

A Biography of Sir James Paget

by Marilyn McCallum

The Early Years

James Paget was born in Great Yarmouth on 11th January, 1814, in an elegant newly rebuilt three storied house on the South Quay. He was the fifth son of Sarah, nee Tolver, and Samuel Paget, who were prosperous and talented parents.

Samuel Paget had begun work as a clerk for a local merchant at the age of 15. He was a small, active and good looking young man but with limited formal education who took great pains to self-educate himself, particularly in matters of business. Mr Kerridge, the merchant, held an extremely lucrative Admiralty contract to supply provisions to the ships of the North Sea Fleet when they were in Yarmouth. When Samuel was 17 his employer died unexpectedly and Samuel decided to seize this unexpected business opportunity and made his way to London on a mission of great importance to his future. The journey to London took over 21 hours and when he arrived in the capital he was overwhelmed by the bustling crowds he encountered to such an extent that he hid in shop doorways to avoid the crush. After realising that this hustle and bustle was normal for the capital he overcame his amazement and made his way to the Admiralty Office where his business acumen and natural exuberance overcame the handicap of his youthfulness so that he persuaded the Lords of the Admiralty to transfer Mr Kerridge's contract to him.

He returned to Great Yarmouth as a self-employed man, but to begin the venture he had to borrow money, a task his mother undertook on his behalf. He fulfilled the contract, despite local opposition, so well that it became one of a long series of contracts. The long years of the Napoleonic Wars during which he victualled the British fleet ensured that he made his fortune. At a large formal dinner party which took place after the battle of Camperdown, Lord Duncan praised Samuel during the toast stating "That's the man that won the battle". In recognition, Samuel received a gold medal emblazoned 'Earl St. Vincent's Testimony of Approval'.

Sarah Paget was considered to come from 'a better social class' than her husband, she was tall elegant and very attractive. As an orphan she was brought up by her wealthy aunt and uncle and was an extremely talented artist who had been a pupil of both old and young Crome, the Norwich landscape artists and etchers. She was well educated and accomplished for a woman of her time with skills in writing and needlework. Sarah was an avid collector of a multitude of things such as autographs, caricatures, and all types of curiosities. She was active in local society and politics and also took on her share of charitable acts and the organising of public amusements. Samuel and Sarah seem to have had a marriage which was both happy and fertile; James, their fifth son, was one of 17 children born in 26 years, although only 9 of them survived to adulthood.

Unfortunately, as the years passed, Samuel was not able to maintain the success of his business ventures or his position as one of Yarmouth's most prominent businessmen.

The post-war economic decline brought about an irreversible decline in the Paget family fortunes and economies were forced upon the family, one of which had an enormous effect upon James' future. James' three older brothers all went to Charterhouse, which was an extremely expensive school and then moved on to university at Cambridge. By the time James was thirteen and ready to move to Charterhouse the decline in the family's fortunes had already taken a firm hold. The only option for James was a small local

school under the supervision of Mr Bowles which was one of the two leading boys' schools in Yarmouth, at a fee of eight guineas per year. The school was not of a very high standard but did teach him a good knowledge of mathematics and the classics such as Latin and Greek. James, like his mother was a talented artist, which proved useful to him in late life.

When he was 15, envious of the attentions paid to officers and because it was a profession for gentlemen, which was not too expensive to pursue, James decided to take up a naval career. Later he described it as "a very silly wish of mine to go into the Navy". His father encouraged him in this decision, so James studied navigation alongside mathematics and geometry. As he approached his 16th birthday Samuel wrote a letter to an old friend, Captain Eaton Travers, asking him to "take him in hand".

But James' mother was not happy about her son leaving home and after prolonged discussion and many tears Samuel decided to "sleep on it" before posting the letter. The following morning Sarah prevailed and the letter was burnt: James cried for a few minutes and was subdued for a few days but on reflection admitted in hindsight that he could not think of a profession which would make him more miserable and for which he was temperamentally less suited.



