



Researching Your Medical Ancestors

By Michelle Dennis

HAVE YOU FOUND A DOCTOR, APOTHECARY, CHEMIST, OR SURGEON in your family tree? Its hard to imagine what the life of a doctor would have been like in 19th century with no pain relief to offer to your patients, and little medical knowledge to draw on.



1850 London Medical Directory showing entry for Dr. Samson Davis. (Public Domain)

My ancestor Dr. Samson Davis was a London surgeon and apothecary in the 1840-50s. Born in 1818 at 4 Upper East Smithfield, London, England, Samson was one of nine children born to Samuel Samson DAVIS (gunlock maker) and Betty Holbrook and was baptised at St. Botolph's Aldgate in East London on Christmas Day 1818. Born into a middle-class family, his father was a prominent gunlock maker and inventor who worked at the Tower of London and patented three improvements to percussion cap gunlocks in the early 1800s.

Unfortunately, in 1832 when Samson was just 13 years old, his parents died in the London Cholera epidemic within a week of each other. This left him and his only two surviving siblings John and Joseph to be raised by his paternal aunt, Ann Keech (1783-1840), who was appointed guardian in his fathers will. Childless Ann was married to James Keech, a chemist from Deptford in Kent. His five sisters all died before the age of three years, illustrating the fragility of childhood at the time. His brother Samuel died in 1829 aged just 24. London's Cholera epidemic was just one of a series of devastating diseases, www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/medicine/cholera-victorian-london.

It must have been unbearable to watch his own parents die of cholera together, and perhaps it was this event that spurred him on to become a doctor. More likely his guardians paid for him to be apprenticed into a good trade that would earn him a good income for the rest of his life. His father's 1832 will left specific instructions on the guardianship of his three sons. Both his father's will, and probate inventory were found online at <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>. The death duty registers of his father at The National Archives UK also gave further information about his guardians.

From the age of 14, a boy was usually apprenticed to a qualified master for a term of 5-7 years. The boy lived in his master's house and undertook his apprenticeship without pay. His parents or guardians (in Samson's case – his Aunt Ann) paid the master (Mr Hesselwood) a premium in a lump sum, which would cover tuition, board and lodging during the whole term of his indenture.

It was the premium that determined which occupation a boy could follow, or what his parents could afford. Since premiums were high for apprentice surgeons and apothecaries, this limited the class of boy who could enter this profession. By the 1800s, surgeons apprentice premiums had risen because the medical profession



Dr. Samson Davis, undated. (Public Domain)

had increased in social status, as it was known that successful medical practices could be very profitable.

Medical apprenticeships were advertised in local newspapers. Sometimes the parent or guardian placed an advertisement themselves, searching for a master that would take on their son. Try the British Newspaper Archive at www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

Newspapers can help you flesh out the bones of your research. As well as looking through microfilm or physical copies of newspapers in the local library of your ancestor's residences, great use can be made of the wonderful resources that are now online. Using the two different database searching techniques available on both British Newspaper Archive, and the British Newspapers 1710-1953 collection on Find My Past, different articles mentioning ancestors can be seen. Family notices, articles and advertisements can all be invaluable in providing further clues about your ancestor's lives. Some of the details available are property and estate auctions, business advertisements, birth, death and marriage notices, apprenticeship disputes, obituaries, criminal trials, inquests, and patent sales.

A young man in London interested in medical life during the early to mid 1800s had a couple of primary career paths open to him. He could apprentice with an apothecary and then eventually obtain a licence from the Society of Apothecaries (LSA), which would grant him the right to concoct medicines prescribed by physicians.

After some training he would be free to embark on his own practice, treating patients with the remedies of the day, probably dabbling in minor surgery or dentistry on the side.

The more ambitious would go on to study at a medical school and later join the Royal College of Surgeons in England, becoming a qualified general practitioner and surgeon, performing a host of different tasks from treating minor colds to amputating limbs.

Within a few years Samson Davis had obtained both his apothecary and surgeon's licence and established a practice at 19 Sidney Square, Stepney, London. Setting up shop as a doctor in those days required an entrepreneurial spirit as competition was intense among London's new medical middle class.

