A black and white portrait of John Butter, an elderly man with a high-collared white cravat and a dark coat, sitting in a chair and holding a small document. The background is dark and textured. To the right, there are some papers and a small decorative object on a desk. One of the papers has the text 'INGENTIVS VERO ET VARIIS CASIBUS' and another has 'PLYMOUTH ROYAL EYE INFIRMARY: 1855'.

THE MEMOIR OF JOHN BUTTER

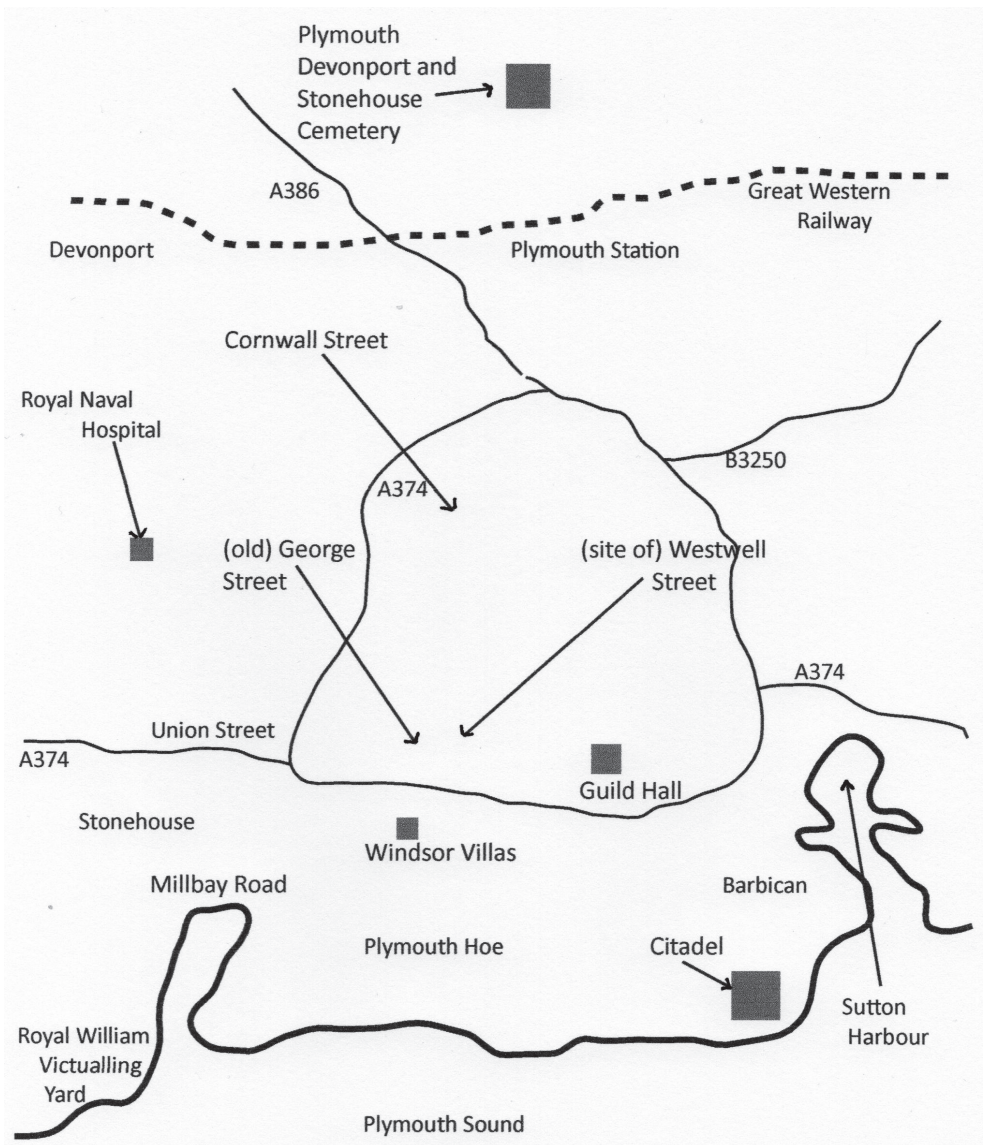
SURGEON, MILITIAMAN,
SPORTSMAN
AND FOUNDER
OF THE
PLYMOUTH ROYAL
EYE INFIRMARY

EDITED BY
DEE AND
MIKE TRACEY

DEVON AND CORNWALL RECORD SOCIETY

New Series

Volume 66



Indicative map of Plymouth (Dee Tracey, 2023).

THE MEMOIR OF JOHN BUTTER

SURGEON, MILITIAMAN, SPORTSMAN AND FOUNDER
OF THE PLYMOUTH ROYAL EYE INFIRMARY

EDITED BY
DEE AND MIKE TRACEY

DEVON AND CORNWALL RECORD SOCIETY

THE BOYDELL PRESS

Editorial Matter © Devon and Cornwall Record Society 2023

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

First published 2023

A publication of the
Devon and Cornwall Record Society
published by The Boydell Press
an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN 978 0 90185 317 2 hardback

ISBN 978 1 80543 096 4 ePDF

Series information is printed at the back of this volume

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate

Front cover: John Butter: mezzotint by Henry Cousins after John Lucas.
Reproduced by kind permission of the Wellcome Collection.

The Devon and Cornwall Record Society is very grateful to the following people, who donated generously towards the publication costs of this book.

Patrons

Jonathan Barry

Richard Batten

Murray Burring

Judith Cannell

Peter Cowell

Sheila Harding

Richard Moyses

Dee and Mike Tracey

Dr Stuart A. Windsor

One other patron has chosen to remain anonymous.

Supporters

John Allan

Gillian Badcock

Christine and Rab Barnard

Ann and Roger Claxton

David Dance

Paul Graham

Tom Greeves

John Maddicott

Elizabeth Parkinson

John Pitts

Margaret A. Rice

Brendon Sparks

Mark Stoye

Jill Stobridge

John Wade

Tess Walker

W. J. Yeoman

One other supporter has chosen to remain anonymous.

CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	x
<i>Editorial Method</i>	xi
Introduction	i
General Introduction	1
John Butter	4
Butter and Early Nineteenth-Century Medicine	10
South Devon Militia	22
Butter's Plymouth	27
The Plymouth Royal Eye Infirmary	34
The Memoir	47
Appendices	
1. List of Names	201
2. Medical Glossary	212
<i>Bibliography</i>	216
<i>Index</i>	221

ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece: Indicative map of Plymouth (Dee Tracey, 2023).

1.	Front cover of volume one of the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).	xii
2.	Inside of the front cover of volume one of the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).	2
3.	An example of the two different styles of handwriting employed in the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).	3
4.	Higher Venmore, Woodbury, East Devon (Dee Tracey, 2023).	5
5.	The Butter/Ashford family tree (Dee Tracey, 2023).	6
6.	7 Windsor Villas, Plymouth (Sheila Harding, date unknown).	9
7.	The Butter family vault in Ford Park Cemetery, Plymouth (Dee Tracey, 2022).	10
8.	John Abernethy, c.1820 (mezzotint after Sir Thomas Lawrence). Reproduced by kind permission of the Wellcome Collection.	12
9.	René Laënnec, 1826, from R. T. H. Laënnec, <i>Traité de l'auscultation médiate et des maladies des poumons et du coeur</i> (Paris, 1826). Reproduced by kind permission of the Wellcome Collection.	16
10.	One of Laënnec's early stethoscopes, c.1820. Reproduced by kind permission of The Science Museum Group, London.	17

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to Sheila Harding, Butter's great-great-great-niece, who first made us aware of the existence of the Memoir and then allowed us to utilise it for an extended period. We are grateful also to her late father, Christopher Ashford (Coroner for Exeter and East Devon) and two friends of his, Kenneth Rowe (Pro-Chancellor of Exeter University and Mayor of Exeter) and Patrick Russell (a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist), who first transcribed the Memoir many years ago, and whose work formed the basis of the digitisation exercise undertaken by Dee Tracey. Sheila also helped us considerably in compiling the family tree.

The staff of the Devon Heritage Centre were extremely helpful, as were Claire Skinner at The Box in Plymouth, and Graham Naylor and his colleagues at Plymouth Central Library.

Roger Hamling worked wonders improving the quality of some of the illustrations, and he and his wife Liz were endlessly patient in resolving IT and other problems.

Jonathan Barry read the entire text and gave us much valuable assistance, particularly in the realm of medical history.

Our editor, Professor Catherine Rider, provided helpful advice along the way and invaluable assistance with the production process. We are very grateful to her and to the D&CRS trustees for agreeing to publish the Memoir, which would not otherwise be in the public domain.

ABBREVIATIONS

DHC	Devon Heritage Centre
FLS	Fellow of the Linnean Society
FRS	Fellow of the Royal Society
FRCS	Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons
L&NW	London and North Western (railway)
MD	Doctor of medicine
MRCs	Member of the Royal College of Surgeons
NHS	National Health Service
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
OED	The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary
P&O	Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company
RM	Royal Marine
SDM	South Devon Militia
SD Railway	South Devon Railway

EDITORIAL METHOD

The first part of the Memoir is written in the third person, which is at times confusing, although, for no obvious reason, it changes to the first person near the beginning of volume five. For the sake of clarity, transcription is in the first person throughout. Legibility is relatively good, but there are instances, particularly with names and medical terms, where the meaning is not absolutely clear, and these are indicated where appropriate. Some year-headings are included in the original, and the missing ones have been added.

The original text contains few paragraphs, no quotation marks and very little punctuation. For ease of reading, the first have been added generally, the second wherever required, and the third as often as needed to clarify meaning and/or to facilitate reading. Where punctuation does appear in the original, it has been retained unless clearly inappropriate. Similarly, the original spellings have been retained without comment, except where they could be misleading. A few instances of obvious repetition have been omitted, as have occasional sections of rambling discourse that add little to the narrative flow; the gaps have been indicated in the text.

Asterisks* have been used to denote appearances in the List of Names. Every appearance of a particular name has been so indicated, other than where it has already appeared in the same paragraph.

Terms appearing in the Medical Glossary have been denoted thus,⁺ again on every occasion other than a second appearance in the same paragraph. Terms that are explained in the text have not been included.

Square brackets [1838] have been used throughout the text to indicate the date of quotations taken from the Memoir.