Medical training

In 1830, when James was 16, he made the decision to become a 'surgeon' and began his medical career by being apprenticed for 4 years. His mentor was Dr Charles Costerton, a surgeon-apothecary with premises at Hall Plain, close to the Town Hall in Great Yarmouth. James remained with Dr Costerton for an apprenticeship lasting four and a half years, during which he was taught the every day work of a medical practitioner of the time. The apprenticeship fee paid to Dr Costerton was 100 guineas

James attended lectures on anatomy and bone given by Mr Randall at the Angel Inn – it was not uncommon for inns to be used as lecture halls and for teaching purposes during this period. He later described this as being equal to anything learned from lectures heard in London during later years. Unlike today, medical students in James' time did not spend many years learning theory before they began clinical work with patients. They encountered patients at a very early stage in their training, learning the various techniques of the day, such as bleeding, which was considered efficacious for many ailments. This type of hands on training gave him invaluable insight into all aspects of medical practice. For example, typhoid fever was widespread during this period and James noticed that it was those patients who were injected with salt water directly into their veins who were most likely to survive.

During his apprenticeship an outbreak of Asiatic cholera developed in Great Yarmouth. He saw many cases which were unsuccessfully treated using a variety of methods such as bleeding, opium and saltwater

injections. He studied the disease intensively and created an orderly volume of abstracts of his readings, a skill he developed from his study of natural history.

Throughout his apprenticeship with Dr Costerton, James spent much of his time in the study and enjoyment of botany and the skills he developed greatly influenced his professional life. He and his brother Charles, also a keen naturalist, studied the flora and fauna of the Great Yarmouth area for seven years. This resulted in a book being published in 1834, called "The Natural History of Yarmouth and its Neighbourhood". The book admirably illustrated James' remarkable thoroughness and meticulous attention to detail, and also his ability to catalogue. During his later years he wrote of the book "The knowledge was useless; the discipline of acquiring it was beyond price".

Following his apprenticeship in Great Yarmouth, James began a two-year period of study at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London on 3rd October 1834. His elder brother George paid James' fees. He immediately began to make an impression and a reputation for himself through the descriptive powers he used to identify specimens and the accuracy of his observations. He worked incredibly hard during this period and when he found that many of the best medical reference books were written in French or German, he taught himself both languages.

During the second year of his studentship, James attended an autopsy on a patient who had died following a feverish illness, and he noticed some small gritty particles which were commonly found in muscles. His investigations (using a microscope borrowed from the Natural History Museum) allowed him to identify these nodules as being the encysted larvae of the worm *Trichinella spiralis*. He went on to discover these were ingested through the eating of unhealthy pork and he worked tirelessly to have a ban imposed on the sale of diseased pork which undoubtedly contributed to a major improvement in the nation's health. "All the men in the dissecting-rooms, teachers included 'saw' the little specks in the muscles; but I believed that I alone 'looked-at' them and 'observed' them: no one trained in natural history could have failed to do so."

Lectures and the standard of teaching at St Barts were of variable quality, with students expected to work with little or no guidance, and James spent a great deal of time working alone reading, observing and dissecting specimens. As a result of his hard work and studies he won all four prizes available (medicine, surgery, chemistry and botany). During the final year of his studies he worked hard to qualify as a surgeon, again coming first in all his examinations. As a brilliant and hard working student he should have been able to look forward to a successful and rewarding career. But it took a further seven years of hard poorly paid work before his efforts were suitably rewarded.



Sir James Paget
(From a Lithographed Portrait by Mr Maguire, 1849)



St Bartholomew's Hospital Quadrangle - 1830

Paget in Practice

James' father had hoped that he would return to practice in Great Yarmouth but James realised that his true vocation was not as a general practitioner but as a surgeon in London. So it was agreed that James would return to London and his father would give him an allowance of £10 per month on the condition that if he had no prospects and was not self-supporting within six months he would return home to Great Yarmouth. He began a small practice in London which was a stop-gap while he waited for a place at the hospital to become available, but it took a long time for the much longed-for post to materialise.