Unable to find his apprenticeship papers, I found information about his medical career in a number of alternative sources. Using census records, post office and trade directories (Ancestry) I narrowed down the geographical areas that he lived and worked in.

In August 1840, Samson married Louisa, the daughter of his neighbour, chemist George Emerson 1773-1838. Their child Louisa was born the following year, but sadly died aged 9 months in March 1842. His wife Louisa died four months later of consumption aged 28.



University College Hospital London.
(Wikipedia)

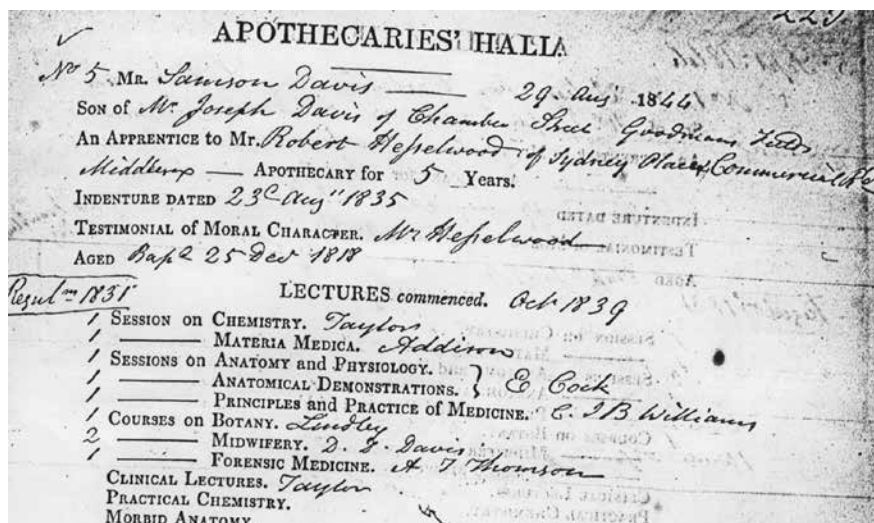
In 1850 Samson Davis could be found in the London and Provincial Medical Directory – available on Ancestry - UK and Ireland Medical Directories 1845-1942, www.ancestry.com.au/search/collections/61053 and it's also worth checking the UK Medical Registers 1859-1959, www.ancestry.com.au/search/collections/33538.

While the medical directories were invaluable in telling me when and where he practised, an email to the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries in London, provided a wealth of information about my medical man. They sent me copies of his entry in the *Student Registration Books* from London University College advising that he studied Medicine, Midwifery, Forensic Medicine, and Botany, the names of his tutors, and that he was apprenticed in 1835 to Mr. Robert Hesselwood.

The livery company of the Society of Apothecaries as well as examining and qualifying apprentices, also dispensed charity to widows, medical students, schools, and institutions. In 1815 the Apothecaries' Act was the first of a series of 19th century reforms aimed at raising standards of medical education and regulating the profession in England and Wales. The LSA (Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries) became a popular qualification.

Samson qualified Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries on 5 Sept 1844 and practised as a surgeon/apothecary at 19 Sidney Square Commercial Rd, 49 High Street Kensington, and 116 Tottenham Court Road. A history of the College is available online, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10048692/1/World-of-UCL.pdf>.

One of the best sources of information, especially if no apprenticeship



Samson Davis Apothecaries Halia 1844 Apprenticeship details. (Public Domain)

papers can be located, is finding a copy of your ancestor's Apothecaries Halia (medical qualification document). This showed when and where and to whom he was apprenticed, the length of apprenticeship, and when he qualified. I found Samson's in the Guildhall Library of London's manuscript collection, www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/guildhall-library.

Electoral Rolls also give information on dates and locations. Try Ancestry's London, England Electoral Registers 1832-1965 collection, www.ancestry.com.au/search/collections/1795.

Obituaries of your medical ancestor can also provide genealogical gems. Search the online versions of the Lancet medical journal, the *British Medical Journal*, and the *Medical Times and Gazette*.

The Lancet also advised Samson had become a member of Apothecaries Hall, London and had obtained his qualifications to practice as an apothecary on Thursday September 5, 1844.

