



Parkinson's
Disease Society

Dr James Parkinson

Dr James Parkinson (1755–1824) was a London doctor whose short study *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, published in 1817, established what we now know as 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 11 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 six months when he was 20. He was then apprenticed to his father for six years and qualified 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. In addition, James served as an attending doctor at a private local asylum for the mentally ill for more than 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
- mental illness and reform in the Act regulating what were known as 'mad houses'
- the need for parish fever wards
- the first report of a case of appendicitis to be found in English medical literature, which also was the first to recognise perforation (peritonitis) as the cause of death
- 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, he 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 career and achievements, James Parkinson had many other interests including the following:

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 13 founder members of the British Geological Society, which is 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 social reformer and political activist who championed many causes and found it difficult to remain silent if he thought 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 was very restricted (indeed, for many citizens it was non-existent) and corruption was rife.

Under the pen name of 'Old Hubert', he wrote many pamphlets that were highly critical of the political system of the day and advocated reforms such as representation of the people in the House of Commons and universal suffrage. He also highlighted social concerns such as poverty, unfairness of high taxes and low wages, unjust imprisonment, poor prison conditions, education for the poor, and care for older people and people with disabilities.

James Parkinson also became a prominent member of two campaigning societies for reforms at the time: the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information. The first aimed to bring about parliamentary reform, especially expansion of the representation of working class people, and some of its ideas were embraced in the political system that exists in the UK today. However, in a time when there was limited freedom of speech, many members of these societies were tried and convicted of a number of offences (including treason) and suffered severe punishments as a result.

Implicated by his political activities, James played a key role in investigations into an alleged conspiracy to kill King George

III by firing a poisoned dart from the pit of a London theatre (known as the 'Pop-Gun Plot'). Five members of the London Corresponding Society were arrested for high treason in relation to this alleged plan, which never existed except in the mind of one man, Thomas Upton. Three of the defendants were accused, based on letters forged by Upton, and a fourth was accused simply by being associated with Upton.

James Parkinson was a key witness for the defence during the Privy Council investigations and in the one trial that was subsequently held. All the accused were eventually freed. James Parkinson, both in appearing for the defence and in his writings, took significant risks with regard to his own career and life. He could have been prosecuted for his political activities, for the people and organisations he was associated with and for writing against the monarchy. However, his involvement in the investigations into the 'Pop-Gun Plot' and the subsequent trial showed that he was a man of principle and honour who believed that these issues were too important for him to remain silent. It was noted that Parkinson's frankness, sincerity and integrity during the trial earned him the respect of the Privy Council and he was not himself prosecuted.

In later life, James Parkinson took on other responsibilities with humanitarian goals. These included highlighting the importance of the welfare of children who worked as apprentices. He uncovered abuses and encouraged reform of the law governing apprentices, in order to make review and inspection an integral part of the system.



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Family and church

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

James Parkinson was also a 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, which was 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 set out a clear description of the condition. This was based on observation of six cases he had either met in his own practice or seen during walks in his neighbourhood. He only examined one of these six cases himself, and as such the description can be seen as incomplete. However, his account is still remarkable for its accuracy and clarity of expression. One of his aims in writing the essay was to encourage others to study the condition.

It was a French doctor, Jean Martin Charcot, who fully recognised the significance of James Parkinson's work some 60 years after *An Essay* and it was Charcot who called the condition 'la maladie de Parkinson' for the first time – Parkinson's disease.

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