Few patients managed to find their way to James' practice and he lived very frugally trying to make ends meet. James supplemented his earnings by writing and teaching pupils, a chore he did not enjoy, but he really needed the additional income. He also used his skill at cataloguing to compile catalogues, first for St Bart's Museum and then for the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons.

Despite opposition from his family, James announced his engagement to Lydia North, the daughter of a clergyman who had shown James great hospitality when he was a student. Lydia's father approved of the match but Samuel Paget was furious that James should become engaged when there was not prospect of an early marriage and he wrote to Mr North imploring him to dissuade the couple. His brothers and sisters considered James to be disloyal to the family and irresponsible and refused to welcome Lydia into the family. Fortunately the disagreement with the family did not turn into a permanent rift, but James refused to discuss the matter with them, preferring instead to rely upon time to change his family's attitude.

The engagement continued for over seven years before the couple could marry. Their evident happiness can be seen in James' comment: "The indiscretion was the happiest event of my life: the beginning of an engagement which for nearly eight years gave me light and then ended in a marriage blest with constancy of perfect mutual love and not once disturbed. No human wisdom could have devised a step so wise as this rash engagement."

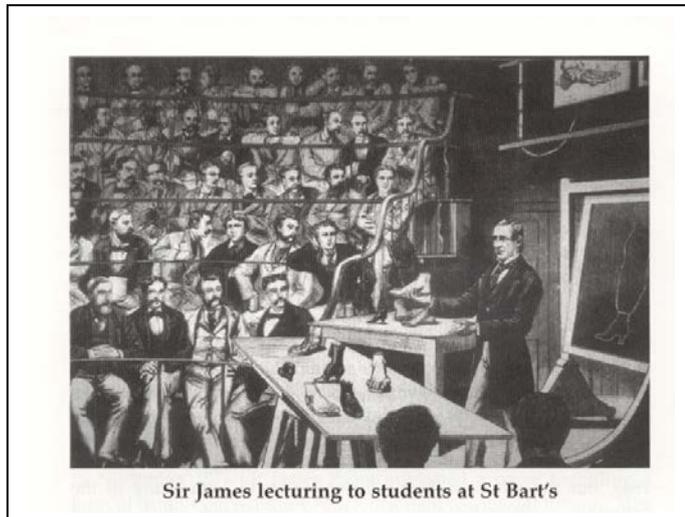
In November he was appointed Curator of the Hospital Museum following the resignation of his friend Mr Bayntin. The post brought the salary of £100 per year; it was not a fortune, but added to the money earned from teaching and writing meant he was no longer dependent upon his father. At the time of his appointment he asked that the additional title of Assistant Demonstrator of Anatomy be added to that of Curator. This would have been a controversial break with tradition and a route to a surgical appointment. His request was refused and it was suggested that instead he take the title of Demonstrator of Morbid Anatomy, which was considered to be of lower status.

But there was still opposition this appointment, the main objector being Thomas Wormald a shrewd Yorkshire man whose personality made him a natural enemy of James. When he was a student, James took objection to Wormald's use of obscenities to illustrate his lectures and anatomy demonstrations and made no secret of his distaste for the man. Now Wormald retaliated by opposing any considerations for the former pupil. So James had to be satisfied with the one title, but the appointment did at least mean that he had a steady income and a foot in the door of St Barts.

