

THOMAS, HUGH OWEN (1834-1891), orthopaedic surgeon

Name: Hugh Owen Thomas
Date of birth: 1834
Date of death: 1891
Spouse: Elizabeth Thomas (née Jones)
Parent: Jane Thomas (née Owen)
Parent: Evan Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: orthopaedic surgeon
Area of activity: Medicine
Author: Arthur Rocyn Jones

Born at Bodedern, Anglesey, 23 August 1834. He was descended from a well-known family of bonesetters whose origin was tinged with tragedy and romance. In the 18th century a shipwreck occurred off the coast of Llanfairynghornwy from which the only survivor was a Spanish-speaking boy. He was adopted by a childless couple named Thomas, who farmed Maes between the church and the sea. He assumed their name, married an Anglesey girl, and became the ancestor of a line of meddygon esgryn (bonesetters).

EVAN THOMAS (1735 - 1814), bonesetter

The first of his family to practise bonesetting, at which his skill gained him a great reputation throughout North Wales and the border counties. He combined a commanding personality with a religious austerity. A memorial tablet was placed in Llanfairynghornwy church by [viscount Bulkeley](#) in which tribute was paid to him as a public benefactor.

RICHARD EVANS (1771 - 1851), bonesetter

Cilmaenan, Llanfaethlu; son of Evan Thomas and known as Richard ap Evan, afterwards Richard Evans. He practised bonesetting successfully and was of the same austere conscientious disposition as his father. He was, however, not so widely known.

EVAN THOMAS (1804 - 1884), orthopaedic surgeon

Son of Richard Evans, achieved even greater fame as a bonesetter than his grandfather. He migrated to Liverpool about 1835. From 72 Great Crosshall Street he conducted an extensive practice in the treatment of bone and joint diseases. He reduced dislocations by slow traction and used a pulley to set fractures. Long continued rest was the principle which he adopted in treating chronic bone disease, whereby many a limb escaped amputation. He married Jane Owen of Tyn-llan, Bodedern, Anglesey, sister of Dr. Owen Roberts, S. Asaph, who later received all their five sons in turn as apprentices before they proceeded to medical schools at which they qualified. Thomas retired in 1863 to Bryn Eglwys, Llanfwrog, Anglesey, where he died in 1884. [Ebenezer Thomas](#) (Eben Fardd) was a relative of Evan Thomas; they were in constant contact and closely resembled each other. The poet wrote a marwnad to the memory of Richard Evans.

HUGH OWEN THOMAS (1834 - 1891), orthopaedic surgeon

The eldest son of Evan Thomas. He was educated at the college at New Brighton, remaining there until the age of 17. He was apprenticed to Dr. Owen Roberts before he entered Edinburgh University in 1855; after two sessions he migrated to University College, London, for the third session. In 1857 he qualified M.R.C.S. England and proceeded to Paris to study surgery in French hospitals. On returning home he joined his father in practice for a year and then started on his own at 24 Hardy Street, Liverpool. In 1866 he acquired 11 Nelson Street, Liverpool, enlarged the house to contain two waiting rooms, four consulting rooms, a surgery, and a workshop; the house in Hardy Street was converted to a private hospital of eight beds with a trained nurse in charge. A smith and a leather worker were fully employed making splints and appliances to his design. It was a unique clinic; in later years it became world-famous. Two factors accounted for the emergence of H. O. Thomas as a surgeon of extraordinary type. The first was his ancestral background; he had inherited an unorthodox therapeutic of which he was the interpreter to the profession. Secondly, the casualties of Merseyside and the diseases of the neighbouring poor provided him with an opportunity for the application and wide extension of that therapeutic. He devised splints and appliances of simple design to ensure rest and immobility for injured bone or diseased joint. He achieved in workmen's dwellings such results in the treatment of fractures as were probably unequalled by any other practitioner. No surgeon in Britain handled so many fractures in one year or devoted such meticulous care to their management. Rest and alignment were his watchwords; he secured both of these by his splints before X-rays were discovered.

In 1875 he published his first book, *Diseases of the Hip, Knee, and Ankle Joints*, wherein the world-famous hip and knee splints were described for the first time. This publication revealed him as an original thinker in surgery. From that time onwards a series of 'Contributions to Medicine and Surgery' appeared at intervals throughout the rest of his life. His teaching, however, made hardly any impression, mainly because his works were not well produced, and he chose an obscure publisher. Furthermore, he worked in isolation and could not be induced to disclose his teaching at scientific meetings.

His work went unrecognised during his lifetime but afterwards his nephew, [Sir Robert Jones](#), whom he trained, succeeded in bringing his teaching and the use of his splints before the profession. During the first world war and since the Thomas calliper saved thousands of limbs and is now in daily use in most hospitals throughout the world.

Hugh Owen Thomas died, over-worked, at the age of 57, on 6 January 1891. The manifestation of grief in Liverpool was astonishing. No other pioneer contributed so much

in establishing the fundamental principles of orthopaedic surgery.

Author

Arthur Rocyn Jones

Sources

F. Watson, *Hugh Owen Thomas. A personal study* (London 1934)

T. P. McMurray, 'The Life of Hugh Owen Thomas,' in *The Liverpool Medico-Chirurgical Journal, including the Proceedings of the Liverpool Medical Institution*, 1935, 43, 1.3

A. Rocyn Jones, 'Hugh Owen Thomas,' in *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*, 1948, 30 B.3 547

Further reading

ODNB: Thomas, Hugh Owen (1834-1891)

Wikipedia Article: [Hugh Owen Thomas](#)

Images

Henry Keet, [Hugh Owen Thomas](#)

NLW: [Hugh Owen Thomas, M.R.C.S. of Liverpool](#)

Vandyke & Brown, [Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas \[Wife of Sir Hugh Owen Thomas\]](#)

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