

My mesmerising medical ancestor

Newspapers helped **Michelle Dennis** discover that her surgeon ancestor had a literally mesmerising sideline

By Michelle Dennis



Michelle is a web designer and family historian living in Melbourne, Australia. She has been researching her own family history for the past 30 years, mostly in Australia, England, and Ireland, and in 2015 completed a Certificate of Family History Skills and Strategies.

Have you ever wondered how much actual medical knowledge a doctor would have had in times past? Imagine being a surgeon in those somewhat medically barbaric times, without effective pain relief to give to your patients.

My ancestor Samson Davis was a London surgeon and apothecary back in the 1840 and 1850s. He was born in 1818 at 4 Upper East Smithfield, London, to Samuel Samson Davis, a gunlock maker, and Betty Holbrook, and was baptised at St Botolph's Aldgate.

ALTERNATIVE SOURCES

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, I narrowed down the geographical areas that he lived and worked in. Medical directories were invaluable, and London's Wellcome Library was able

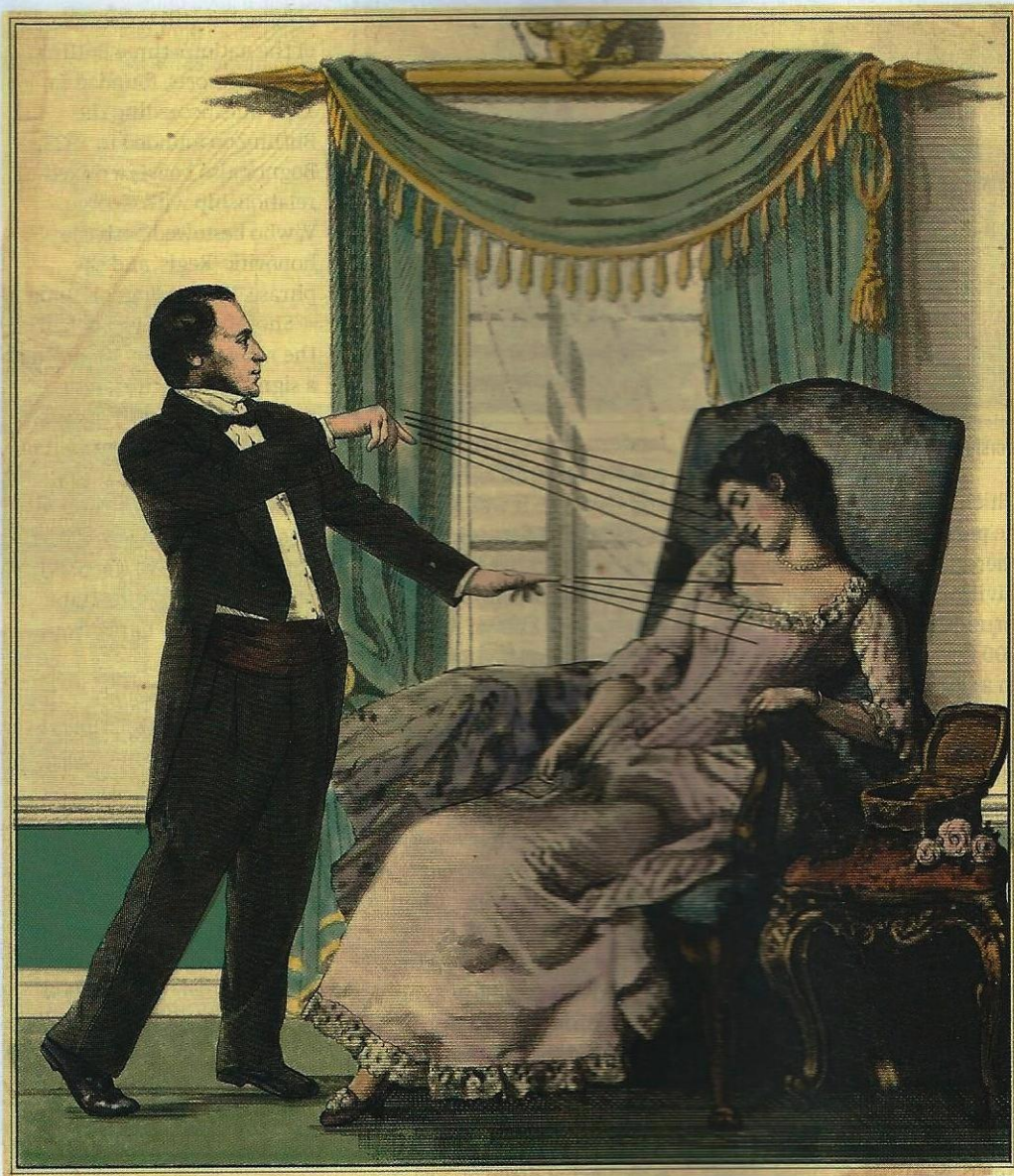
to provide further details. At University College London, Samson studied Medicine, Midwifery, Forensic Medicine, and Botany, being apprenticed