In 1837, on his return from a four-month trip to Paris, James began work as Curator. One of his first tasks was to prepare a catalogue of the hospital museum. It was a monumental task, which was to occupy part of James' every working day for the next nine years. He also supplemented his income through working as a medical journalist, which helped him to sustain a reasonable standard of living. At last he was in a position to assist his family who had suffered a reversal in fortunes. He began to send money back to Great Yarmouth and even borrowed money to help his father through a variety of financial crises in his attempts to save the family business. James' hard work and frugal living (he went without dinner every Friday) contributed to him becoming ill with the first of many recurring bouts of pneumonia he experienced for the rest of his life. The vulnerability of doctors to infection during this period was

demonstrated in 1839 when James contracted typhus following a post mortem on a woman from the Lambeth Poor House who had died from the disease.

Work dominated James' life and although he was managing to make a living the nature of the work conspired to keep him away from clinical practice. In 1843 James' finances experienced an upturn when he was appointed Physiology Lecturer at St Barts and at the same time was appointed Warden of the Hospital's first hall of residence, although the lack of decorum and dissipation he saw among the students disturbed him greatly.



The upturn in his finances meant that he was at last in a position to marry Lydia after their long engagement. The wedding took place on 23rd May 1844 at St Mary's Church, Bryanston Square, followed by a one-day honeymoon in Oxford (which was all they could afford). The marriage which began so quietly lasted for over 50 years without any serious arguments between them and the birth of the couple's first child, Catherine, the following year only seemed to spur James on to work even harder. Catherine was followed by a further five children: John Rahere, Francis, Henry Luke, Stephen and Mary Maude. Unlike Samuel and Sarah, James and Lydia were fortunate that all their children survived and out-lived their parents.

In his biography of his father, Stephen described his family's contented life. They lived a relatively simple life, with plain frugal meals. James firmly believed that many of his wealthy patients' health problems would be resolved by less self-indulgence. Evenings were spent with the whole family gathered in the drawing room. James would write letters and articles on a small area of the table and the rest of the family would play music or have noisy discussions about issues of interest. At 10pm James would lead the family in prayers and then return to his writing, often until the early hours of the morning. Lydia was equally as influential on the family as her husband.

She was a gentle and capable woman who raised healthy children and managed her household in an efficient and cost effective way, but she was also compassionate and generous to those in need. Although she was not a brilliant conversationalist she was always in demand because she was an attentive and responsive listener. Lydia was also an accomplished pianist and singer who ensured that the musical evenings in her home were of the finest quality.

Although his professional life and marriage were successful he experienced a series of body blows during this period. His mother had died in 1843 following a long paralysing illness, as did two younger brothers who had worked themselves to death attempting to rescue the family business. In 1845 the brewery was sold and a three-day sale of the family home, contents and the family's collections took place in 1848, but the sale was singularly unsuccessful with many of the collections realising less than the value of the

cabinets which housed them. With the proceeds from the sale, James' father moved to Pinner with his two unmarried daughters, and he succeeded in obtaining a pension from the Shipping Clubs of Yarmouth. James and his two older brothers pledged themselves to gradually pay off all their father's debts and ensure that he and their sisters could live securely and comfortably. It took until 1862, but eventually all the debts were honoured with interest. The brothers were particularly thorough in searching for creditors who had not pressed their claims for payment.

In 1847 he was at last accepted as a surgeon at Barts. In the intervening years since his previously unsuccessful application, his standing had improved at the hospital. At last he was able to gain experience of operative and clinical surgery and he took every opportunity to learn, on some days he would see as many as two hundred patients. In 1851 he moved to 24 Henrietta Place, where he increased his private practice. Gradually, as his earnings rose from £700 per year, he was able to move to another house, which was large enough to contain his burgeoning practice. So, in 1858 he moved to Harewood Place. In the same year he was appointed Surgeon Extraordinary to Queen Victoria.

