A HISTORY OF NITROUS OXIDE AND OXYGEN ANAESTHESIA
IVE: HENRY HILL HICKMAN IN HIS TIME

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SUMMARY

More evidence is presented: a questionable letter from a grateful patient; Hickman’s stewardship at a Charity Ball; the baptism of his children at Shifnal. The identities of “John” and “Glover”, mentioned in Hickman’s letter from Paris, and the marriage of one of Hickman’s cousins to the son of a French emigre, are discussed. A recorded gift places Eliza in Paris with Henry on November 10, 1828. The need to assess the evidence in the context of its time and place is stressed.

A grateful patient

Ignoring deceits associated with his qualification, one might imagine Hickman as a young altruist inspired by Brodie’s discourse and example. The Shrewsbury Chronicle of August 17, 1821, provides evidence, in the form of a letter to the editor, which presents Hickman as a saint, a sinner, or just as a man of his place and time, according to the interpretation of the reader:

“C. N. to Dr. Hickman
Mr Editor,

I have been a commanding officer in his Majesty’s service for upwards of 30 years and in that time seen the four quarters of the globe; as my companion I have had a disease of the most afflicting nature, and like a pilgrim in the desert, have wandered from place to place in search of relief, resolving that if I ever met with it, to use the utmost of my powers to immortalize the means, and that not only through the medium of the periodical press, but in the production (although I confess not literature) which will some day appear under the same title, as a pledge of gratitude (which I shall never cease to acknowledge) towards the gentleman who has preserved my life.

I went to Ludlow Sir, under the impression that I was soon to be no more which was still further grounded by the opinion of Mr Nichol Mr Acton etc: but hearing of my benefactor Dr HICKMAN and ready to grasp at the shadow of hope, I determined to hear his opinion as a stranger to me and as a dernier resource; he instead of long contemplated death, promised me health and vigour, if I would submit to a trifling operation, and perserverence in his method of cure. This I have done, and with heartfelt thanks to God and to him, am now in perfect health, restored to my wife and children, after having been told by men most eminent in the profession that the thought of life vain. I have all my life, Mr Editor, been an admirer of a good valuable character, but to give a true picture of this one, in your paper, it would be impossible; as from what I have seen of him, it will cost me many hours of study to find words for the purpose of conveying its sense; and at present I shall say, heaven knows without the least taint of flattery, that in no man possessed of such universal medical honours, have I found (after pretty close observation) so much humanity, modesty, and extraordinary great talent, thus intimately connected, which the public will soon find out; and that what I now say may not be offensive to his ears, and that God may protect him, to enjoy it for the good of his fellow creatures is the sincerest wish and constant prayer of his and your humble servant

C. N.

C. N. has not been identified. His letter resembles one of those bogus testimonials used in quack advertisements of the time, such as were produced by the self-styled “Dr. Smith of Upton Magna” with whom Antiquack (1826) made a most unfavourable comparison of Hickman in the Lancet (Smith, 1966). An example is shown in figure 1. Note that Dr Smith’s “grateful patient” omitted the name of the medical practitioner whom he criticized, whereas C. N. named Nichol and Acton who were respectively physician and surgeon in Ludlow (Pigot’s 1822/3 Shropshire

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0007-0912/78/0050-0853 $01.00
Fig. 1. Handbill advertising Dr Smith of Upton Magna's Ploughman's Drops. (From the private collection of Mr John Norton. The letter beneath the heading has been enlarged in order to emphasize the point made in the text. There are two columns in the original.)

Directory), which argues against identification of C. N. with Hickman. Although it is true that qualified medical practitioners did sometimes name each other in open controversy, these incidents usually related to specific quarrels about etiquette (Waddington, 1975).

On the other hand, there is a similarity between C. N.'s proclaimed recovery, despite dismal professional prognostications and Hickman's boast in his letter to Eliza from Edinburgh in 1819 (Smith, 1970b):

"I have a Gentleman who comes to consult the professors here for ill health and having accidently met with him he thinks from the explanation I have given him of his case that I understand it better than they and accordingly has put himself under my..."
care. It is of long standing and an obstinate case, but I shall make him well."

This does suggest the possibility of the connivance of either Henry or Eliza in the drafting of C. N.'s letter. If the truth ever emerges whether C. N. and his letter were pure fabrication or genuine, it should be assessed in the context of the time and place. Professional advertisements were not unknown. An example of the period is shown in figure 2. A later example of particular interest took the form of a letter to the Editor of Berrow's Worcester Journal in which it was published on January 30, 1847, 6 weeks after Dr Francis Boot of Gower Street learned about the use of ether to render patients insensible to pain during surgical operations (Ellis, 1976, 1977):

"VAPOUR OF ETHER"

To the Editor of the Worcester Herald

Mr. Editor,

SIR,

Having seen several cases in which employment of the above Vapour has proved successful in rendering capital operations free from pain, I conceive it desirable, from experience, to administer it in all minor cases when the patient is of a delicate or excitable nature, and in the more important operations in Dental Surgery, many of which are avoided through fear of pain. Satisfied that I shall be acting up to the wishes of my Patients, I take this ready means of informing them of my intention to continue the application of this wonderful agent in all cases as may appear to require it, or when it may be desired by the patient.