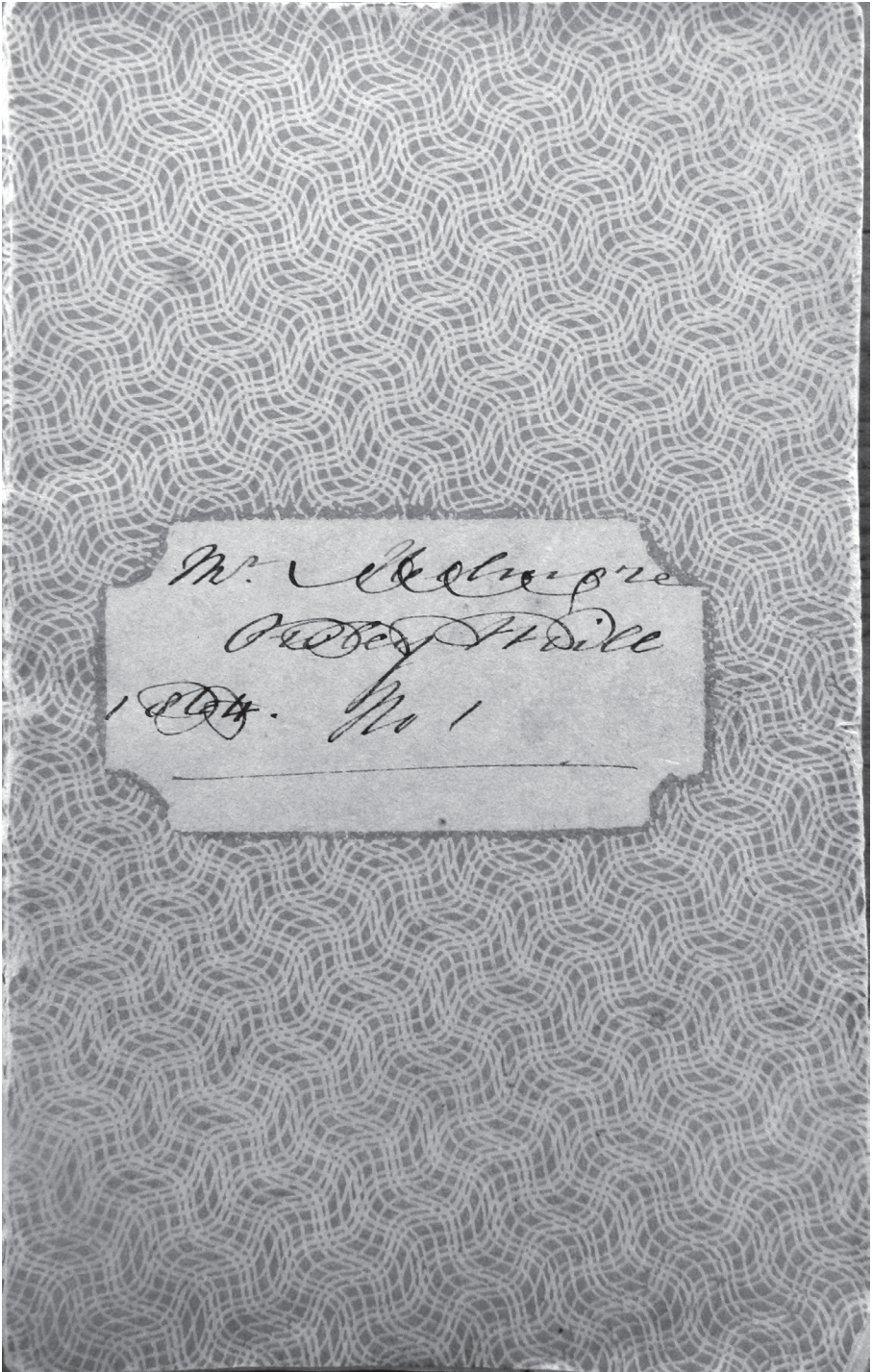


Fig. 1. Front cover of volume one of the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).

INTRODUCTION

General Introduction

The Memoir is essentially John Butter's life story, from his birth in Woodbury, Devon, in 1791, to the middle of 1853, shortly before he went blind. He died in Plymouth in 1877. Why he wrote, and for whom, is not clear, although, in describing a device for removing fishhooks from the throats of careless anglers [1820], he does write that 'this notice may be useful to others', and there are several other apparent indicators of an intention to publish. Apart from fishhook removal, he gives many valuable insights into

- the history of medicine and of medical education, in pursuit of which he spent time in London, on the continent, and in Edinburgh, where he was responsible for the introduction of the stethoscope to Scotland;
- the foundation and growth of the Plymouth Royal Eye Infirmary;
- his experiences with the South Devon Militia, particularly during its acquaintance with the Luddites;
- his life as a physician and a surgeon;
- his travelling, both at home and on the continent;
- his love of hunting and game-shooting;
- his social life in and beyond Plymouth; and
- his ventures into the property market.

The Memoir is written in nineteen notebooks, 3¼ x 6¼ inches in size. They are virtually identical, except that volumes one to three have pale orange covers (and, on the front, somebody else's illegible name crossed-through), volume five is blue and the rest green. All except volume five, which is blank, have a calendar for 1854 inside the back cover, and an almanack for the same year inside the front. So far, so good, but the very first entry is an apparently arbitrary and isolated date, '12 December 1865'. The situation is further confused by the fact that volumes one and two have the date 1864 inscribed on their front covers as, presumably, the time at which they were written. Volume three is dated 1864/5, volumes five to seven 1866, and all the others are undated. What happened? Did Butter suddenly come across a cache of ten-year-old books? Had he bought them in order to write his life story, and then not got around to it before he went blind? Why does the first of the 1864 books start with a date right at the end of 1865? When were the undated volumes written?

What we do know is that the books are written in ink, in two distinctly different hands, and completely filled from first page to last. The last instalment ends abruptly, and it seems probable that there was originally a twentieth, and presumably final, volume. Some of the outer covers have become loose and have separated, but all the books remain in otherwise good condition. They have been passed down through the Ashford family (Butter's sister Catherine married James Ashford) to their present owner Mrs Sheila Harding, great-great-niece of John Butter.

Butter dictated the Memoir when he was blind, relatively late in life, and this complicates matters. The overall accuracy of the narrative seems to be pretty good,

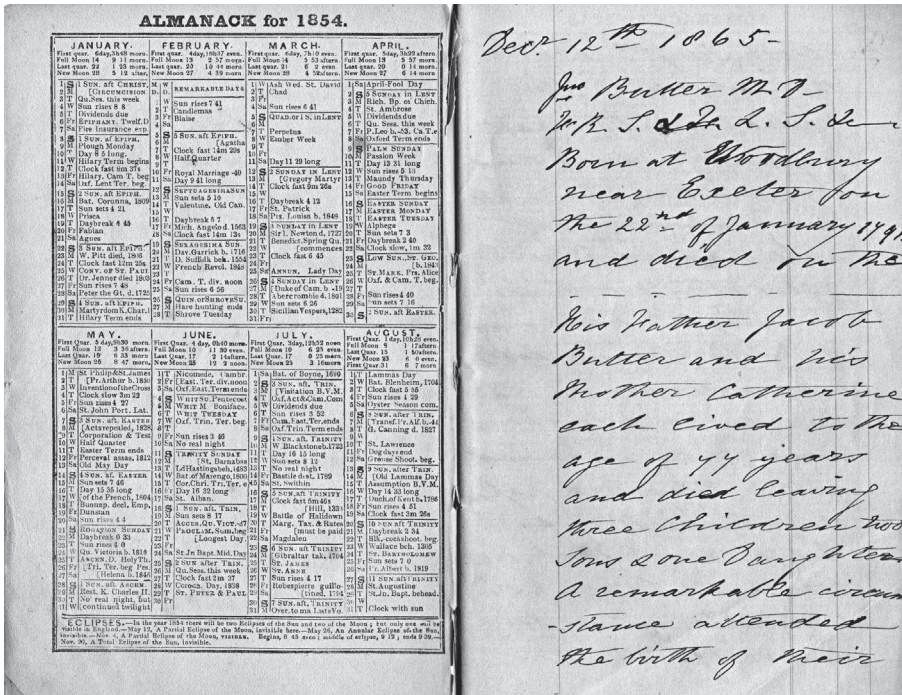


Fig. 2. Inside of the front cover of volume one of the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).

