

Mary South

John Monckton (1715 – 1799) Southampton Surgeon

The youngest of five surviving children, John Monckton was born in 1715 at Liskeard in Cornwall, where his father Charles served both as Rector for the Parish and Headmaster of the Grammar School. Originating from Brenchley in Kent, the family came from a long tradition of clergymen and both John's brothers (Charles and Jonathan) went into the Church as well.

Within months of John's birth the family left Cornwall and travelled to Alverstoke, in Hampshire. This seems to be a strange move for Charles Snr to make, leaving a double income and moving such a distance to take up what was described in the Bishop's Visitation ten years later as a 'very poor living of £35 per annum'. Whatever the reasons, the two Charles', father and son, ministered to the two parishes of Alverstoke and Gosport, as well as preaching at the private churches of Southwick and Boarhunt.

It was here at Gosport that Grace, the eldest child, married Henry O'Neill and then moved to Romsey; Jonathan (the fourth child) went to university and then to his first parish; Charles Jr took up his own living at Easton (near Winchester) taking sister Rebecca with him, as housekeeper, and John became apprenticed to an army surgeon / apothecary in Gosport. Throughout their lives the siblings remained in contact, through visits and letters to one another and by practical support when it was needed. Thus we find John accepting Grace's son, Henry, as an apprentice and relying on him to supply medicine for many years to come. Similarly, when Jonathan's son (another Jonathan) had problems finishing his apprenticeship with a surgeon / apothecary in Kent he came to John, in Southampton, to complete his training.

With this strong sense of family continuity (his parents enjoyed a long married life together) it must have come as a shock to John when his

young wife of seven months died in 1740, just one month after his father.

He had finished his seven year apprenticeship in 1738 and received his Bishop's License to practise in the same year, continuing to work in the Gosport area apparently with the army and eventually with the large numbers of French prisoners of war, held at Portchester Castle. Eventually 800 of these were transferred to Southampton and crammed into the woolhouse. It seems possible that John came to Southampton with these prisoners in 1740 and took over the lease of the woolhouse, after the death of the previous lessee, John Ayres.

Ayres had been ordered to make a compound for the prisoners to enjoy some fresh air, but had never complied with the order. Now, John did just that and had an exercise area fenced off for the prisoners, around the woolhouse. They were suffering from typhus and dysentery. The Corporation acted swiftly when the prisoners went on view, demanding they be removed from the town or, at the very least, be locked up, out of sight again. Perhaps it was as a reaction to this treatment of the prisoners, but as soon as he had lived in the town for the obligatory seven years in 1748, John became a Junior Bailiff - possibly hoping to change things from the inside of local government.

Whatever his motives, he always seemed to be working for the 'underdogs' of the town, giving them the benefit of the doubt and using the system to their advantage. When his servants stole from his spirit store, it was the local people who told him what was happening; he paid for a woman's husband to be released from the debtor's prison; he used the poor law system by sending sick seamen home so their mothers or wives could claim an allowance for nursing their son / husband; he tested the literacy and numeracy of the poor house children before they started apprenticeships; he gave a woman

inmate a position as a servant in his house and fought for her unpaid salary from her previous employer. The impression is of a man trusted and accessible to the local people - a genuine public servant.



Nonetheless, he also knew that status was important and used the Monckton coat of arms on his stationery. This may well have been useful in his dealings with Dr Speed, Henry Hartley, Sir Yelverton Peyton, Rev Richard Mant and others from the Corporation. Dr Speed was a close neighbour and in 1751 John took over the lease of Speed's 'Great Mansion' behind Holy Rood church. The site gave him the opportunity to have his own surgery and shop, library, gardens, and several tenements, as well as the old Holy Rood rectory to rent out.

It would have been in this surgery that he carried out the dissection on John Collins in 1768. Collins was sentenced to be hanged for murdering his wife, but the sentence also included dissection. The belief being that total destruction of the body ensured the soul would go to hell, thus increasing the severity of the death sentence. Later, in 1784/5 during his

second term of office as Mayor, he became associated with two notorious happenings in the town's legal history.

Returning home in late October 1784, in a single horse chaise with one of his three daughters, they were held up by a highwayman near the Cowherds. They had their watches and money stolen - John's description of the thief has a modern resonance about it: 'the man was shabbily dressed in a light coloured coat and red waistcoat. He rode a very bad horse'. John had been sworn in as Mayor only three weeks before and it is quite likely he was acting as coachman for his youngest daughter, Charlotte, on some errand prior to her wedding in mid-November.

