Sir Jonathan Hutchinson 1828 – 1913

Born in Selby to a Quaker family, Jonathan became a leading Victorian surgeon, adventurer and museum founder.

**Early life**

Jonathan Hutchinson was born in Selby on July 23\(^{rd}\) 1828, the second son in a strict Quaker family of twelve. His father was a prosperous business man with another Quaker, Thomas Proctor. The Hutchinsons came to Selby from Lincolnshire and the family firm acted as middlemen in the thriving trade between Yorkshire farmers and the Leeds manufacturers who bought their flax for making linen.

Jonathan lived at Ratten Row beside the Ouse, now “The Quay”. He was well educated, first by governesses and then at the school kept by Mr Beilby. It is recorded that he was “a domineering boy, both at home and at school”, and at the age of 20, he was “A reserved and gloomy Quaker whose watchword was self-denial, he was a puritanical workaholic even by Victorian standards. His youthful diary shows him rising before dawn each day to study his medical books and read the Bible”

Jonathan decided that he wished to take up medicine and attended the York School of Medicine and the York County Hospital.

**Life in London**

In the spring of 1850 Jonathan and his brother Massey went up to London. Jonathan wanted to be a surgeon and studied at Bart’s medical college. In October 1850 he began teaching at the Ragged School in Clerkenwell, which became the Bedford Institute. He then returned to Bart’s to study under James Paget and became somewhat of an expert eye surgeon. He obtained an appointment on the staff of the “Medical Times and Gazette” and reported on all the most important cases and operations in London, work of immense educational value. In 1856 Jonathan married Jane West, daughter of William West of Leeds, a distinguished chemist.
They were both earnest Quakers. During their early married life Jonathan's work was almost entirely with the poor, and in the study of sexually-transmitted diseases. However, through his faith, he remained optimistic about civilisation in general and his aim was to help conquer these diseases for the benefit of the poorest and most degraded of mankind.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, along with official positions in many other medical societies. He studied diseases of the nervous system, the eyes and ears, skin, cancer and sexual disease and established an enormous and well-earned reputation as a teacher. Even 150 or so years later, some of his diagnoses remain as accepted 'best practice', his anatomical diagrams continue to be respected and several medical descriptions, e.g. 'Hutchinson's triad' referring to the onset of syphilis, remain in use.

In addition to his professional teaching he was a pioneer of science education for the public. He had a great interest in the natural world, which led to the varied exhibits with which he filled his museums.

Opinions of his character continued to differ.

Ernest Little (1867-1950) commented: "He was a tall, stooping, spare figure, wearing an unbeautiful straggling beard at a time when beards were obsolete. He was totally devoid of any sense of humour and like most humourless men, incredibly obstinate in clinging to his opinions long after they had been demonstrated to be untenable".

A more charitable observer, who attended a lecture delivered by Hutchinson, stated: "He was a tall man with a great dome of a head, dark eyes looking benevolently through steel-rimmed spectacles, and a white beard which came well down on his chest.

He was dressed in a suit of black broad cloth and looked like an absent-minded professor, though there was nothing in the least absentminded about his delivery. I do not remember what he talked about that day but he held us completely for an hour.

He spoke rather slowly and solemnly, and what he said was clear and logical. There was nothing scintillating about it, but you felt he was speaking out of immense knowledge. There was a distinct North Country intonation in his voice, which seemed somehow to make what he said trustworthier."
Philanthropy and Museums

As a typical Victorian philanthropist Hutchinson wanted to share his wider interests with his fellow men, and there was some conflict between his ideas of creationism and those of Charles Darwin.

By 1887 Jane and Jonathan had had 10 children and were living in idyllic style at Haslemere in Surrey, but sadly Jane died in that year. In 1888 Hutchinson began the 'Haslemere Educational Museum' in the out-buildings of his farm. The museum was started from items that he had picked up on his travels, a mixture of stuffed birds, fossils and an elephant’s skull.