but there are a number of apparent mistakes, which have been indicated in the transcription. Where did they come from? Did the scribes mishear what he said, or did Butter's memory fail him? He twice makes mention of a journal that he had kept, but for how long and how comprehensively is not known. Given the fine detail of dates that appears in many places, it seems probable that it was a lifelong affair and that he used it as an aide-memoire, although, if so, the years 1827–31 were presumably lost, as the Memoir entries for that period are vanishingly short. The journal was presumably read to him in order to jog his memory, but whether or not the resultant text was then read back to him for confirmation and approval is another matter. One might have expected him to pick up on a number of what are clearly transcription errors, but the only notable amendments to the text are in 1817 and 1835, when, in each case, a sheet of paper containing further information has been inserted into the relevant volume, and in 1847, when a newspaper cutting has been added. It is just possible that the volumes we now have constitute a fair copy, completed after any amendments had been made, but the considerable extra work involved would hardly have been justified. It is not known who were the scribes, and it could not have been easy work. What little punctuation they did use was decidedly arbitrary, they were inconsistent spellers, and it seems highly unlikely that they were medical men. They did, however, write as legibly as one could reasonably hope, and that in itself is something for which to be grateful.

Trying to analyse Butter's character is not easy, given that he was writing with the benefit of hindsight and was, doubtless, conscious of how he was portraying himself.

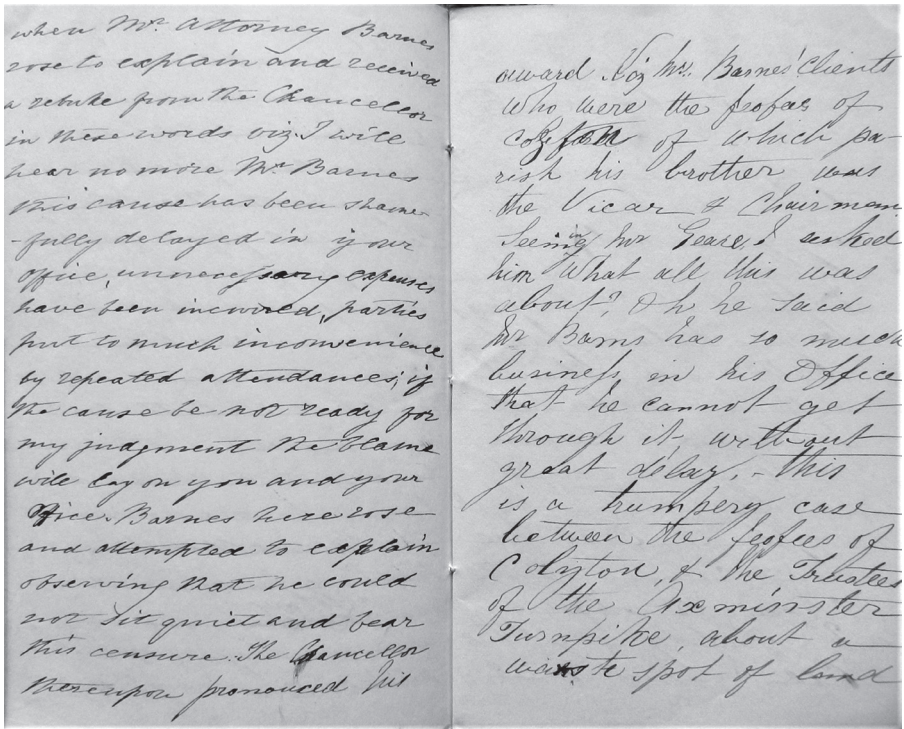


Fig. 3. An example of the two different styles of handwriting employed in the Memoir (Dee Tracey, 2023).

It is clear that he had plenty of confidence in his own ability, and he was rarely slow to point out where he had succeeded after others had failed. He did, however, report a number of his own failures, and his tone could not be described as unduly boastful. He certainly made every effort to maximise his medical education, both at home and abroad, and he does seem to have been a skilful and adaptable surgeon, very receptive to new ideas and with a markedly greater success rate than many of his contemporaries. He was devoted to blood-letting, as were all surgeons at the time (other, seemingly, than those domiciled in Bath [1822 et al.]), but not slavishly so, and neither was he hidebound by tradition, as indicated by, for instance, his enthusiasm for the long splint and his denunciation of the use of mercury to combat syphilis. He did rather abandon the stethoscope, but he was nearing the end of the hospital phase of his career before he brought it into the country, so he lacked the opportunity to develop any knowledge and appreciation of its true capabilities.

On a personal basis, he does seem to have had a clear idea of his social status, although he did not go out of his way to trumpet it – his reference to having been in correspondence with the Queen’s physician about a wet-nurse for the Prince of Wales, for instance, is very casual [2.11.1841]. That said, his equally passing reference to Joseph Paxton’s achievements at the Great Exhibition is decidedly patronising [14.7.1851]. He was also not above letting a social equal get away with rape [17.7.1845], albeit making quite clear his disgust, but in general he does seem

to have had a social conscience, as well as a marked sense of duty, together with the determination, skill and vision required to put them into effect. He probably treated more of the poor and humble than many of his fellow-practitioners, although it must be said that a large proportion of them were while he was with, and being paid by, the South Devon Militia (SDM). There were quite a few other instances, such as the Ougier family [8.3.1852], but the practicalities of business dictated that his patients should normally be able to pay their way. Much charitable work was, of course, done by the Eye Infirmary, and, although it had its own surgeons, Butter almost certainly did operations there, and he must have given a great deal of time and expertise in his role as Physician, quite apart from the endless hours devoted to the running of the organisation. If he had never done anything else, the Infirmary alone would constitute a legacy to be proud of.

