the title by which its property is held, that the Council of that Society was willing to come to Savile Row or the immediate neighbourhood in the event of their union with the Westminster Med. Society, and to have a reading room and accommodation for their library. The deputation of the Medical Society of London expressed their desire to unite with the Westminster Medical Society. They estimated the value of their property at £2000, and stated that the number of their paying members was about 75.'<sup>21a</sup> The deputation's proposal that the report be adopted was passed unanimously, and subsidiary reports paving the way for amalgamation were also passed.

Far from being moribund, as Clarke claimed, the WMS was by far the larger and more prosperous of the two. The attendance book shows a steady increase from a low of 3 and an average of a dozen during the early 1840s, to a peak of 70 and an average of 60 at each meeting towards the end of the decade; and it brought with it a dowry of some £60, and an annual income from subscriptions of £157/10/0. The Society held its last meeting on 18 May 1850; seventy members were present, and the final entry in the Minute Book reads, 'The Society then broke up.'

The *Lancet's* Farewell

'We cannot allow the Westminster Medical Society to merge into "things that were" without an epitaph.' The editorialist summarized the early history of the Society, its difficulties after the closure of the Great Windmill

Street School, and personality problems which were eventually resolved when 'it became important that one of the officials of the Society, who had almost become a permanent officer, should retire; and after some committee-meetings on the subject he thought fit to resign. From this period a new life seems to have been imparted to the Society . . . and members began to pour in. For the last two or three sessions of its existence the success of the Westminster Medical Society was beyond anything in the history of scientific medical associations. When the Society dissolved, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, 275 fellows were on the books.'<sup>22</sup>

There followed a summary of the Society's influence on health policy: during the cholera of 1832, its submission during the debate on the Anatomy Act that did much to 'do away with the public prejudices respecting that important measure,' and on other occasions too, the WMS contributed its influence in favour of changes connected with the public health. 'It bore, in fact, more resemblance to the Academie de Medicine, of Paris, than did any other British institution. It might be called the House of Commons of the profession, and was the nursing school of many of our best speakers and lecturers. It was always considered more of a debating society than a publishing one; but within the last year or two, the proceedings, which were published in a pamphlet form, showed that the Society took a high position among the scientific bodies of the metropolis.'

But however justified all this praise was, Wakley, for it must have been he, had an axe to grind, and he proceeded to compare the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society very unfavourably with the WMS. For some years past it had given great offence by its arbitrary rejection of papers, by cliquism and favouritism. 'Under these circumstances, an (*sic*) union between the Westminster and London Medical Societies was determined on. The first had numbers, the second had a library and considerable property . . . and such a union promises to be both prosperous and happy. The publication of transactions; the annual award of the Fothergillian medal; the weekly report of interesting cases and discussions; will render the Society worthy the parents from which it sprung, and will do no discredit to the names of a HUNTER and a LETTSOM.'

#### Medical Society of London – A New Beginning

The new joint Society took a lease of what had been the gallery of an art dealer at 33 George Street, off Hanover Square, for £100 per annum, from the landlord, Mr. Bullock, chemist, of Conduit Street, and fitted it out;<sup>23</sup> and as the *Lancet* reported on Saturday, October 12, 1850, 'The first meeting of this Society, since its amalgamation with the Westminster Medical Society, was held this evening, at the new rooms in George-street, Hanover-square.'

The committee who had managed the amalgamation had succeeded in making what had been a picture gallery into a suitably worthy meeting place for the oldest metropolitan medical society in every particular but one. It was too small. 'When we state the fact, that on this evening nearly fifty fellows and visitors were unable to obtain admission, the room of meeting and the library being both so crowded, that every space where the President could be seen, or a speaker heard, was occupied . . . Many of the most eminent members of the profession were present . . .'<sup>24</sup> and twenty seven new applicants for membership were to be balloted for in the usual way at the next meeting. There are 140 signatures in the MSL Attendance Book!

