

DOCTORS AND GUNMAKERS IN THE EAST END

by Michelle Dennis

Saturday, September 17th, 1842 - LONDON

.....a severe calamity having almost overwhelmed me, I felt most desirous to destroy all associations connected with it. To aid this purpose, I determined in my confusion to leave my native land, for some time..... (Diary of Samson Davis, London, 1842)

A prominent London doctor and lecturer, Samson Davis had just lost his wife to consumption. In July 1842, Louisa EMERSON, his wife of just two years, passed away, leaving him alone in the world.

In a fit of misery and depression, Samson decided to sail to North America, to see his brother John, who was residing in New York at that time. He stayed in New York, perhaps two years before returning to his beloved birthplace, old London town.

Born in 1818 in Whitechapel, Samson was one of nine children struggling to rise from the poverty around him. His father, Samuel Samson DAVIS, a gunmaker at the Tower of London, died in 1832 when he was only 13 years old, and his mother Betty HOLBROOK died two weeks later. They are both buried at St Botolph Without Aldgate, London. Samson along with his siblings - Samuel b 1804, Joseph b 1807, Sarah b 1809, Elizabeth b 1811, Ann b 1813, Catherine b 1814, Mary b 1816 and John b 1821 were left to fend for themselves.

His older brother, Joseph, learnt his gunmaking trade from his father before he died, and struggled to put Samson through Medical School at the London University Hospital. Their father Samuel, had managed to patent three gunlock mechanism's before his early demise, and with the money earned from the patents, and Joseph's self-sacrificing labour, Samson was able to make it to the top of his field.

He lectured widely around London and district at universities and mechanic's institutes, and was known especially for his research into mesmerism and hypnotism.

On New Years Day, in 1846 Samson married Annie Rathbone Reeves, who bore him three sons in the following five years. Unfortunately, the middle son, Henry B Davis died shortly after birth. They resided at 2 Palentine Place, London.

In early 1852 Samson decided to immigrate to the land of hope "Australia". Perhaps as a respected London physician he could carve out a new life for himself in the process. Thousands were rushing to the goldfields of Victoria; they must need doctors out there, mustn't they?

In August 1852 Samson, Annie and their two sons George and Edward arrived in Port Melbourne, Victoria aboard the ship "Gloriana". They decided to stay in the city of Melbourne for a couple of years so that Samson could gain registration as a doctor in this country. In 1855, their only daughter Mary Eliza was born.

By 1857 the Davis family had moved to the rich goldfields of the Castlemaine area and Annie had produced another son - Hardwicke Davis. Unfortunately, the baby died soon after birth. How frustrating as a doctor to watch your children succumb to the hard conditions of a pioneering life without being able to prevent their deaths.

Over the years he himself became poorer in both health, due to the constant stress, and financially due to the poverty of his clients. He started to drink to escape the frustration he felt, and before long he was almost an alcoholic.

On the 23rd of December 1860, he was found drowned in the Loddon River, Newstead, near Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia. The coroners' inquest found 'accidental death due to the subject suffering from a state of delirium tremens' (alcohol induced stupor).

Did this once well-known and respected, prominent doctor take his own life, or did he fall into the waterhole in his drunken state?

His older brother Joseph, and his wife Eliza and 5 children, immigrated to Australia with Samson's family. Before leaving London Joseph was also working as a gunlock maker in the Tower of London (like his father) and was contracted to the East India Company. Joseph and Eliza resided at Chamber Street, Whitechapel. After arriving in Australia Joseph became the Town Clerk of Castlemaine and held many esteemed positions in that town. Unfortunately, he too also met with an untimely end.

Joseph, at the age of 76 years, having being blind for the last few, jumped out of his bedroom window, at his house in Bendigo, Victoria and hanged himself.