In 1871, at the age of 57 years, James contracted a serious illness, a form of 'blood poisoning' which he acquired whilst performing a post mortem, and was ill for three months. As a result of this illness he resigned as a surgeon after working for 37 years at the hospital and gradually began to lighten his workload, but he did continue with his private practice. Not long after, Queen Victoria conferred on him a baronetcy, which he accepted with pride. His coat of arms contained the family motto 'Labor ipse voluptas' (Work itself is a pleasure). He was now in the public eye for the first time, making an impact on London's fashionable social circles, and was on his way to fame. He found his 'elevation' very amusing and on one occasion when he had to delay the start of a family holiday he wrote to his wife, "Tomorrow I have to see a Baron, a Viscount, a Countess, and a Marquis! Cock-a-doodle Doo".

Vanity Fair – 12th February 1876

Men of the Day No: 122

Sir James Paget, Bart.

A poor, promising, hard-working young student, Sir James Paget, although he soon became honoured in the practice of surgery, did not soon become rich through it. He obtained many honorary titles, however, and at thirty he had the good taste to marry a young lady from among the retainers of the late Duke of Kent. His talent thus recommended itself to the Court, and he has in due course of time blossomed into a Sergeant Surgeon Extraordinary to the Queen, and acquired the highest surgical reputation and a lucrative practice. Four years ago he was made a baronet, and now at the age of sixty-one he is universally accepted as one of the very eminent men of his profession. He is shy and retiring to the extent of excess, but he is well known to be much admired by many thousands of proprietors of damaged frames.



Cartoon from Vanity Fair - 1876

In November 1876 Sir James Paget published a paper regarding a form of chronic bone disease which he called osteitis deformans. This paper described five cases of a chronic bone disease, which had previously gone unrecognised. His main illustrative case was that of a man who he had been observing for over twenty years.

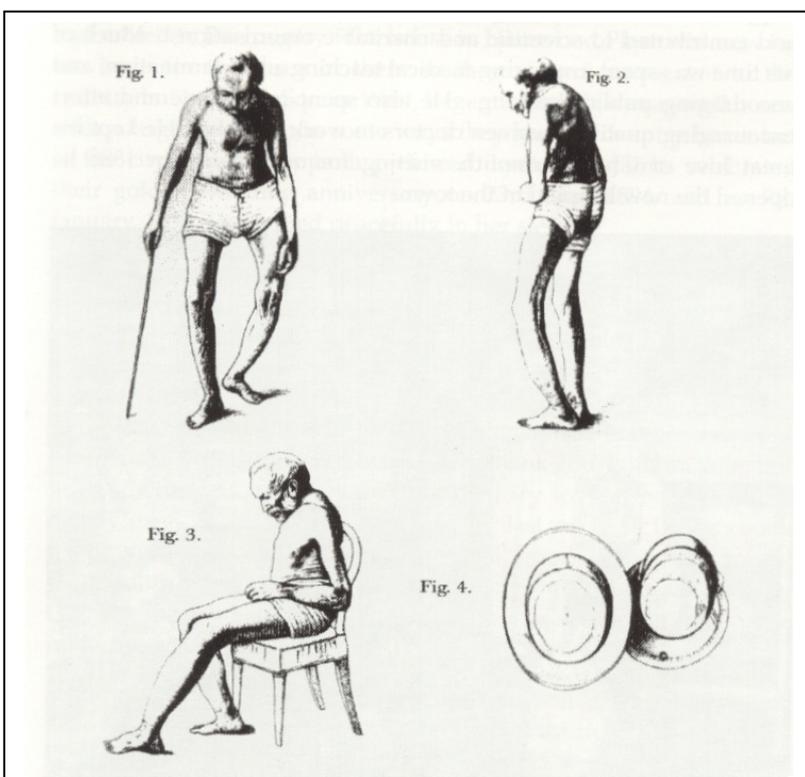
The patient was a 46 year old coachman who first visited St Bartholomew's Hospital in 1854 suffering from pain in his lower limbs. He had the good fortune to be seen by Dr James Paget, who described "a chronic form of inflammation of the bones". Dr Paget observed that the patient's left shin bone and his left thigh bone were enlarged and deformed. No other abnormality was noted. It was a condition which Dr Paget had not encountered before and he was therefore unable to make a diagnosis. In the years that followed the bones of the man's right leg also became enlarged and eventually his legs became bowed to such an extent that he could not bring his knees together. At the same time his skull became so large and deformed that he had to buy larger and larger hats. The patient was so stooped that his head sank onto his chest and his height was reduced by over four inches.