John Butter

Butter's private life does not form so integral a part of his Memoir as might be expected. Apart from late nights with the SDM, and a lifelong passion for field sports, he tells us relatively little about the things and people closest to him. We hear more about his affection for his great-aunt in Bath than we do about his feelings for his wife – their marriage was childless, but there is no indication that it was anything other than happy, and in all probability he just wanted to keep private things private. It is, nevertheless, possible to fill in quite a bit of background.

John Butter was born at Cooks Venmore Farm, later known as Higher Venmore, in Woodbury, East Devon, on 22 January 1791. His parents were Jacob Butter (1760–1838) and Catherine Farr (1760–1837). Catherine is easily identifiable: she was baptised on 4 July 1760 in East Budleigh, the only child of Samuel Farr and Joyce, née Turnock. Jacob's origins, however, are less clear and are not helped by his son's somewhat cavalier attitude to his forebears. On the first page of the Memoir, John clearly conflates two generations, claiming to have 'had seven grandfathers and grandmothers all living at my birth'. On the same page, however, he refers to his father's 'grandfather Langdon', who was the father of John's paternal grandmother, and this provides the necessary clarification. The Butter and Langdon families had been connected for a very long time: in 1611, Philip Butter had married Agnes Langdon in the Exmoor village of Wootton Courtenay, and the connection was still strong in 1801, when John's uncle James married Mary Langdon at Milton Abbas, in Dorset.

We know that Jacob's father was also named Jacob, and that a Jacob Butter married Mary Langdon (thus providing the required 'paternal grandmother Langdon') in Tolpuddle, Dorset, on 6 November 1759. There was a significant Langdon presence in the area, but there were no Mary Langdons born there between 1720 and 1745, nor, for that matter, any Jacob Butters, so both parties to the marriage must have been incomers. Jacob junior was baptised in Tolpuddle on 15 December 1760,¹ so there can be little doubt that we have the correct family, although why two people with established roots in Woodbury should have married in Tolpuddle must remain a mystery.

Mary Langdon had been baptised in Woodbury on 18 October 1732, probably by her grandfather Gilbert, who was the Vicar. Mary's father, also a Gilbert, had, at the

¹ www.familysearch.org



Fig. 4. Higher Venmore, Woodbury, East Devon (Dee Tracey, 2023).

age of fourteen, been apprenticed to a cheirosurgeon² in Bovey Tracey, which cost Gilbert senior a fee of £21. Gilbert junior served his apprenticeship, married Mary Holwill, the cousin of a distinguished Exeter doctor, and practised in Woodbury until his death in 1791. Jacob senior and the former Mary Langdon eventually settled at Higher Venmore Farm, where it is reasonable to assume that Jacob made his living as a farmer. Jacob junior, however, was apprenticed to his grandfather Gilbert, whose practice he eventually took over, using the farm as his base; there is reputedly still a ‘surgery’ sign over one of the doors there. The farm and, indeed, a large proportion of the parish was part of the Rolle estate; Lord Rolle* was one of Jacob’s patients and was, in due course, responsible for John’s appointment to the SDM.

Jacob and Catherine had six children, of whom John was the eldest. John’s younger brother Jacobus, born in 1793, also became a doctor and initially practised in Lypstone, before taking over in Woodbury after his father died in 1838, when he might have felt a little hurt that a newspaper obituary recorded Jacob specifically as ‘the father of Dr Butter, of Plymouth’. It went on to say that ‘he practised the medical profession for nearly 60 years, with great credit to himself and satisfaction to the public. He was respected by the rich, and beloved by the poor for kindness and attention in sickness, and for the relief he afforded to their wants and afflictions.’³ Jacobus did not marry, and his tenure at Woodbury lasted only eight years, as he died of dropsy⁺ in May 1846, after which the practice passed out of the family.

² There is no very satisfactory definition of a cheirosurgeon, but it is probably a corruption of ‘chirurgion’, a variant of the French word for ‘surgeon’ (*chirurgien*), which was commonly used in this country.

³ *Western Times*, 16.6.1838.