If you live in London, you can take a self-guided walk entitled Plagues, Pestilence and Pathology, to see where surgical instruments were made, plague pit locations, and ancient hospitals were located. Visit www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/walks-and-itineraries.

Checking newspaper archives for his medical advertisements, I uncovered a surprising fact – Samson also practiced the art of mesmerism (hypnotic trance induction). One of Samson's University tutors was involved in an early scandal arising from the Victorian craze for mesmerism. Dr. John Elliotson pioneered the stethoscope and introduced the use of quinine for malaria. Unfortunately, he had to resign from the College when the medical journal, *The Lancet*, exposed two of his mesmerism trance patients, sisters Elizabeth and Jane Okey, as fakes.

Samson also began giving lectures himself in London on mesmerism and hypnotism. In the 1840s mesmerism was beginning to gain popularity as a form of pain relief in childbirth. Samson continued his lectures into mesmerism after he immigrated to Australia in 1852.

In his 1841 diary which has been handed down in our family, I read about how Samson delivered medical lectures to various Mechanics Institutes around London and how he described his brief trip to New York, USA to visit his brother John. Often medical men would work their passage to Australia or USA as the ship's surgeon, which Samson did in 1841 to the USA,



Samson became a member of Apothecaries Hall, London on Thursday September 5, 1844. (Creative Commons)

so it's worth checking shipping crew lists such as this one on Ancestry – New York Passenger and Crew Lists 1820-1957, www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/7488.

Samson was, by his diaries, quite a conscientious doctor, as demonstrated by his personal diary entry concerning the quarantine proceedings involved in landing in New York harbour:

“The medical man boarded at this place as each person accordingly to law has to undergo an examination before he can land. This sounds well, but it is quite farcical in effect. The physician made us march by him like a drove of pigs. The ceremony occupied two minutes of his precious time. Had half of us been half dead with typhus fever he would not have cared. He must have been much more sagacious and penetrating than English physicians to have detected it by the cursory glance. He just vouchsafed us all.”

On his return to London in 1843, he published a book *“Physiological Principles of Physiognomy and Natural Language”* and in 1846 married his second wife (daughter of the neighbouring publican) Annie Reeves Rawbone at Brompton, London. I found this publication by doing a name search in the British Library catalogue, www.bl.uk. Searching on Google books, I found the entire book reproduced online which I could download and keep. His new book was also mentioned in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1844 found on Google Books.

A few years later in 1847 Samson published a second book entitled *“Human physiognomy: or the art of discerning the mental and moral character of man; to which is added the Sibyl's Book of Fate”*. I found the book online, and was delighted



In 1847 Samson published his second book, *Human physiognomy: or the art of discerning the mental and moral character of a man; to which is added the Sibyl's Book of Fate*. (Public Domain)

to read about the topics of human physiognomy (“how to discern the character by physical appearance”), dream interpretations (“to dream one sees a lizard signifies ill luck and misfortune by secret enemies”), the significance of moles on the body (“if a man shall have the form of a mole on his tongue, it doth demonstrate he shall marry a rich and beautiful wife”), Charms to know who your husband might be, Signs to choose a good husband and wife (“extraordinary long chin shows a person unfit for business and given to folly”). This was found on an obscure website (Cedarville University USA), using Google.

After fathering three children (George, Henry and Edward) Samson immigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1852 with his brother (Joseph Davis, gunlock maker) and families. The first two years were spent in Melbourne, and then he moved his medical

practice to the Victorian goldfield's towns of Castlemaine and Newstead. Two more children were born (Mary and Hardwicke). Samson appears as the doctor delivering his daughter on Mary's birth certificate, as well as several other South Melbourne births listed on the same page.

Sadly, Samson came to an untimely end aged only 42, when he was found drowned in the Loddon River, in Newstead, Victoria in December 1860. His inquest revealed he was suffering from ‘delirium tremens’ (drunkenness). Family story tells that he died penniless on the Victorian goldfields when his poorer patients could not afford to pay for his services. The Public Record Office of Victoria, Australia holds inquests available digitally, <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/inquests-and-other-coronial-records/inquests-deaths-deposition>.