Yours obedient servant

G. J. Sylvester

57 Broad Street, Worcester, January 28, 1847."

Shifnal

It is not known why Hickman moved from Corve Street, Ludlow to Church Street, Shifnal. Eliza's first pregnancy is unlikely to have had anything to do with it because the notice of auction (Smith, 1978; figure 1) would have been printed around the time of conception. Perhaps Prodger's Ludlow Bank going bust at that time contributed, or mention of Nichol and Acton in C.N.'s letter may have roused local competition. He may have seen rosier prospects at Shifnal. (It was on the route of the London–Holyhead Mail. Telford’s new road was nearing completion and the Menai Bridge opened in January 1826—see...
Richards, 1976.) Whatever the reason, he appears to have been established there by August 14th, 1824. That was the date printed on his pamphlet addressed from Shifnal to T. A. Knight.

August 5, 1824, according to the *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, was:

"... a day of general rejoicing at Shifnal, in celebration of the accession of Lord Stafford (late Sir George Jerningham) to that ancient Barony. The morning was ushered in by the ringing of bells and firing of cannon... 5 oxen were slaughtered, which with three wagon loads of bread, and about a thousand gallons of ale, were distributed... among the poor of Shifnal and Oaken Gates, in proportions according to the size of their families. A large ox was roasted in front of the market place... A procession, consisting of the Committee and the principal inhabitants of Shifnal, attended by an excellent band, all wearing favours of white and purple, paraded the town, accompanied by a great concourse of persons; appropriate flags were introduced in the procession, and every species of joy was manifested. A respectable party of nearly 100 dined at the Jerningham Arms..."

The Jerningham Arms stands at one end of Church Street. It seems likely that Hickman would have participated. The *Wolverhampton Chronicle* in January 1826, contains positive evidence of his association with the Jerningham Arms. An advertisement for a Charity Ball names him as steward (fig. 3). The only other evidences of Hickman at Shifnal are the baptismal records of his second and third children.

It is noteworthy that on June 23, 1824, around the time that Hickman was probably drafting his pamphlet, the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* reported "A meeting of friends of the Bill for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals." Attention has been drawn previously (Smith, 1970b) to "a spirit rising against experiments tried upon living animals", and to the relevance of this to Hickman's redrafting of his original letter to T. A. Knight and to the reception of the pamphlet. Mr C. A. B. Leslie has written to me about his grandmother, who was Hickman's grand'daughter:

"She certainly passed it on to us, that one of the main reasons why Hickman failed to achieve acceptance in his own country was because of the prejudice against his work from the anti-vivisectionist lobby".

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**Fig. 3.** Advertisement published in the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* on January 18 and 25 and February 1, 1826. (Attention was kindly drawn to this by Dr Norman Mutton.)
French (1975) provides evidence that animal suffering during Magendie’s lecture demonstrations in London provoked an outcry. That was in 1824 and it could have given Hickman further reason to postpone distribution of his pamphlet. It could also have opened his eyes to the greater tolerance of such experiments in France.

The *Wolverhampton Chronicle* of September 22, 1824, reported the death of Louis XVIII and the succession of Charles X, to whom Hickman appealed in 1828.

**Hickman in Paris**

Cartwright (1952) drew attention to a letter written by Hickman on April 21, 1828, from Paris to Eliza at The Hyde:

“...—As I don’t know how John may be situated as to lodgings I have sent for him to my hotel, which is what every house is called here, and I expect him every minute—... as soon as I can hear from Glover to whom I shall write by this Post I shall think of returning, about the time you named—Jack is this moment arrived and most utterly astonished and delighted to see me—He is very well—...”

The Société des Amis de la Bibliothèque Nationale drew attention to the names “John” and “Glover”, and in a footnote Cartwright mentioned that John Glover (see DNB) and his two sons (John and William) were English travelling painters who worked in Paris and enjoyed the patronage of the French Royal Family. John Glover’s brother, Joseph, lived at Pool House in Astley, about 10 miles from Worcester. Cartwright suggested that Hickman may have become acquainted with John Glover, in which case this might explain why Hickman went to France to advance his cause and why he made the direct approach to the King.