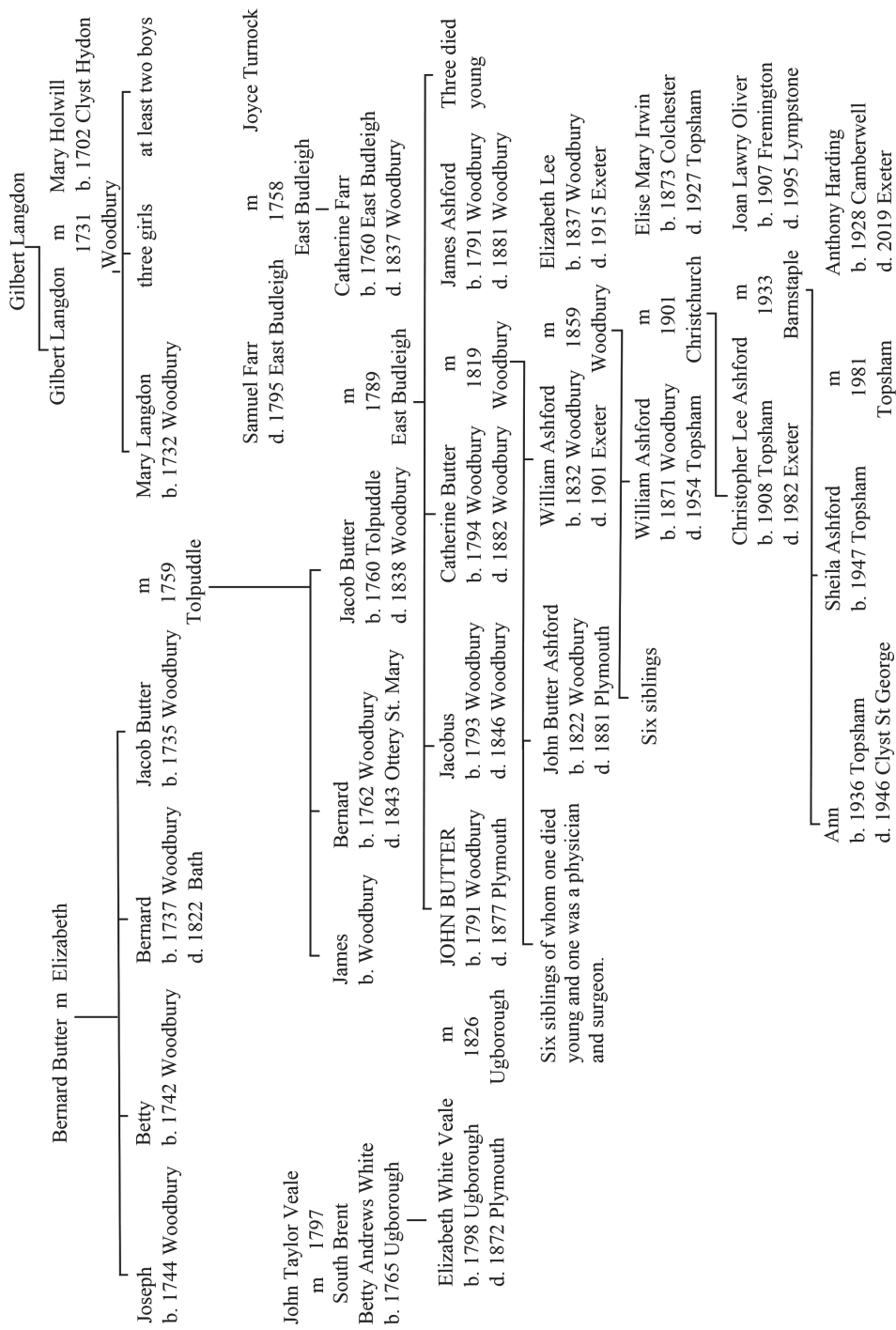


Fig. 5. The Butter/Ashford family tree (Dee Tracey, 2023).

Catherine, the third child of Jacob and Catherine, was the last to survive, the three subsequent children all dying at a young age. She married James Ashford in October 1819. James was a yeoman farmer living at Venmore Farm, next door to Higher Venmore, which Catherine inherited when her brother died. She and James had eight children, one of whom died young, but three continued in the medical profession. The oldest, John Butter Ashford, born in May 1822, was apprenticed to his uncle John and was living at, and inherited, 7 Windsor Villas, Plymouth, when Butter died in 1877. He himself died there barely four years later, aged fifty-eight, on 18 March 1881.

John and Jacobus received a classical education at Exeter Grammar School under the Rev. Bartholomew [1808].⁴ John left when he was sixteen, although in later life he became a Steward (governor) and was elected their Chairman in 1826. He had a large number of acquaintances and belonged to more than twenty different societies. Around half were medical in one way or another, including two Royal Colleges (Surgeons in London and Physicians in Edinburgh), and he was also a Fellow of the Royal Society.⁵ His interests were wide-ranging, including natural history, which led to his becoming one of the longest-standing members of the Linnean Society, and he was also a member of the Wernerian Society, to whom he twice talked on ‘the change of plumage exhibited by many species of female birds, at an advanced period of life ...’⁶ In addition to this, he ‘gave two lectures on Natural History, and one on Comparative Anatomy at the Plymouth Athenaeum’ [1816], he was a patron of the Royal Western Yacht Club,⁷ and in 1863 he was treasurer of the West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. His standing in the local community was further demonstrated by his becoming a magistrate [1822], and by his election as a Freeman of the City of Plymouth in 1832.

Butter’s loss of sight, which dominated his later life, is mentioned only once in the Memoir, as early as 1817: ‘I never dreamt myself of becoming blind. The Almighty however decreed otherwise, in my 64th year’, which was some thirty-seven years later. There is no other suggestion that his sight had been failing, and he had continued to treat patients until at least May 1853, when the Memoir ends. Thereafter, he worked as a consultant at the Eye Infirmary until just before he died in 1877. He does not mention how everyday life must have been affected, although neither of his great passions, hunting and shooting, is referred to after 1847 – possibly by then his eyesight was too bad for him to be able to safely enjoy potentially dangerous sports.

Apart from the early years of studying and travelling, when he was generally fairly hard-up, Butter’s standard of living was rarely less than comfortable. In due course, he became very wealthy, helped by a couple of generous legacies. In 1826, his great-aunt (his great-uncle Bernard’s widow⁸) left him £8,900 net of duty. Twelve

⁴ What is now Exeter School was founded in 1633 as the Exeter Free Grammar School and installed in the medieval buildings of St John’s Hospital, with funding from Exeter’s wealthy merchants. Rev. Bartholomew became master in 1793 when there were, on average, forty day boys and fifty boarders (www.exeterschool.org.uk).

⁵ *Medical Times & Gazette*, 10.3.1887, p. 275.

⁶ *Memoirs of the Wernerian Natural History Society: Vol. 3, for the Years 1817–18–19–20* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1821), pp. 183–206.

⁷ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 1.11.1836.

⁸ Her name was Elizabeth, but it is never mentioned in the text. Her husband and son were both Bernard, but they are referred to throughout as Barnard.

years later, his father died, and he and his two siblings were each left £1,000, whilst Butter inherited substantial estates in Axmouth, Musbury and Colyton, as well as property in Woodbury. The 1826 windfall was particularly welcome, as in May of that year, in the course of what he described as ‘the most important ... year of my life’, Butter married Elizabeth White Veale, who was born in 1798 and seems to have been the only child of John and Betty Veale. This meant that she inherited land in Ugborough when her father died, to add to that she had already inherited from her grandfather. Butter bought more land in the area, so that by 1839 he owned 858 acres in South Brent and Ugborough, occupying seventy-five acres of this himself and having tenants on the rest. He was also joint owner of a further forty acres. By 1873, his holdings in the South Brent area had reached 984 acres with an estimated gross rental of £1,064 5s. Nor was it just land: at the Brent Fair of 1869, he sold ‘Fat Cattle ... viz: 6 prime fat steers, 6 fat heifers, 17 fat wethers, 17 ewes, 6 lambs also a handsome brown colt, rising three years old, calculated for a Hunter Sale.’⁹ He talks in the Memoir [1832] about ‘my farm’, but it seems very unlikely that he did any hands-on farming.