The rest of the story belongs to the Medical Society of London, of which John Snow was elected Vice-President and Orator in 1853, and President in 1855.<sup>25</sup>

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#### References and Notes

1. The Westminster Medical Society's records are included in the Medical Society of London's archive, which has the prefix SA/MSL. There is one book of Committee minutes, SA/MSL/K/1/1/1; six books of minutes of the Society's public meetings, SA/MSL/K/1/2/1 to 6; and three attendance books, SA/MSL/K/1/3/1 to 3. Fortunately the surviving Committee minute book covers the most interesting period, 1839-1850.

2. *London Medical Gazette* 27 (1840-41): 175. 'It is not our intention to report the proceedings unless on extraordinary occasions.'

3. For relevant topological information about London during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century see: Zuck, "Dr John Snow's London" – the Blessed Chloroform Lecture 2008, *Proceedings, History of Anaesthesia Society* 39 (2008):109-127.

4. D. Power, *British Medical Societies* (London: Medical Press and Circular, 1939); and J. Jenkinson, *Scottish Medical Societies 1731-1939, their History*

*and Records* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), 19-220. The Royal Medical Society was founded in Edinburgh in 1737 as an association of students. Power's supposedly comprehensive review does not include the Westminster Medical Society.

5. J.R. Wall, "The Guy's Hospital Physical Society 1771-1852," *Guy's Hospital Reports* 123 (1974), 159-170. Founded in 1784; see also D. Burch, *Digging up the Dead* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), the excellent biography of Sir Astley Cooper.

6. *Lancet* 1 (1836-37): 232, 260, 280.

7. To avoid overloading the list of references, sufficient indication is given in the text to allow the reader to locate the *Lancet's* reports. The whole of the Proceedings of the History of Anaesthesia Society can be accessed from the Society's web site at <[www.histansoc.org.uk](http://www.histansoc.org.uk)>

8. Wakley's biographer, Samuel Squire Sprigge, writes about the very interesting but unexplored subject of the *Lancet's* reporters. 'The meetings of the medical societies, again, were reported at the length that their importance warranted – a proceeding that the officials of the societies objected to as an infringement of copyright. They considered that the editor of the *Transactions* of the Society, a person appointed by themselves, enjoyed the copyright as a matter of common sense as well as common law'; S. S. Sprigge, *The Life and Times of Thomas Wakley* (London: Longmans Green & Co. 1897), 81. Since the WMS did not publish its transactions there seems to have been no objection to the presence of reporters.

Wakley, in his evidence at the libel action brought by Bransby Cooper, said that 'In the discharge of my duty as a journalist, I am under the necessity of employing a great number of reporters; they are widely distributed, – they take note of the cases as they are admitted into the various hospitals, and carefully describe all particulars connected with them. The reporters I have employed, as far as I have been capable of judging, have been men of honourable character, and they have executed their duties in a very honourable and accurate manner.' We know the identity of one only, James Lambert, a recently qualified surgeon, evidently also skilled at shorthand, who had reported from the Middlesex and St. Thomas's Hospitals, and had been banned from both for the tone of his reports. He was attacked by Sir James Scarlett, acting for the plaintiff, as 'a hireling, instigated by malice to write untruths.' Wakley riposted that Scarlett was himself a hireling, as were they all. T. A. Wakley, *Report of the Trial of Cooper v Wakley for an Alleged Libel . . .* (London: Office of the *Lancet*, 1829), 15. (Available on the Web by searching for Cooper v Wakley – a most entertaining and instructive verbatim account.)

9. R. Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), 144, 236.

10. *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres* 22 (1838): 72-73.

11. The *Survey of London* Vol. 31, chap. 3 states erroneously that the School closed at the end of 1831, and this has been copied elsewhere. The *Survey* cites two references, Peachey and Thomson. Peachey, at the end of a history of the School, says, 'on completion of the spring course of lectures in 1831, the doors of William Hunter's Theatre of Anatomy were closed. Its career, like that of its founder, had extended over sixty-four years'; G. C. Peachey, *A Memoir of William and John Hunter* (Plymouth: Brenden, 1924), 124. Note that this refers only to the 'Theatre of Anatomy,' not to the School. There is ample evidence, from its adverts in the journals and John Snow's studentship among much else, that the School did not close, nor did the teaching of anatomy cease, until the end of the 1837-1838 session. The John Thomson reference is to his two volume *Life of William Cullen, MD*, (London: Blackwood, 1859), 739-42.