There is nothing in the above letter, however, to indicate that the Glover to whom Hickman said he would write had any connection with the John for whom he sent and who shortly afterwards greeted him. The Glover of the letter evidently had something to do with the date of Hickman’s return to England. It is known that Hickman was at Tenbury after his return from France and his third child was baptized at Shifnal on December 28, 1827. It seems likely, therefore, that the visit to Paris was fitted in around the time of the move from Shifnal to Tenbury (and this is reinforced by the fact that Eliza and the children were staying with her family at The Hyde while Henry was in Paris), in which case the date of Hickman’s return to England would have been influenced by factors relating to this move. It is possible that the Glover mentioned in the letter was the William C. Glover recorded in Pigot’s *Directory* of 1828 as attorney in Shifnal. The name William Cheshire Glover also occurs in deeds, (Smith, 1978) related to Benjamin Gardner the elder and Benjamin Gardner the younger at The Hyde.

Who, then, was John, and had Hickman any other French connections? Whoever John was, Hickman knew how to contact him but not where he was lodging. He does not appear to have been expecting Hickman in Paris and he expressed astonishment and delight when he saw him. This suggests that they knew each other well, perhaps close friends or relatives. (If they were that close, and if Hickman had not forewarned him, it could be argued that the trip to Paris was planned at fairly short notice). A possible candidate is John Nathaniel Gardner, who was Eliza’s younger brother. He obtained his L.S.A. on October 9, 1834 (Guildhall Library MS 8241/6, p. 567). He was appointed apprentice to Mr John White of Dartmouth Street (Westminster) on October 2, 1828, for 5 years. He was baptized at Cotheridge on February 23, 1808. He would have been 13 years old when his father, Benjamin Gardner, went bankrupt, which may explain why he was as much as 20 years old when he was apprenticed (5 months after the encounter between Hickman and Jack in Paris).

**A French connection**

Mrs Philippa Gray of Shrewsbury, née Bourlay, has revealed another possible connection between Hickman and France. According to family tradition Guillaume Michel de Bourlay, dancing and fencing maître at the court of Louis and Antoinette, fled from the revolution and settled in Shrewsbury. He certainly advertised in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*:

“SHREWSBURY, April 29, 1791
DANCING AND FENCING
MONSIEUR BOURLAY respectfully informs his Friends, that on Account of the Multiplicity of Business he finds it necessary to make the following Arrangements:
DANCING at his Academy, on Mondays and Tuesdays; at Mr Meredith’s Academy, Church Stretton on Thursdays; at the Rev. Mr Pitchford’s Downton, on Fridays. Fencing at his Academy, on Wednesdays.”
Those Ladies and Gentlemen to whom he may have the honour of giving private Instructions, will please to take Notice that the only Days on which he is disengaged are Wednesdays and Saturdays.

TERMS,—At his Academy, Twice a Week, Eighteen Shillings per Quarter; Entrance Ten Shillings and Sixpence—In the Country, Once a Week, Fifteen Shillings per Quarter; Entrance Ten Shillings and Sixpence.—For Fencing, One Guinea per Quarter; Entrance, Ten Shillings and Sixpence.

Monsieur Bourlay still finding greater Proofs of the Imperfections, and Modes practised by some who call themselves Dancing Masters in this Country, is quite determined not to take any Pupils without Entrance, except those who have been under the Tuition of Mr Ravenhill or Mr Burney.”

The Downton referred to in this advertisement is probably that in the Parish of Upton Magna near Shrewsbury, and not the Downton near Downton Castle (I am indebted to Lt Commander H. S. Bromby, R.N. Retd., for assistance in resolving this point).

M. Bourlay died in 1817, but his son, William Vestris Bourlay, carried on with the Academy and he married first Susan (see Smith, 1978; figure 2) and then Catherine (fig. 4) Hickman who were the daughters of Henry’s uncle Thomas.

**Eliza in Paris**

Hickman also wrote in his letter of April 21, 1828: “—and please God we live and things turn out as I think they will, you shall see this place—I found no difficulty in coming along I could make myself tolerably well understood and hold a pretty fair conversation as soon as my ear became accustomed to the sound a la francais.”

Eliza did “see this place”. An amethyst bracelet (fig. 5) has been handed down to Mrs J. Scragg, a descendant of Hickman, together with a card secured in the lid of its case, on which is written, in Hickman’s handwriting: “For Mrs Hickman with the kind love of a gentleman she has a slight knowledge of—bought in the Palais Royale July 31st—28.” That was one week before the receipt of Hickman’s memorial to Charles X was officially recorded (Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, 1930). With another pen was added: “& given to her Nov 10 at 9 o’clock at Meurice Hotel, Paris.” Alas, it is possible that by then his hopes may already have been dashed.

