

HISTORICAL FACTSHEET No 32

The Bonesetters of Anglesey and Hugh Owen Thomas

Due to their healing skills, generations of the Thomas family living on the small island off the coast of North Wales have come to be known as the bonesetters of Anglesey. The founder of the dynasty was **Evan Thomas** (died 1814), whose inherent skill at manipulating and mending broken bones was recognised by his adoptive father Dr Lloyd, who encouraged him to work with his patients. Evan Thomas had four sons, all of whom were competent bonesetters, but his third son **Richard Evans** (1771-1851) was the most famous member of the family. He worked as a farmer, but held a regular clinic for the treatment of bone and joint conditions. His name, as was custom at the time, derived from his father's Christian name Richard ap Evan, hence Richard Evans.

Richard Evans had seven children, who again inherited the family skill. His eldest son **Evan Thomas** (1804-1884), named after his grandfather, was the first to adopt bonesetting as a full-time occupation. He moved to Liverpool in 1830 and set up in practice in the docklands area. As his success and reputation grew, he came to be resented by the local doctors, as he had no formal medical qualifications. This led to several serious legal confrontations, but he was acquitted each time, and remained very popular with the local people. A portrait of Evan Thomas as a young man hangs in the Professor's office in the Institute of Orthopaedics.

Evan Thomas had five sons, and he ensured that they each qualified as doctors. His eldest son **Hugh Owen Thomas** (1834-1891) started his own practice at 11, Nelson St, Liverpool in 1859. As well as being a doctor, he was a prolific writer, inventor and craftsman who designed and manufactured his own splints. Most famous of these is the Thomas Splint for treatment of fractures and deformities of the femur.

As Hugh Owen Thomas's marriage to Elizabeth Jones of Rhyl was childless, he offered a home to his wife's nephew **Robert Jones** (1857-1933), who came to study medicine in Liverpool. In this way Robert Jones, who is recognised as 'the father of orthopaedics', came under the influence of Hugh Owen Thomas's ideas from an early age. After qualifying as a doctor in 1878, he became professional assistant to his uncle before advancing in his medical career. During the Great War, Robert Jones was appointed Inspector of Military Orthopaedics, and his use of the Thomas Splint for the treatment of fractures of the femur among military patients led to a reduction in the mortality rate from 80 per cent to 20 per cent. Robert Jones' association with Agnes Hunt in the treatment of orthopaedic patients led to the development of this hospital which bears his name.

Sources

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