On Sundays Jonathan would lecture to the populace at the museum on a huge range of topics. These included scientific facts of the different ages of the universe, geology, shells, birds, animals and the lives of the English poets. Some of his subjects such as life, death and immortality clashed with the views of some local churchgoers.

Following the success of his museum in Haslemere he opened the museum in Selby in 1898. He maintained that “a museum without a lecturer to explain it is like a church without a minister”. Hutchinson purchased a grand building in Park Street as the home for his museum. It was built in 1839 and had been a Mechanics Institute and reading rooms. It is believed that Charles Dickens gave a reading in this building.

True to his word, Hutchinson returned to lecture at his museum, and his lectures caused local controversy. He was very much in favour of evolution and scientific theories of the world, rather than blind creationism. The “Selby Times” ran several highly critical articles, “Hutchinson….calls into question the very foundations of our faith…..We have abstained from taking much notice (of his lectures”.

The contents of the museum have been described as a “Cabinet of curiosities”. A full list of its contents does not survive, but Selebians with good memories can recall some of the more striking exhibits. There was a wildly inaccurate model of Selby Toll Bridge, with a vastly exaggerated number of supports. A stuffed brown bear is remembered, along with many geological and fossil specimens. Some say there was an ichthyosaur skeleton – others maintain it was merely the head of an Indian river crocodile.
Selby’s museum closed around 1965, subsequently becoming a Salvation Army citadel, and now a restaurant.

The museum in Haslemere, by contrast, has gone from strength to strength. A vibrant and welcoming institution, it combines ‘old-fashioned’ display with more modern interactive techniques and is a popular visitor attraction.

**Later life**

Hutchinson continued to lecture on diseases of the nervous system, gout, leprosy and diseases of the tongue, which were “full of original observation”; but his principal work was connected with the study of syphilis. In 1901 Hutchinson went to South Africa and India to carry on his investigations into leprosy and skin disease. However, his strongly-held views that rotten fish were the cause of leprosy and that circumcision was the major and most effective way to reduce sexual disease in men began to be disproved.

He accepted a knighthood in 1908, for “distinguished service to medicine”. He eventually retired to his 300 acre farm where he died in 1913, choosing his own epitaph, “A Man of Hope and Forward-Looking Mind”

Flags at the Abbey, museum and Town Hall flew at half mast. The “Selby Times” perhaps realised they had misjudged a great man in the town’s midst by stating: “He made Selby think”.

Hutchinson was honoured in Selby firstly by having a science room at the Abbey School named in his memory and then by naming a street after him in the Flaxley Road area of Selby, an appropriate link with the Hutchinson family’s trading past.

A fine plaque detailing his life is in the foyer of the restaurant and Selby Civic Society fixed a blue plaque detailing his achievements on the site of his childhood home in what is now Westmill Foods on The Quay, in 2005.
Taking things further

The Haslemere Educational Museum’s website is www.haslemeremuseum.co.uk. It was the Daily Telegraph’s ‘Small Museum of the Year’ in 2012, has archival material on Hutchinson and continues to function following Hutchinson's principles.

There are standard biographies of Hutchinson on Wikipedia.

Journals concerning diseases of the skin sometimes have historical articles on Hutchinson.

The most comprehensive is by Dr AE Wales and can be found as

at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1194566/

A form of biography of Hutchinson was published in 2013 to mark the centenary of his death. It is ‘Remembering Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (1828-1913): A Centenary Hagiography’ by Nadeem Toodayan. This is available via Amazon and is a ‘print on demand’ book.

The Friends Meeting House in Selby, where Hutchinson would have worshipped still remains in Selby, down an alley off Gouthorpe, just beyond Audus Street, heading away from the Abbey. Although no longer used, the outline of the building can be made out, albeit somewhat obscured by a shopfront, currently the derelict ‘Worth It’ shop.