Later in his mayoralty, in 1785, he would be responsible for sending William Shawyer to the Assizes. Shawyer was the butler who stole silver from his employer, Mrs Bagenal. At this time there were 160 capital offences (the bloody list), but judges were given a discretionary use of the sentences - offenders may not actually have been hanged.

However, hellraiser clergyman Martin Madden (he wrote 'Hark the Herald Angels') spoke out against this practice. Judge Eyre took this up saying it was more humane in the long run to hang everyone so sentenced, because it acted as a greater deterrent and removed the possibility of re-offending. An experimental 'clamp down' carrying out the capital punishment for all the offences took place right through the Home Circuit throughout 1785. So William Shawyer may have been a victim of a nationwide crackdown on crime, hence the failure of the petition to save him. Instead, he became the last man to be publicly hanged in Southampton.

Although he served the Corporation for 50 years in a variety of offices: mayor, sheriff, junior and senior bailiffs, town coroner, visitor to the poorhouse, medical overseer to the poorhouse and prisons and one of the pavement commissioners, it was in his role as surgeon that John possibly had the greatest impact on the town. He was acknowledged as the town's senior surgeon and as such, organised the

town's resident surgeons to inoculate the poor against smallpox for free. Probably this was as a result of his ecclesiastical family background giving him his sense of responsibility to the less fortunate inhabitants. The inoculation service was ongoing, over a period of several years, probably through the poorhouse and hospitals. A woman in St Mary's poorhouse asked if her child, who lived with its grandfather at Eling, could be allowed to participate in the next series of inoculations at the poorhouse. He agreed and a few weeks later the child was admitted to be inoculated and then returned to Eling.

It was against this background that an itinerant inoculator, Mr John Smith of Winchester, came to the town, in 1774, hoping to make some money for himself by inoculating the inhabitants - offering the 'very reasonable rate of 2 gns per common servant'! An acrimonious exchange followed in the *Hampshire Chronicle* between the local surgeons and Mr Smith. Eventually under the auspices of the town Corporation, a full-scale mass inoculation of the poor was mounted. A door-to-door collection was carried out to raise funds to enable as many 'deserving poor' as possible to be inoculated by the charity. The surgeons were paid 5s 3d for each person they inoculated and resulted in some 400 people being treated. When further outbreaks of the disease occurred in 1778 and 1783 the Inoculation Committee swung into action again, with further mass inoculations for the poor, to protect them and the town from the disease.

For many years John had also been acting on behalf of the Admiralty, producing information about and treatment for sick seamen, when they returned to Southampton from their voyages. In 1794, shiploads of expeditionary soldiers were returned to the town. They had been confined on board ship for weeks and were suffering badly from typhus. Again, our man moved swiftly. Without ado, he paid to convert the empty sugar house into a temporary hospital for the sick soldiers and set about providing for their needs - including sending to his nephew, Henry O'Neil at Romsey, for medicines.

After the soldiers had departed, John ordered that all blankets and clothing used by them

should be left in the sugar house and the building locked up. A wise precaution, as typhus is spread by the human body louse and some of the lice and eggs would have remained in the blankets. Unfortunately it was a bitterly cold winter and some of the local people broke into the sealed building and stole the blankets. Understandably the disease broke out amongst the town poor, with a resultant high death rate.

One of the last events in the town that John may have been involved with, or at least would have known about, was the disastrous demonstration fencing match between two renowned French exponents of the sport. Planned as part of the entertainment for the town's fashionable visitors, the protagonists were Monsieur De Launay and the Chevalier d'Eon, a transvestite who fenced in female attire. Unfortunately the unthinkable happened and the Chevalier was wounded, not mortally but sufficiently to prevent him ever using a blade again. Whether John would have been called to attend, or was in the audience, is open to conjecture, but he would have certainly been aware of the incident, if only from a point of interest and/or courtesy to his position in the town.

Later in the same year, 1796, Jenner discovered vaccination, a totally safe alternative to inoculation, relying on the cowpox virus rather than the smallpox virus itself, to give immunity against the disease. The days of inoculation were numbered and the practice was outlawed in the 19th century. Nonetheless, in the hands of skilled operators inoculation had served Southampton well during the 18th century. It is entirely reasonable to believe that many people alive today in Southampton are here because their ancestors were saved from the scourge of smallpox by the inoculations carried out through the efforts of John Monckton.

The only surviving obituary of John Monckton was printed in the *Hampshire Chronicle* of 6 May 1799 and reported: 'On Tuesday last died John Monckton Esq the oldest alderman of this town and an eminent surgeon and apothecary'. He was buried in Holy Rood, and any memorial there might have been was lost during the Blitz.