

# A New Obituary for Thomas Howitt Junior: The Longest Serving Lancaster Medical Book Club President

Bryan Rhodes and Gill Fitzpatrick

Thomas Howitt junior (1809-1881) was born in the Lancaster Dispensary at Castle Hill in 1809 and, as was commonplace at the time, was subsequently apprenticed to his father, also Thomas, on his 16th birthday. His father had been a founding member of the Lancaster Medical Book Club (LMBC) and in 1843 Thomas jr. succeeded his father as Secretary/Treasurer of the LMBC, serving in this role until 1848. In 1857 he became President of the LMBC and remained in this post for over 13 years. He remains the longest serving President in the history of the LMBC. After more than 30 years as a surgeon to the Lancaster Infirmary, he was appointed Consulting Surgeon in 1863. In 1853 he was one of the signatories to the Trust Deed which established a new permanent medical library at the Infirmary, at that time still called the Lancaster Dispensary and House of Recovery. His father, Thomas senior, had supported the establishment of the new library by donating 161 volumes from his personal collection in 1843.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, we submitted a new obituary for Thomas Howitt jr. to the Editor of Plarr's Lives Online. This is now available on their website: <https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/> and we republish it here by kind permission of the President and Council of The Royal College of Surgeons of England.

## HOWITT, THOMAS JUNIOR (1809-1881)

**Identifier:** RCS: E002276

**Full Name:** Howitt, Thomas junior

**Date of Birth:** 24 March 1809

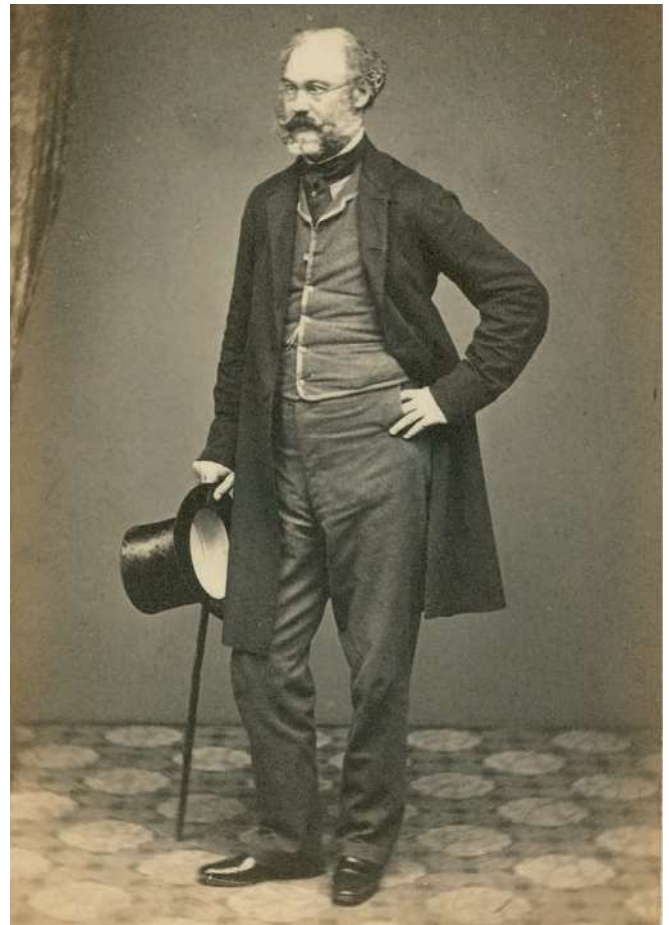
**Place of Birth:** Lancaster Lancashire

**Date of Death:** 29 May 1881

**Place of Death:** Lancaster, Lancashire

**Occupation:** General Surgeon

**Qualifications:** MRCS April 29th 1831, FRCS October 13th 1853, LSA 183, JP for Lancaster



Thomas Howitt jr. Photo courtesy of Lancashire County Council's Red Rose Collections. <https://redrosecollections.lancashire.gov.uk/>



