

This information by courtesy of Dr Michael Whitfield

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JOHN KING - SURGEON OF CLIFTON

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John King? I can hear you asking yourselves. A well-known of his time, he is practically unheard of today.

Born in Switzerland in 1766 as Johan Koenig, he rebelled against his family's wishes for him to enter the Church where his prospects of preferment were good. Instead he came to London hoping to earn his living by his talents for engraving and writing! Finding this impossible he decided to study surgery under Mr. Abernethy of St. Bartholomew's hospital.

After qualifying as a Surgeon he was commissioned in July, 1799 as an Ensign in the Second Shropshire Regiment of Militia. Later in 1799 he was in touch with Dr. Thomas Beddoes at his Pneumatic Medical Institute in Dowry Square having been recommended to the Doctor by Mr. Abernethy.

However, before going to the Pneumatic Medical Institute and apparently with Dr. Beddoes' approval, he accompanied Tom Wedgewood, younger brother of the famous Josiah Wedgewood, on a voyage to the West Indies where Tom hoped to find a cure for an illness which was in fact later to prove fatal. Very soon, tiring of his travels, Tom and his companions returned to England and John King joined Dr. Beddoes at the Pneumatic Medical Institute.

Besides his medical activities, Dr. Beddoes at this time was the centre of an interesting social circle which included Bristol-born Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joseph Cottle, the Bookseller who published some of Coleridge's poems. For a short time the young Cornishman Humphrey Davy worked with Dr. Beddoes before going onto London. It was thus a scintillating circle which John King entered on his arrival in Bristol.

The Pneumatic Medical Institute had become a Hospital and King's appointment was to look after the patients as well as to take part in the experiments which were carried on there. His engraving expertise was useful in providing illustrations for written work.

After Humphrey Davy left the Pneumatic Medical Institute in 1805, its character changed. Sometime in 1803/1804, Beddoes opened a branch establishment in the heart of the old city of Bristol. The site that

he chose was Little Tower Court, Broad Quay, which is shown in the 1825 map of Bristol by Ashmead. By 1805/1806 it was in the hands of Dr. Stock and Dr. Pritchard, with John King acting as Surgeon and Vaccinator.

In 1802 John King had married Emmeline Edgeworth, a sister of the Anna Edgeworth whom Dr. Beddoes had married eight years earlier and thus, King and Beddoes became Brothers-in-Law. The match was not popular with the Edgeworth family. They did not attend the wedding and for many years there were polite exchanges or letters between King and his Father-in-Law over the amount of Emmeline's dowry.

On 1st August, 1803, however, King was writing to his Father-in-Law on happier matters to report the birth of a daughter (given the name Zoe by her father) but only after a dangerous labour of seventeen hours. Robert Southey, writing to a friend from Bristol on July 31st, 1803 says, "Poor King, who is our bleeder and purger in ordinary keeps house with his wife, who is, I fear, past all hope in a childbed fever, so that instead of having him to keep us, I am obliged to go and look after him, and find a far worse house than I left at home".

Fortunately this gloomy foreboding was not justified and Emmeline recovered to bear two more children, a second daughter (Psyche Emmeline) and a son Edgeworth King who unhappily died in childhood at the age of ten.

King had been forced to ask his Father-in-Law to raise a loan of four hundred guineas for him. This Edgeworth did saying that the interest would be £25 per annum and that he would repay this by deducting it from the £80 per year which he sent to King as Emmeline's dowry.

At this time the Kings were still living in Dowry Square but not apparently in the house used for the Pneumatic Medical Institute. In 1811, however, they moved to 26 Mall, Clifton. Immediately after moving King was laid up with a dangerous inflammation of the liver which meant that he was unable to practise for some time and he was in considerable financial difficulties until an inheritance from his family in Switzerland eased the situation. At one point he was sufficiently well-off to have a carriage and horses and he kept open house for his friends and relations.

One of these relations, his nephew Thomas Lovell Beddoes, the poet and Doctor, thought highly of his "demi-uncle" and said in a letter to a friend that if it had not been for his uncle's unpopular democratic political views and ecclesiastical antipathy he might have "been one of the most opulent and celebrated as he is confessedly one of the best, living surgeons". It was probably these same views which prevented him from being elected to the staff of Bristol Royal Infirmary.

Besides his interest in medicine, John King was very interested in art and numbered many of the members of the Bristol School of Artists amongst his friends. This interest also brought him into contact with John Gibbons who belonged to a Bristol family (his uncle William Gibbons 1732 — 1807 was a one time Mayor of Bristol). King and Gibbons, who lived in Staffordshire, carried on a correspondence for

many years. Gibbons, a rich man, was a patron of the arts and John King acted as a friendly intermediary between the patron and the young members of the Bristol School of Artists. At one time John Gibbons' nephew became a pupil of King's but the relationship between them did not run smoothly and young William Gibbons left, but not before he had fallen in love with King's younger daughter Psyche Emmeline King whom he later married.

The writings of John King apart from his letters and reports of experiments, consist of a short treatise on Physical Education, a few pages of memoranda, two letters to the local papers and a series of somewhat lengthy reviews of Art Exhibitions. Perhaps the most interesting of these are the memoranda in which he describes in detail his everyday life. He records every patient visited, and the treatment prescribed as well as financial statements of all the monies received and paid out.

Perhaps John King's own phrase, "teased by care", best sums up his work, although another favourite word, "bustle" gives an idea of what was certainly an energetic life.

Another man with a more flexible disposition might in the circumstances, and with the same ability and dedication, have won the fame and fortune which eluded King himself. Dr. Pritchard, with whom King worked in the Preventive Medical Institute thought well-enough of him to get him elected as a member of a Medical Society of which the membership was limited to twelve. He went to meetings of the Philosophical Society and he seems to have been a well-known citizen of Bristol and was well-liked by the circle that knew him intimately.

After leaving 26 Mall in 1844 King went to Bath for two years where he lived at 13 Orange Grove. He then returned to Bristol where he stayed at 3 Boyce's Buildings. He died there on 18th August, 1846. He was buried in Arno's Vale Cemetery and his epitaph was written by Walter Savage Landor:

*Having acquired an extensive knowledge
Especially in the diseases to which the human form is liable*

Negligent of fortune

Assiduous in solacing the poor,

Beloved by family and kindred,

Honoured by friends and neighbours

Sought and consulted by strangers

And now called to receive his reward by Him whose minister he was

Here rests from his labours

Amidst the benediction of them all

John King

He was born at Bern, in Switzerland,

Of which city he was a Patrician.

He practised as a Surgeon, at Clifton, almost 50 years

And died there on the 18th day of August 1846,

Aged 80

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