In 1820, Butter bought his first home, in what was then fashionable George Street, Plymouth, where Lord St Vincent (First Lord of the Admiralty and instigator of the Plymouth Breakwater) had an official residence. He foresaw ‘that George Street would become a great thoroughfare on the completion of the Union Road to Stonehouse dock’. He was perhaps happiest, however, at the rather remote Owley Cottage, a two-up, two-down moorland cottage near Wrangaton in the parish of South Brent. The Memoir entries about Owley are somewhat confusing, as he asserts that he first slept there in 1833, but that Elizabeth did not do so until 1841. In 1842, however, he reveals that they owned more than one cottage in the area, renting out the others, so they had presumably moved their second home from one to another. They had certainly been making annual excursions to the moor ever since 1832, when, suffering from rheumatic fever, Butter was desperate to get away, ‘so loathsome was the contaminated air of Plymouth’. Ever afterwards, he justified their trips on the basis that ‘health was always preferable to wealth’ [1832]. That did not, however, prevent his final move, in 1842, to 7 Windsor Villas in Lockyer Street, designed by John Foulston. The building lies within the Hoe Conservation Area and is now Grade II listed. The Memoir records that the property cost him the sizeable sum of £2,213 7s 3d, albeit including £200 for a new stable. It records also that his reason for moving was to avoid having ‘to give up Society’, indicating the major part that the social scene undoubtedly played in his life.

Butter does seem to have been occasionally a little naive. In 1836, as executor of George Hunt’s will, he endured such a nightmare that he swore never to get so involved again, but he did – several times! His other problem was with politics, of which he generally steered well clear. His one notable, and potentially disastrous, involvement came in the 1852 Parliamentary election. Somewhat unwisely, he allowed himself to be cajoled into chairing the campaign of Charles John Mare,* a wealthy Londoner. Mare campaigned as a Protestant and a shipowner with a desire to correct the ‘lamentable neglect’ of the port facilities. To general surprise, he was elected at the head of the poll but never took his seat as he was found guilty of substantial bribery. Butter seems to have had no inkling of this and was not

⁹ *Western Times*, 24.7.1869.



Fig. 6. 7 Windsor Villas, Plymouth (Sheila Harding, date unknown).

summoned to the House of Commons hearing into the matter. Indeed, ‘the leading barrister complimented me on my speech at the [hustings] meetings and said he had no complaint to make against me bar my vituperation of lawyers’. It is, however, rather strange that in the evening after the hearing Butter drank with Mare at his house and the next day was his guest at ‘the launch of the most magnificent ship in the world’¹⁰ [1853] and at the subsequent excessively ostentatious banquet. Butter was quite open about this, and clearly saw no wrong in it, but it does, nevertheless, constitute a strange little footnote to his story.

He died at home in Windsor Villas on 13 January 1877, a little more than four years after Elizabeth. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried in his wife’s vault at the Plymouth Devonport and Stonehouse Cemetery,¹¹ and his name was added to her tombstone. The terms of his will initially named Elizabeth as sole executrix and divided his estate between her and his nephews and nieces, with a small number of other bequests, including Elizabeth’s right to pew number seventy-seven in the Episcopal church of St Andrew in Plymouth. Subsequent codicils do not specifically mention Elizabeth’s death, but in 1874 John’s nephew, James Ashford, was

¹⁰ The *Himalaya* at Mare’s Blackwell site on the Thames. Weighing 3,438 tons, she was built for P&O and was said at the time to have been the biggest ship ever constructed.

¹¹ Now Ford Park Cemetery.



Fig. 7. The Butter family vault in Ford Park Cemetery, Plymouth (Dee Tracey, 2022).

appointed sole executor, with a further and final codicil appointing Charles Edwin Ashford and William Ashford as joint executors should James die before John. The total value of the estate was a very substantial £53,691 13s 10d.

Butter and Early Nineteenth-Century Medicine

It was perhaps inevitable that both John and his brother Jacobus should have followed their father into the medical profession. John seems to have shown promise at an early age, when his father, unable to gain any other relief, allowed him to carry out his first ‘operation’ – a tooth extraction: ‘necessity obliged him to instruct a Schoolboy in the art of using a German Key⁺ ... so much to his ease and comfort that it induced him to present me with my first fee’. At the age of sixteen, Butter treated a local village lad suffering from ringworm [1807], and within two years he was undertaking six months’ residential medical training at the Devon and Exeter Hospital,¹² although he does not mention to whom, or even if, he was apprenticed.

¹² The Devon and Exeter Hospital was built on a former tilt-yard in Southernhay and opened to the public in 1743. Within five years, it had a hundred beds, with patients looked after by eight nurses, six physicians, five surgeons and an apothecary. The regime was relaxed – until the 1830s, patients were allowed to come and go as they pleased during the day, so long as they did not return drunk and they helped with the domestic chores: feeding the pigs, pumping

Whilst still very young, although not unusually so for medical students at the time, he gained experience in treating the injuries and illnesses, including typhus and dysentery, of soldiers returning from the battle of Corunna¹³ [1809].

Despite not being a graduate of Cambridge or Oxford, the normal means of becoming a pupil at one of the London hospitals, Butter was fortunate to have a letter of introduction from one of his father's patients and, on leaving Exeter, was accepted as a 'perpetual [i.e. full-time] pupil' of John Abernethy* at St Bartholomew's.¹⁴ As a prerequisite to medical study, students were expected to be of good character and to have had a 'strong' education. Subjects studied had to include Latin (which was used extensively during lectures, for examinations and in medical papers), logic, physics and chemistry; others, such as Greek, German, mathematics, zoology and botany, were 'useful'.¹⁵ St Bartholomew's is one of the two medical hospitals in the country that survived the Reformation (the other was St Thomas's, while a third 'hospital', Bethlem, was an asylum for the insane), and although many more were added from the 1700s onwards, it maintained a high status and reputation. Shortly after Butter left, the Apothecaries Act of 1815 required compulsory licensing and education for those who were, in effect, the GPs of their day, so that by 1841 Bart's had three hundred pupils.¹⁶ There were many fewer when Butter was there, and when he was at Guy's, although there is a complete dearth of information about his time at the latter establishment.