Thomas Howitt's Manuscript Notebook for 1830 to 1838. Purchased by the Royal College of Surgeons from Howes Bookshop in 1961

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### Details:

Thomas Howitt was a surgeon in Lancaster. He was born on 24 March 1809 in Lancaster. His father, also Thomas, was a prominent surgeon in the city and subsequently one of the founding members of the Lancaster Medical Book Club in 1823; his mother was Nancy Howitt née Nichols. One of six children, Thomas had a brother, William, who also became a surgeon. Thomas was educated at Lancaster Boys' Grammar School and then, on his 16th birthday, in 1825, was apprenticed to his father for five years. However, he did not complete his studies in Lancaster, and instead moved to London in 1829, where he spent most of the next two years.

Howitt's manuscript notebook, with entries from the period between 1830 and 1838, is one of the treasures of the Royal College of Surgeons of England's archive collection and includes his notes on surgical lectures by Sir Charles Bell and Herbert Mayo. After working as Bell's dresser at the Middlesex hospital in 1831 and early 1832, he spent June to August 1832 visiting Paris hospitals, where he observed Baron Dupuytren operating and accompanied Napoleon's favourite surgeon, Dominique Larrey, on a Saturday morning ward round.

In September 1832 he returned to Lancaster, where he joined the staff of the newly opened Lancaster Infirmary (at that time called the Lancaster House of Recovery and Dispensary). One of three surgeons, his weekly outpatient clinic took place each Tuesday at 11 am. Outside the infirmary, he took an increasing interest in the development of the city

and was involved in the establishment of the Literary Society, the Lancaster Athenaeum and the Royal Albert Hospital for Children.

In 1839 he married Hannah Openshaw and they had three daughters: Fanny Rachael, Annie and Sarah Louisa.

In 1845, he was appointed as surgeon to the Duke of Lancaster's Yeomanry Cavalry; a post he held for over 25 years. He also served as warden of St Thomas's Church for over 20 years and was a JP.

In 1847 he was elected as mayor of Lancaster and in the same year, on February 11th, he performed the first operation in Lancaster with ether anaesthesia. The operation was an above knee amputation for 'white swelling' of the knee. In 1863, he became consulting surgeon to the Lancaster Infirmary. He served as president of the Lancaster Medical Book Club from 1857 to 1870, the only person to serve as president for over 10 years. He died on 29 May 1881.

**Author:** Royal College of Surgeons of England

**Sources:** Lancaster Gazette 4 June 1881

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**Publication Date:** 23 September 2022

**Collection:** Plarr's Lives of the Fellows

### REFERENCE

1. Anderson G (ed). The Minutes of the Lancaster Medical Book Club. 1997. Appendix A; pp:91-96

## Professor Gareth Williams MD ScD FRCP FRCPE

Gareth Williams grew up in Belfast, won a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge to study medicine and qualified as a doctor with Honours in 1977. He built up an internationally renowned research group in diabetes and obesity in Liverpool and was Dean of Medicine at the University of Bristol, where he is now Emeritus Professor of Medicine. He has written 200 scientific articles and edited over 20 medical textbooks, including the prize-winning *Textbook of Diabetes*. His books for general readers are *Angel of Death: the story of smallpox* (shortlisted for the Wellcome Medical Book Prize 2010), *Paralysed with Fear: the story of polio* (2013), *A Monstrous Commotion: the mysteries of Loch Ness* (2015), and *Unravelling the Double Helix: the lost heroes of DNA* (2019).

Gareth is a former President of the Anglo-French Medical Society, has served as Chair of the Trustees of the Edward Jenner Museum and is proud to be an Ambassador of the British Polio Fellowship. He is often to be found playing classical music or jazz on the flute and saxophone. His website is [profgarethwilliams.com](http://profgarethwilliams.com)