Searching Australian newspapers using the free online newspaper resource in the National Library of Australia, I found several articles about him practising the art of mesmerism, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

Trove brings together content from libraries, museums, archives, repositories, and other research and collecting organisations. Here you will find Australian online resources including books, images, historic newspapers, maps, music and more. Many articles were copied for the British newspapers, so it is worth searching if you have a relative that you suspect may have spent some time in Australia.

In 1858 in Castlemaine, Australia he was lecturing on the subject of mesmerism with indifferent results. He invited audience participants up on stage where he induced a state of mesmeric sleep (trance).



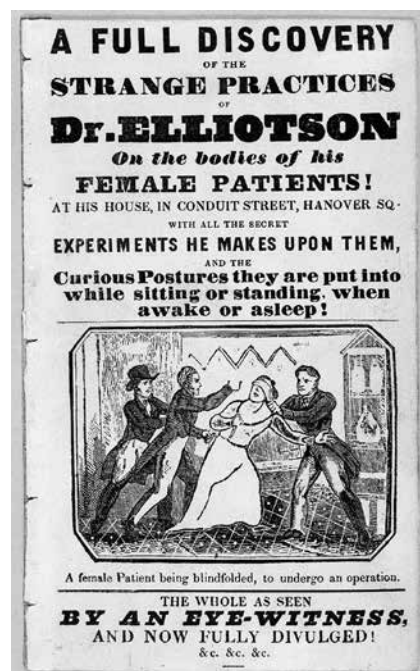
The sceptical audiences saw-sawed between boos, hisses and derisive laughter to being utterly astounded by the cataclysmic trance that he was able to place some of his audience members in.

One article describes how after he was unable to wake one person out of a trance, an audience member called out “fire, fire”, so that the participant sprang from his chair with a sudden violence, but still took some time to be awoken completely by Dr. Davis.

Why then, did a writer, lecturer and doctor of eminent London qualifications, sink to the apparent almost sideshow-like deliverance of lectures on hypnotism and mesmerism? After further research, I found the answer.

During the 1840s, there was a real trend for hypnotic medicine in London. Being few existing options for alleviating pain at the time, hypnosis and mesmerism were controversially used as a form of anaesthesia, especially during childbirth.

John Elliotson (Samson’s tutor



Mesmerism poster featuring Dr. John Elliotson. (Wikipedia)

medical ancestor sources

The Lancet Medical Journal 1820-2022

– www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/issues#decade=loi_decade_183

The British Medical Journal 1840-1993 – www.bmj.com/archive

The Medical Times and Gazette – <https://books.google.com>

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries UK – www.apothecaries.org/family-history

Wellcome Collection library catalogue

– <https://wellcomecollection.org/collections>

Royal College of Surgeons of England, Lives of the Fellows

– https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/client/en_GB/lives

Guildhall Library– Occupations

– www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/guildhall-library

Hospital Records Database staff and patients

– www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords

UK Royal College of Physicians (Munks Roll)

– <https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/inspiring-physicians>

Scotland Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh

– www.rcpe.ac.uk/heritage/catalogues-digitised-material

USA College of Physicians and Surgeons Obituary Database

– www.library-archives.cumc.columbia.edu

USA Directory of Deceased American Physicians

– www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/about/exhibition/index.html

Australian Medical Pioneers Index – www.medicalpioneers.com

at University College Hospital), practised controversial hypnosis and was one of the first men to practise acupuncture and use his newly invented stethoscope. Undeterred by his critics, Elliotson went on to found the London Mesmeric Infirmary. Under his stewardship, mesmerism finally managed to attract a cloud of credibility, as evidenced by this newspaper birth notice:

On the 19th ult. at Rotherhithe (in the unconsciousness of mesmeric sleep, induced by Mr. Chandler), the wife of Mr. Thomas Moss, of a son. (The Times, February 2nd, 1848).

Today, the use of mesmerism has all but faded into the past but is still used in some countries as a form of alternative medicine. If I had been facing a painful childbirth in the 19th century, with no other form of pain relief offered, perhaps I too may have considered mesmerism as a viable option. Let’s be thankful for our medical pioneers of the past. ©

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