Medical training involved very little practical work and was undertaken principally in the lecture theatre, by observing the surgeon on his ward rounds and by reading books and periodicals. The timetable of lectures at Bart's listed medicine, chemistry and materia medica⁺ early in the morning; midwifery in mid-morning or late afternoon, anatomy at 1 or 2 p.m. and surgery at 7 or 8 p.m.¹⁷ Butter's experience of ward rounds was more useful than that of most of his colleagues because Abernethy,* recognising his great promise, appointed him a dresser. Dressers were unqualified apprentices, but the post was granted only to outstanding pupils, who 'gained much sought-after experience by performing minor surgical tasks and seconding surgeons'.¹⁸ The appointment was normally held for one year and usually had to be paid for by the student. Abernethy's regard for Butter is clear, not only

water and serving meals. Robert Dingwall et al., *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

¹³ The battle of Corunna, which took place on 16 January 1809, was a rearguard action to hold off the French while British troops boarded ships for a seaborne evacuation. The evacuation succeeded, but only at the cost of French control of northern Spain.

¹⁴ Founded in 1123, St Bartholomew's hospital has provided continuous patient care on the same site for longer than any other hospital in England. It began a major re-build in 1730 that was finally completed in 1769. The Governors approved the construction of a new lecture theatre in 1791, primarily to accommodate the popularity of the lectures given by John Abernethy.* Keir Waddington, *Medical Education at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1123–1995* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Thomas Neville Bonner, *Becoming a Physician: Medical Education in Britain, France, Germany and the United States 1750–1845* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 71.

¹⁶ Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp. 298, 316–17.

¹⁷ Florent Palluault, 'Medical Students in England and France 1815–1858, a Comparative Study' (Unpublished D.Phil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2003), p. 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

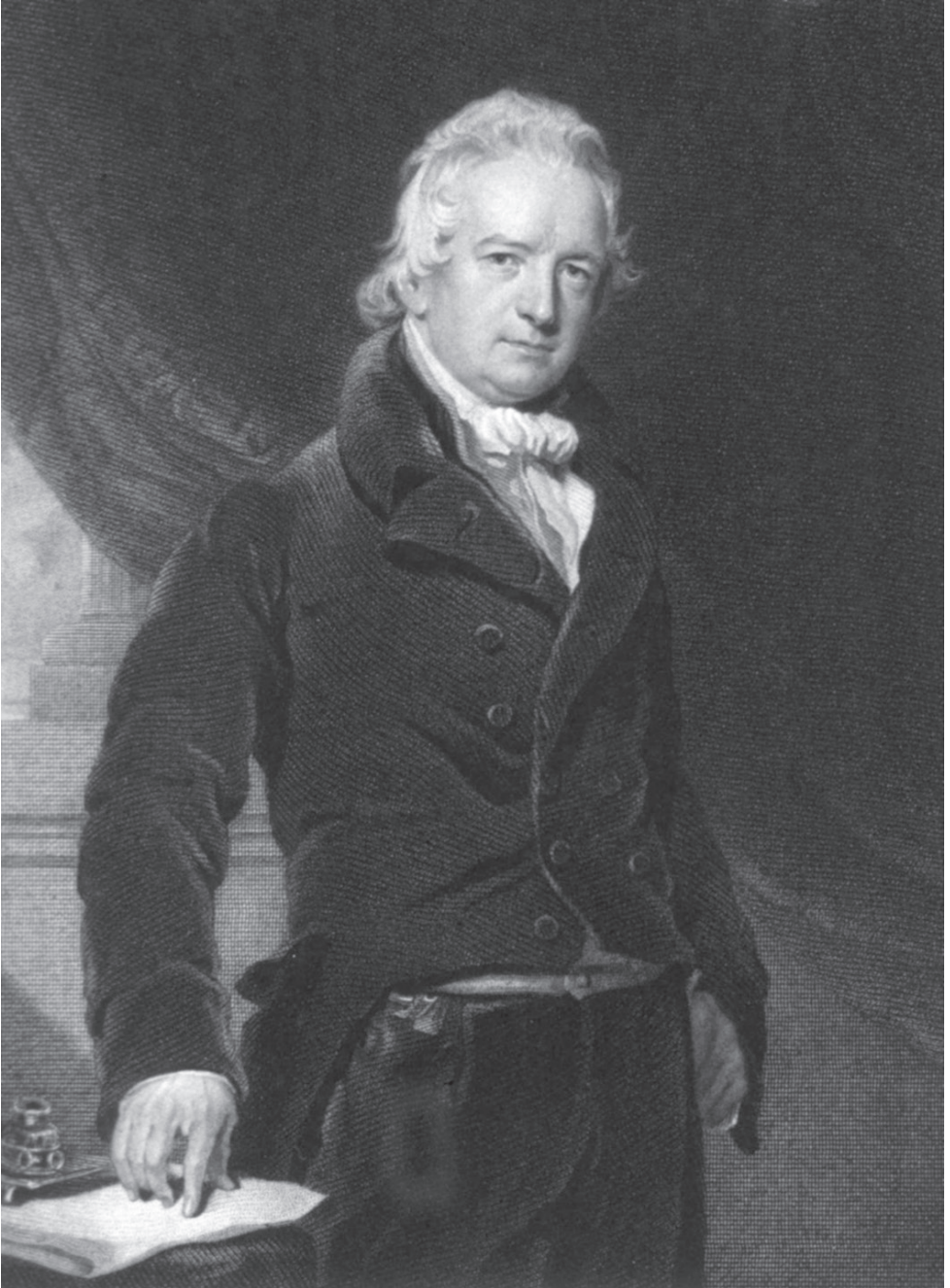


Fig. 8. John Abernethy, c.1820 (mezzotint after Sir Thomas Lawrence). Reproduced by kind permission of the Wellcome Collection.