Twenty years after he first consultation the patient developed a rapidly enlarging bony mass in his left forearm which was diagnosed as bone cancer and caused his death two months later. During the post mortem microscopic examination of the bones showed a dramatic aberration in the bone remodelling process that normally continues throughout life which Paget thought was inflammatory in nature so he called it osteitis deformans. Modern day techniques have shown us that the disease is not an inflammation, but science has not been able to discover a satisfactory explanation for the condition.

It was a remarkable feat of observation and diagnostic skills which brought about this diagnosis when you realise that another forty years elapsed before the development of X-rays allowed the whole skeleton to be examined in the living patient for the first time.

It was at this time that doctors realised that Paget's Disease of Bone is not the rare condition they had thought it to be, and that many older people have one or more bones affected by the disease, even though they may not be experiencing any symptoms.

James' original description of the condition is so perfect that virtually nothing has been added to it since from the clinical side.



Illustrations accompanying Paget's first article on Osteitis Deformans. Figures 1-3 are from photographs of the patient (Case 1) taken six months before his death. Fig 4 is from photographs of the same patient's cap worn in 1844, and hat

The Final Years

As Sir James began to get older and his workload was lightening he still did not lose his enthusiasm for work. As he saw fewer private patients he filled his time with writing, and made an important contribution to the general health of the nation. He played an important role in the work of the Royal Commission on Vaccination, and contributed to scientific and charitable organisations. Much of his time was spent improving medical teaching and examination, and encouraging public speaking. He also spent much time and effort encouraging qualified women doctors to work in India. He kept his great love of Great Yarmouth, visiting frequently, and in 1888 he opened the new hospital in the town.



Sir James and Lady Paget in their sitting room

Both James and Lydia began to suffer from failing health. He turned down invitations to the USA and in 1888 they had their last family holiday in Switzerland. Although, in 1891, at the age of 77 years he undertook an arduous journey to Italy to see a patient, he did not enjoy his one and only visit to Rome and wrote to his family about his longing to return home again. All the Paget children except Mary had married and left home, and many of Paget's friends and colleagues had retired to the country. The house in Harewood Place was now far too large for the three of them so they moved house, not to the country but to 5 Park Square West, Regent's Park. It was a small house with a large garden so in some ways they had the country home but in the city, which they both preferred. Lydia and James celebrated their golden wedding anniversary on 23rd May 1894, and on 7th January, 1985, Lydia died peacefully in her sleep.

The loss of his beloved wife seemed to speed up the ageing process in James and he became resigned to the inevitable end. He turned more and more to religion, becoming an avid theology student. In November 1897 he wrote his last letter to his friend Sir Henry Acland who he had hoped to visit, in which he said, "My infirmities increase so rapidly that I cannot hope to travel so far, in weather so nearly cold as we must have in winter. The increase, thank god, without pain, but not without evidence or warning. And I try to use their warnings rightly, using especially what you gave me last year – Dr Pusey's book of prayers edited by Dr Liddon and good Bishop Andrews' Meditations. I could have, I think, no better human guidance. May God bless them and guide me to their just use – adding this to His many mercies."

Shortly after writing this letter he became too weak to write and speech was difficult for him, although his mind remained sharp to the end. Sir James Paget died on 30th December, 1899, two weeks before his 86th birthday and just before the beginning of the twentieth century.

At his funeral in Westminster Abbey medical students who had never had the opportunity to meet Sir James formed a guard of honour, a fitting tribute to a gentle, kindly man whose industry, achievement and life was an inspiration to everyone.



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