

Rolls R (2003). Caleb Hillier Parry (1755-1822).



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Caleb Hillier Parry was born in Cirencester on 21st of October 1755. Of Welsh descent, his father Joshua was minister of the Old Presbyterian Church in Dollar Street. Caleb was educated at the local grammar school where he attended as a day boy. Edward Jenner was also a pupil at the school and despite the difference in their age their friendship developed and continued throughout their adult lives.

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At 15, Caleb was sent to Warrington Academy, founded to provide further education for dissenting students who were not eligible for admission to Oxford or Cambridge because of the Oxbridge policy of only accepting Church of England pupils. It was at Warrington that Parry first fell in love with Sarah Rigby whose father ran the hostel for the academy students. The couple married eight years later.

Meanwhile, Caleb left Warrington to study medicine at [Edinburgh University](#), which at that time had the most enlightened and advanced medical school in Britain. The newly appointed professor of medicine, [William Cullen](#) departed from tradition by lecturing in English rather than Latin and teaching clinical medicine in the presence of living patients. Caleb also spent some of his undergraduate years in London under the tutelage of Dr Thomas Denman, physician-accoucheur to the Middlesex Hospital, and was able to attend lectures and demonstrations given by John and William Hunter. His departure from Edinburgh to London may have been influenced by his older friend Jenner, in whose footsteps he seems to have followed.

In 1777, Caleb returned to Edinburgh where he graduated M.D. and was held in such high regard that he was elected president of the [Edinburgh Medical Society](#). After qualifying, Caleb and his new wife Sarah set out on a long tour of northern Europe, returning to England where they lived temporarily in Cirencester with Caleb's widowed mother before establishing their home in Bath.

Bath was then at its height of fashion, attracting rich and famous, impoverished and destitute, some hail and hearty, others sick and ailing. Twenty years earlier, the novelist Tobias Smollett had described the city as the great hospital of the nation. By the time Parry arrived, elegant new buildings designed by John Wood and his son were beginning to spread northwards beyond the walled confines of the old medieval spa town. Visitors far outnumbered residents. Amongst these, a large proportion came for health reasons, providing ample business for doctors. Parry found himself in competition with a multitude of well-established practitioners and his practice was slow to build up. This gave him an opportunity to develop his other interests - geology, ballooning and farming - and to make contact with people of inquiring disposition through the newly founded [Bath & West of England Society and the Bath Philosophical Society](#). The latter, whose membership included William Herschel and Joseph Priestley, provided a forum for scientific discussion.

By 1786, Parry's practice was enlarging and his income steadily increasing. In the previous year he had treated his old mentor [John Hunter](#) for angina. Parry was now travelling extensively to see patients in neighbouring towns - as far as Gloucester to the north and Warminster to the south - as well as being called upon by local colleagues to provide a second opinion. He was able to acquire a grand townhouse in the Circus, and build a large country house on the lower slopes of Lansdown, to the north of the city.

Parry kept meticulous records of his patients. His case descriptions, which included exophthalmic thyrotoxicosis (recorded 1786) and megacolon (recorded 1822) remained unpublished until after his death, thus allowing those conditions to be eponymously ascribed to others. Parry's contribution to medicine falls into four main categories:

- His deduction of general pathological principles from human and animal observation and experiment, for example, the recognition of coronary insufficiency as the cause of angina (a collaborative observation with his friend Edward Jenner).
- His analysis of case descriptions allowing him to define specific syndromes like thyrotoxicosis.

- His detailed case reports, which are recognised as the first or most complete early description of a rare condition.
- His comparative studies of therapeutic efficacy, as illustrated by the rhubarb experiments detailed on this web site.

In his quest for an understanding of clinical medicine, Parry was very willing to collaborate with his colleagues. His work on the therapeutic effects of rhubarb was part of a team effort with Dr William Falconer and Dr Anthony Fothergill. This willingness for collaboration is further illustrated by Parry's involvement in a small medical society which he and [Edward Jenner](#) formed so that its members could meet regularly to present papers to each other. The Fleece Medical Society, named after the Gloucestershire inn in which the members met, was one of the earliest English provincial medical societies.

Besides his interest in medicine, Parry looked after a large farm, where he carried out experimental sheep breeding in an effort to improve the quality of wool. In 1807, his essay on breeding Marino sheep won him a prize awarded by the Board of Agriculture. His interest in air flight led to the launch of an unmanned hydrogen balloon from Bath which flew 19 miles, landing just west of Wells. He was one of the original members of the [Geological Society](#) when it was founded in 1807 and he possessed a large collection of fossils and minerals. He was a fellow of the Royal Society, although prior to 1847 it was possible to be nominated by friends who were already fellows regardless of any recognition for outstanding work.

Parry's health began to decline after his 40th birthday. He suffered from attacks of gout and renal colic. He even published a comprehensive account of his own symptoms entitled *Observations on the gravel, written from my own actual feelings....etc.* In 1810 he suffered a severe attack of facial erysipelas and never fully recovered his former strength. Six years later, a stroke left him unable to speak and paralysed on his right side. His recovery was slow and incomplete and caused him great frustration and emotional instability, and he ultimately developed epileptic fits. He died on the 9 March 1822 and his remains are buried in Bath Abbey. He was survived by his wife and children. His eldest son, Charles, also a physician, published many of his father's papers posthumously. His youngest son was the arctic explorer Admiral Sir Edward Parry.

Parry had an extensive medical library. Some of these books survive as part of the "[Parry Collection](#)" at [Bristol Medical School Library](#).

A full account of Parry's life and work entitled *The Spirit of Inquiry* by Sholem Glaser was published by Alan Sutton in 1995. ISBN 07509 09986. The book is available at £15.00 including p&p. from Jane Glaser, 49 Penn Lea Road, Weston, Bath BA1 3RG Tel: (01225) 429681. For further details contact jane@glaser.freenet.co.uk

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