in 1835 to Robert Hesselwood. He then qualified as a Licentiate of the **Society of Apothecaries** on 5 September 1844, before practising as a surgeon/apothecary at various locations – 19 **Sidney Square**, Commercial Road; 49 **High Street**, Kensington; and 116 **Tottenham Court Road**.

Checking newspaper archives for his medical advertisements, I uncovered

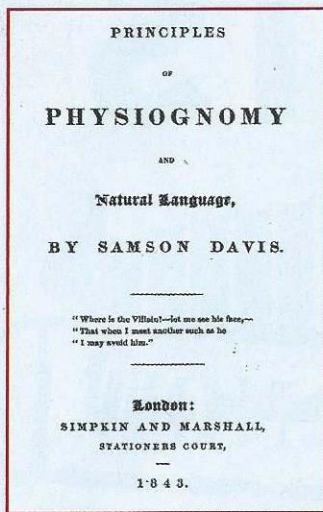
a surprising fact – Samson also practiced the art of mesmerism, or hypnotic trance induction. In his 1841 diary, he records delivering medical lectures to various Mechanics' Institutes around London and describes his brief trip to New York to visit his brother John. In September 1842, after the deaths of his first wife, Louisa, and baby daughter, also named Louisa, he made a sad journey to the USA.

'A severe calamity having almost overwhelmed me, I felt most desirous to destroy all associations connected with it – but those which place cannot affect. To aid this purpose, I determined in my confusion to leave my native land for some time.'



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In his 1841 diary, he records delivering medical lectures to various Mechanics' Institutes



The title page of Samson Davis's book

Samson was, judging from his diaries, quite a conscientious doctor, as demonstrated by his 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 entitled *Physiological Principles of Physiognomy and Natural Language*, and in 1846 he married his second wife – Annie Reeves Rawbone, daughter of the neighbouring publican – at Brompton.

After fathering three children – George, Henry and Edward – he immigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1852 with his brother Joseph, a gunlock maker, and their families.

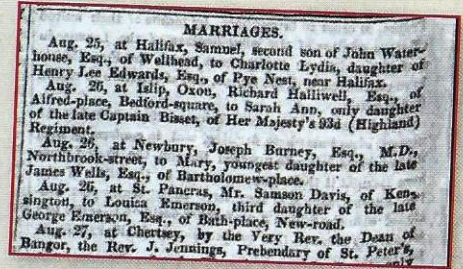
Reading about the past

Michelle found that newspaper archives were a great way to build a picture of her ancestor's life

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 her ancestor's residences, I made great use of the wonderful resources that are now online. Using the two different searching techniques available on both British Newspaper Archive and the British Newspapers 1710-1953

collection on Findmypast, different articles mentioning my ancestor were brought up. Family notices, articles and advertisements can all be invaluable in providing further clues about your ancestors' lives. Some of the details I found were property and estate auctions, business advertisements, birth, death and marriage notices, apprenticeship disputes, obituaries, criminal trials, inquests, and patent sales.

The other terrific free online newspaper resource is Trove – the digital resource of the National Library of Australia (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>). Trove brings together content from libraries, museums, archives, repositories and other research and collecting organisations. Here you will find over 500 million Australian and 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.



After two years in Melbourne, he moved his medical practice to the Victorian goldfield towns of Castlemaine and Newstead, and had two more children, Mary and Hardwicke. Sadly, Samson was found drowned in the Loddon River in Newstead in December 1860.

HYPNOTISM SIDESHOW

In searching the Australian newspapers, using the wonderful free online newspaper resource Trove, I found several articles about him practising the art of mesmerism. In 1858, 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 see-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 though, did a writer and 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. There 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 at University College Hospital, practised controversial hypnosis and was one of the first men to practise acupuncture and use the newly invented stethoscope. Undeterred by his critics, Elliotson went on to found the London Mesmeric Infirmary. Under his stewardship, mesmerism 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, 2 February, 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. ■



Dr Samson Davis