

Surgeon and polymath Sir Henry Thompson was born in Framlingham on August 6th, 1820, the only son of Henry Thompson, a tradesman, and his wife Susannah. His parents had a shop on Market Hill, next to the alleyway leading to the Co-op store (there is a blue plaque on the wall). His mother was daughter of Samuel Medley (1769-1857), an accomplished portrait painter who painted the portrait group of the founders of the Medical Society of London, and was one of the founders of University College, London.

Sir Henry was educated under a local tutor Mr Fison, and was originally went into trade, as his parents, who were uncompromising Baptists, believed a profession was inappropriate for their son. However, his father finally relented and coming to London he was apprenticed to George Bottomley, a doctor at Croydon, in January, 1844, and in October he entered University College, London, to study medicine. Here he won the gold medal in anatomy in 1849, the gold medal in surgery in 1851, and took the MB degree.

In 1851, he began to practise surgery at 35 Wimpole Street, where he lived the rest of his life. He acted for a short time as Surgeon to the St Marylebone Infirmary, but in 1863 was elected Assistant Surgeon to University College Hospital, becoming full Surgeon in 1853, Professor of Clinical Surgery in 1866, Consulting Surgeon and Emeritus Professor of Clinical Surgery on his retirement in 1874.

Thompson specialised in genito-urinary surgery and visited Paris in July, 1858, to study the subject under Jean Civiale (1792-1867), who was the first to remove a bladder stone by lithotrity (a surgical procedure involving the mechanical breaking down of the stone). He became a pioneer in the removal of tumours from the bladder.

Thompson's successful crushing operations at University College soon attracted attention, and in 1863 he operated upon Leopold I, King of the Belgians. Thompson also treated Napoleon III, Emperor of France, at Camden Place, Chislehurst who unfortunately died before the third of a series of operations.

Thompson was a true polymath with a wide variety of other interest and attainments. He was a strong advocate for cremation on hygiene grounds. He was also an authority on diet (his book '*Food and Feeding*' (1880) went through twelve editions and *Diet in Respect of Age and Activity with Hints Concerning*

*Habits Conducive to Longevity* (1902)), a devoted student of astronomy, an excellent artist, a collector of china, and a man of letters.

In 1874 the Cremation Society was founded in England, and he was its President promoting the practice both here and on the Continent and published a book, *Cremation: the Treatment of the Body after Death* (1874) Cremation was contentious issue at the time with crematorium being built at Woking in 1879 but usage was forbidden by the Home Secretary and it was not used until March, 1885 when a test case decided that the practice was not illegal if no nuisance was caused. In 1902 Thompson took a leading part in the formation of a company which built a crematorium at Golder's Green near Hampstead Heath, then an outskirt of London.

Astronomy was another major interest of Sir Henry, and he built an observatory at Molesey, where he had a country house. He presented several instruments to the Greenwich Observatory, the last being a telescope twice the size of any previously in use

He was also a very competent artist (see sketch books below) and he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865, 1870, annually from 1872-1878, and again in 1881, 1883, and 1885. Two of his pictures were subsequently shown in the Paris Salon. He also experimented with and wrote about photography only two years after its introduction in 1839 by Louis Daguerre (see the Daguerreotype below).

He was also an eminent collector of fine china and had a major collection white and blue Nankin. A catalogue was produced which was illustrated both by him and James McNeill Whistler in 1878 (who was suggested by another of his acquaintances – Dante Gabriel Rossetti). However, he felt that the size of the collection had become unmanageable, and it was sold at Christie's on June 1st, 1880.

If all this was not enough besides numerous articles in magazines Thompson wrote two novels under the name of 'Pen Oliver'. *Charlie Kingston's Aunt*, published in 1885, presents the life of some fifty years earlier. *All But, a Chronicle of Laxenford* (1886) is illustrated by twenty full-page drawings by the author, in one of which he portrayed himself as he was in 1885.

As a host he was famous for his 'octaves', which were dinners of eight courses for eight people at eight o'clock. They were commenced in 1872, and the last, which was the 301st, was given shortly before his death. The guests were as carefully chosen as the food, and for a quarter of a century the most famous persons in the worlds of art, letters, science, politics, diplomacy, and fashion met at his table in Wimpole Street. King Edward VII, when Prince of Wales, dined there once, and his son, King George V, when Prince of Wales, attended Thompson's 300th octave. (see guest list below).

He was also very keen on the motorcar and learned to drive very late in life and published a book *The Motor Car Its Nature Use & Management* in 1902.

Thompson became a knight bachelor in 1867 and was created a baronet on February 20th, 1899.

He married on December 16th, 1861, Kate Fanny, daughter of George Loder, of Bath. Lady Thompson was well known as a pianist. She was paralysed for some years, but survived her husband, dying on August 30th, 1904, leaving a son, Henry Francis Herbert, and two daughters.

Sir Henry Thompson died at 35 Wimpole Street, W, on April 18th, 1904, and was cremated at Golder's Green.