Thompson (1912), indeed portrayed a dismal end to the affair:

“One can picture the young surgeon’s bitter disappointment and despair at the reception which his Memorial met at the hands of the Royal Academy of Medicine, and the extinction of what he thought his last hope of demonstrating his discovery. Thus, discouraged and well-nigh broken-hearted, he returned to England to die a few months afterwards . . .”

What M. Gerardin was reported to have said in 1847, however—and he was speaking from memory—was:

“... This letter was from an English doctor, and it set forth the different means of deadening sensibility during surgical operations; among other means, nitrous oxide was mentioned. According to custom, the Section elected a committee of which I had the honour to be the reporter. I need not say that this proposition met with much incredulity. One member only, Baron Larrey, said that it deserved

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**Fig. 4. Hickman’s niece, Catherine Bourlay née Hickman.**

(Photograph in possession of Mrs Philippa Gray.)
the attention of surgeons. This affair went no further . . ." 
(Wellcome, 1930).

If the committee's conclusions were recorded at the time, the record has not survived. There is no evidence to suggest if, how or when the true opinion of the committee was communicated to Hickman. We do not know the depth or the time of Hickman's disappointment, so this may not have clouded Eliza's visit.

Tenbury

When the Hickmans left Paris and how soon they set up in Tenbury has not been recorded. His house there still stands, now a cafe. One of the relics of those days is a notice, preserved at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine: "AT HOME, EVERY TUESDAY, From 10 o'clock until 4; for the purpose of giving ADVICE gratis to the Poor and Labouring Classes." This inspired Fülop-Miller (1938) to head his chapter on Hickman "Physician to the Poor and Needy", but there was probably nothing exceptional about that notice. It was probably common practice at that time. Similar wording appeared in the advertisement inserted in the Wolverhampton Chronicle by Surgeon Apothecary W. Lewis in 1826 (fig. 3).

Comment

Some may feel that Hickman's once shining halo has become tarnished, but it may have been unfair to have given him a halo in the first place. Saints are few.

Outstanding questions urge further research. The evidence should be seen in the context of Hickman's time and place, rather than against the gloss of previous accounts, or against the codes of conduct of today. At least there is no cause to belittle Hickman's clear recognition of the advantages to all of insensibility during surgical operations, and of the possibility of achieving this through the introduction of certain gases into the lungs.

Hickman did not claim to have perfected the induction of suspended animation to the point of human application. He expressed the evidently genuine hope that "some one or other, may be more fortunate in reducing the object beyond a possibility of doubt". Whether, in the light of his own and other people's experiments, he thought that this could be accomplished by straight asphyxia, or through other...
properties of the gases used or proposed, remains an open question.

Had Hickman lived longer he would surely have pursued his vision. He might have killed himself, or a patient, thereby setting back the advent of anaesthesia. Equally, suffering during surgery might have been alleviated in his lifetime—hopefully without the quarrels, claims and counter-claims that marred the introduction of anaesthesia in the 1840's.

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BRITISH JOURNAL OF ANAESTHESIA
HENRY HILL HICKMAN IN HIS TIME


Wolverhampton Chronicle (1826). No. 706, June 23.


HISTORIQUE DE L'ANESTHESIE AU PROTOXYDE D'AZOTE ET A L'OXYGENE IV (E): HENRY HILL HICKMAN ET SON TEMPS

RESUME

On presente ici d'autres preuves: une lettre contestable emanant d'un malade reconnaissant; la gestion d'un bal de charite par Hickman; le bapteme de ses enfants a Shifnal. On discute de l'identite de "John" et de "Glover", dont il est question dans la lettre qu'Hickman a envoyee de Paris, et du mariage de l'une des cousins d'Hickman a fils d'un francais emigre. Un cadeau, dont on a conserve une note, permet de dire qu'Eliza et Henry etaient a Paris, le 10 novembre 1828. On insiste sur la necessite d'evaluer les preuves dans le contexte de son temps et des lieux.

GESCHICHTE DER STICKOXYD- UND SÄUERSTOFFNARKOSE, IV(E): HENRY HILL HICKMAN IN SEINER ZEIT

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG


UNA HISTORIA DE ANESTESIA DE OXIDO NITROSO Y OXIGENO IVE: HENRY HILL HICKMAN EN SU TIEMPO

SUMARIO

Se presenta más evidencia: una carta dudosa de un paciente agradecido; la administración por Hickman de un baile de caridad; el bautismo de sus hijos en Shifnal. Se discuten las identidades de "John" y "Glover", mencionados en una carta que Hickman envió de Paris, y el casamiento de una de las primas de Hickman al hijo de un emigrado francés. Un obsequio registrado sitúa a Eliza en Paris con Henry el 10 de noviembre de 1828. Se pone énfasis en la necesidad de evaluar las pruebas en relación al tiempo y lugar.