John Snow MD—his early days

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Summary
The early background of John Snow is examined on the basis of some contemporary evidence. His birthplace, baptism and early schooling are recorded.

Key words
History; John Snow.

The pioneering work of the Victorian physician John Snow will be well known to readers of this Journal. Not only did he perfect the safe administration of ether and chloroform but he also investigated the properties of these and many other anaesthetic agents. In epidemiological circles he is no less admired for his methodical approach to the causation and transmission of cholera.

And yet little is known about the personality of this noble figure. He never married and what little information exists suggests that his private life was, in the Victorian manner, quiet and restrained. Still less was known about his early days until recent research uncovered many new details. By examining these early influences a better understanding of the man may be obtained.

John Snow was born on 15 March 1813. He was the first of nine children born to William and Frances Snow who lived in North Street, York. Figure 1 is an engraving of North Street in the year of John's birth. His father was a labourer in a coalyard and the family home was situated adjacent to his place of work. The dwelling must have been cold and damp, although doubtless there was always fuel for the fire. At that time coal was brought to the yard in barges along the River Ouse. Figure 2 is a later photograph showing barges moored at the North Street water-front. North Street is now a quiet backwater, but at the time of John's birth it must have been one of the busy parts of the City. In addition to numerous shops, dwellings, and the coalyard, there were warehouses from one of which Joseph Rowntree later founded his cocoa and chocolate business. These warehouses and some of the houses remain, but most of the waterfront has been redeveloped. A modern hotel stands at the site of John Snow’s birthplace, although many local people can still remember the North Street coalyard.

As was the custom, John was baptised soon after birth: the entry in the records of All Saints Church, North Street, is shown in Fig. 3.

When he was old enough John attended a private school in York. Most probably this was one of the famous Quaker establishments in the City. We are told that he was a most industrious pupil and that, of the subjects he studied, mathematics and natural history were his favourites. Here also was he imbued with the Quaker
principles which were later reflected in his austere lifestyle and life-long vegetarianism. Exactly how his father, a poor labourer, managed to send his son to a private school remains a mystery but the money may have come through John’s mother, Frances. She was the illegitimate daughter of Mary Askham who later married a gentleman, Mr Charles Empson. Empson, a leading figure in Bath society, was affluent and well-travelled. He numbered the Emperor Napoleon amongst his acquaintances and in 1816 took his relaxation, John Show, to meet this famous friend. Perhaps it was Charles Empson who financed the schooling of his step-daughter’s children.

As to the rest of John’s family we know that he had five brothers and three sisters. Most of them achieved notable positions in life. Robert (1819-86) became Magner of Gorsthwaite Colliery in Yorkshire. Thomas (1821-71) took Holy Orders and went to Underbarron in Cumbria as Vicar. Two sisters, Hannah (1825-1904) and Mary (1823-1911) set up a School for Ladies at The Mount, in York. William (1815-79) ran a temperance hotel in the City before emigrating to Australia. George (1828-30) died in infancy and is buried in All Saints churchyard, but of Charles (1857-77) and Sarah (1827-77) we know little.
At the age of fourteen John left his schooling and was sent to Newcastle-upon-Tyne to be apprenticed to Mr William Hardcastle, a General Practitioner Surgeon. His education here, including his attendance at the newly formed Newcastle School of Medicine, has been well documented. From such humble origins did John Snow become a leading figure in English medicine. His achievements have earned him a place in the history of anaesthesia and epidemiology, and it is appropriate that a memorial plaque should recently have been erected close to his place of birth. (Fig. 4).

Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to the following individuals and institutions: Mr George Sims, York; Dr A. Ashcroft, Newcastle upon Tyne; Dr J. Kinnell, York; The Borthwick Institute, York; The York City Archives; The Castle Museum, York; The North Yorkshire County Library.

References

1. From the Parish Records of All Saints Church, North Street, York, held by the Borthwick Institute, York.
2. From the List of Ratepayers of York 1824 (York City Archives).
5. From the family records of Mr George Sims, York.
6. From the Theological Archives held by the Borthwick Institute, York.
8. From the York Directories for 1843 and 1849 (York Reference Library).