The Leeds surgeon Charles Turner Thackrah was the first to make a systematic study of occupational diseases, and his premature death deprived the Leeds School of Medicine of one of its keenest intellects and most diligent teachers. His biographer Meiklejohn stated that, despite having searched many records, he had been unable to locate Thackrah’s grave [1]. I was fortunate to discover the grave at St John’s churchyard, Dewsbury Moor, during a Sunday afternoon walk about 3 years ago (see Figures 1 and 2).

Dewsbury is an industrial town about halfway between Leeds and Huddersfield. On the western edge of the town is Dewsbury Moor, which overlooks the valleys of the River Calder and its tributary, the Spen Beck. St John’s, which was consecrated in 1827, is a substantially unaltered commissioners’ church built in a simple gothic style. The architect was Thomas Taylor of Leeds. Thackrah’s grave is at the northwestern corner of the churchyard, close to the boundary wall. The stone commemorates Thackrah and his second wife Grace, who was the youngest daughter of Abram and Mary Greenwood of Dewsbury Moor House.

By the time of his second marriage, the bitter and public disputes with his medical colleagues in Leeds were over and Thackrah had been a widower for about 2 years. The wedding ceremony at Dewsbury Parish Church on 8 March 1830 was conducted by the Rev. Dr Martin Naylor of Wakefield, who was headmaster of Wakefield Grammar School, a prominent liberal and freemason, editor of the *Wakefield Star* newspaper and absentee vicar of Penistone. The witnesses were John Beswicke Greenwood, the bride’s elder brother, and Henry Yates Whytehead, Thackrah’s friend and former pupil.

Henry Whytehead was later to write that following his marriage, although Thackrah’s bodily health was impaired, the morbid irritability of his feelings was sensibly diminished [2]. Despite his illness, the years that remained were Thackrah’s most productive. His great work, ‘The effects of the principal arts, trades and professions . . . on health and longevity . . .’, was published in 1831. He wrote a pamphlet on cholera, having visited Tyneside during an epidemic. He accepted an invitation to take part in the foundation of the Leeds School of Medicine and merged his own Anatomy School with the new institution. From its very first session on 25 October 1831, he participated actively in the teaching programme.

Thackrah continued to work for social and industrial reform. He was a principal speaker at the great meeting in Leeds on 9 January 1832 called to express support for Michael Sadler’s Factory Bill. The conclusion of his speech ‘The proposed measure of limiting the hours of labour is therefore recommended alike by patriotism,
justice and humanity’ received loud applause [3]. When Sadler introduced his Bill ‘for regulating the labour of children and young persons’ in Parliament on 16 March 1832, he quoted Thackrah’s work at length.

Early in 1833, Thackrah began to prepare a new edition of his textbook on the disorders of the blood. He became ill, however, with pulmonary disease, in addition to the chronic intestinal disorder that had troubled him for almost 20 years, and he died on 23 May 1833, the day after his thirty-eighth birthday. The funeral at Dewsbury Moor took place on 29 May, Dr Naylor coming over from Wakefield to officiate.

Thackrah’s epitaph reads ‘After a life spent in the active practice of that profession of which he was a distinguished ornament (he) fell a martyr to his exertions’.

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References