12. It is difficult to provide equivalent present-day values, and contemporaneous information is scarce, but in 1876 a good middle class general practice brought an income of £500 a year, while a prestigious one run by a practitioner with higher qualifications would bring an income of £1100. Among the upper echelon of London consultants, Benjamin Brodie earned between £15,000 and £21,000 a year during the period 1824 to 1846; M. J. Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 206-15.

13. Exeter Hall, now almost completely forgotten, was built in 1829, on the site now occupied by the Strand Palace Hotel. It had a large hall, soon enlarged further to cope with public demand, and a number of smaller meeting rooms. It was the Albert Hall of its day, a popular venue for concerts and public meetings. Information about it can be found on the Web.

13a. "Westminster Medical Society," *Lancet* 1 (1839-40): 166.

14. The Royal College of Physicians had moved as early as 1828.

14a. Minutes of Committee Meetings held on 1 and 15 April 1843; SA/MSL/K/1/1/1.

14b. "Westminster Medical Society," *Lancet* 2 (1844): 144-45.

15. Richard King trained at Guy's and St. Thomas's, and from 1833 to 1835 was surgeon and naturalist on an Arctic expedition sponsored by the Royal Navy. He corresponded with Thomas Hodgkin, who had a great interest in the conditions of the aboriginal inhabitants. Hodgkin and King were founding members of the Aborigines Protection Society, and of the Ethnological Society, set up to study the natives of the territories being taken over by the ever-expanding British Empire; A. M. Kass and E. H. Kass, *Perfecting the World - The Life and Times of Dr. Thomas Hodgkin 1798-1866* (Boston: Harcourt Brace Johanovich, 1988), 258-79, 393, 455.

15a. "Westminster Medical Society," *Lancet* 2 (1846): 533.

16. I am grateful to Peter Vinten-Johansen for a copy of the plan of the ground floor as it appears in the *Survey of London*.

- 16a. Minutes of Committee Meeting held on 29 April 1848; SA/MSL/K/1/1/1.
- 16b. "Westminster Medical Society," *Lancet* 2 (1848): 506-08.
- 16c. Ibid.
- 16d. "Westminster Medical Society," *Lancet* 2 (1849): 401.
17. J. F. Clarke, *Autobiographical Recollections of the Medical Profession* (London: Churchill, 1874), 239-40.
18. It has been suggested that Dr. John Epps introduced John Snow to a meeting on 8 April 1837 as his guest, but there is no evidence for this in the Attendance Book. A scrawled entry on 15 April opposite that of Dr. Epps could possibly be Snow's name, but it is certainly not his signature.
19. D. Zuck, "Snow, Empson, and the Barkers of Bath," *Anaesthesia* 56 (2001): 227-30.
20. Snow's main communications were on neonatal asphyxia and resuscitation, paracentesis of the thorax, the capillary circulation, alkaline urine and calculus formation, lead poisoning, cholera, and ether and chloroform anaesthesia.
21. B. W. Richardson, "The Life of John Snow, M.D.," in *J. Snow, On Chloroform and Other Anaesthetics* (London: Churchill, 1858), viii – ix.
- 21a. Minutes of Council Meeting on 24 January 1850; SA/MSL/K/1/1/1.
22. *Lancet* 1 (1850): 668-69.
23. Some information about the mechanics of the move will be found in P. Hunting, *The Medical Society of London 1773-2003* (London: Medical Society of London, 2003), 170-73. In addition to its books the WMS brought its teacups and saucers, so for the first time refreshments became available at meetings of the MSL.
24. *Lancet* 2 (1850): 456-58.
25. In the words of the MSL's historian, 'for a few incandescent years Snow was the most active and inspiring Fellow of the Society . . . ,' Hunting, *Medical Society of London*, 195. There are 96 signatures in the MSL Attendance Book on the day of his Oration.

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Illustrations **[see Study Detail for this item]**

Figure 1 WMS Minute Book 1848 (Medical Society of London).

Figure 2 32 Sackville Street, London W1.

Figure 3 17 Saville Row, London W1.