

# Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library

## The Quest for Hickman

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Henry Hill Hickman (1800–1830), “the Rupert Brooke of anaesthesia”,<sup>1</sup> has a well-established place in medical history. A Shropshire general practitioner, who died young, he successfully carried out minor surgical procedures on animals rendered insensible by carbon dioxide and published his results in 1824 in a locally-printed pamphlet, which was reviewed unfavourably in the *Lancet* and *Gentleman’s Magazine*. In 1828 he went to Paris in an attempt to interest the French medical establishment in his ideas but met with indifference. When ether anaesthesia was in the news in 1847, Hickman’s work was remembered and noticed in both the English and French medical press, and thereafter he received regular passing mention in the literature, but by the early twentieth century he was no more than a name and the detailed records of his work were totally unknown. Credit for his rediscovery is due entirely to C J S Thompson (1862–1943), first Curator of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, who published an account of Hickman in the *British Medical Journal* in 1912 and secured the deposit of his papers, etc. in the Wellcome collection. Since then, Hickman’s story has been frequently told. The centenary of his death in 1930 was the subject of a special exhibition at the Wellcome Museum, with a hardback souvenir catalogue, and there have been various later studies of his life and work.<sup>2</sup> However, the story of Thompson’s rediscovery has not yet been recounted.

The starting point of Thompson’s quest was undoubtedly a letter by Hickman’s acquaintance, Thomas Dudley, of Kingswinford, published in the *Lancet*, 6 February 1847:

Permit me to make a few observations . . . respecting the system of inhaling the sulphuretted ether for the purpose of causing insensibility during surgical operations . . . I am in a position to prove that a similar system was brought before the public nearly twenty years ago, by a Dr Hickman, then

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<sup>1</sup> E Ashworth Underwood, ‘Before and after Morton’, *Br. med. J.*, 1946, ii: 525–31.

<sup>2</sup> Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, *Souvenir*

*Henry Hill Hickman centenary exhibition*, London, Wellcome Foundation, Ltd., 1930. The two fullest accounts are F F Cartwright, *The English pioneers of anaesthesia (Beddoes, Davy, and Hickman)*, Bristol, John Wright, 1952, and W D A Smith, *British Journal of Anaesthesia*, 1966, 38: 58–72; 1970, 42: 347–53, 445–58; 1978, 50: 519–30, 623–7, 853–61. Recent short accounts include the latter author’s *Henry Hill Hickman . . . and anaesthesia*, University of Leeds, 1981, and F G Page, ‘Henry Hill Hickman, a Shropshire medical practitioner’, *Medical Historian*, 1997, 9: 35–42.

residing at Shiffnal [*sic*], and previously at Ludlow, where he successfully performed various experiments with it upon animals . . . Dr H. commenced his experiments at Ludlow previous to the year 1824; after which he resided at Shiffnal for three years, and went to Paris in 1828, in which year he presented a memorial to the King of France, Charles X . . . but the prosecution of his inquiries was cut short soon after by his decease, previous to which he published an account of his invention, either in a pamphlet, or in the form of an essay in the medical publications of the day. I well remember that the system was treated with very great severity in the medical reviews . . .<sup>3</sup>

Thompson's discovery of this letter probably arose out of Henry Wellcome's wish for an enlarged edition of the Burroughs Wellcome booklet *Anaesthetics, antient and modern*, published in 1907.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately he overlooked Dudley's second letter in the same volume of the *Lancet*, which described Hickman's pamphlet as "dated 1824 . . . in the form of a letter, addressed to the late T A Knight, Esq., of Downton Castle" and identified his anaesthetic agent as carbon dioxide.<sup>5</sup> Thompson's quest was thus initially handicapped and was largely directed to the hope of establishing Hickman's priority in the use of nitrous oxide gas, twenty years ahead of its discovery in the United States. Paris seemed the best source for further information and on 5 April 1911 a letter was sent over Wellcome's signature to the Archives Nationales requesting a copy of Hickman's petition. On 7 April Thompson wrote from his home address to a Dr Richard Hickman of Newbury in the hope that he might be related to his nineteenth-century namesake. No reply to either letter is recorded. A fresh letter sent to Paris on 6 September drew a response from F Bayet, Directeur de l'Enseignement Supérieur, Ministère de l'Instruction Publique, that the records of meetings of the Académie de Médecine for 21 October 1828 contained a reference to Hickman's petition. Thompson wrote back on 17 October to request a photograph and then in November sent his assistant, Arthur Amoruso,<sup>6</sup> to Paris. He was soon reporting back on his struggles with French bureaucracy.

14 November

This morning first thing I went to Mr Bayet . . . unfortunately I met with no success, as this gentleman's "receiving day" . . . is Wednesday from 2–4 p.m. I tried to get at someone who might put me on the right track but the officials knew not where to address me for this special case . . .

I procured after that a ticket admission [*sic*] to the Bibliothèque Nationale where I was not able to trace any pamphlet . . . relating to Hickman . . . In the engravings department there were several portraits of Hickmans, but one only might be the physician. It is a fine stipple engraving of a rather young looking, impressive man . . . his name *Tom* Hickman . . .

15 November

This morning first thing I tried again the Bibliothèque Nationale and sent in a slip asking for any work on ether as applied in surgery by Hickman, but they had none. In the meantime I came across in the Surgeon General Catalogue with the following reference: 'Dr Hickman the original discoverer of inhalation as a means of performing painless operations—*Med. Times*, London, 1847, xvi' . . . it must be attainable in London.

<sup>3</sup> *Lancet*, 1847, i: 163.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum by E F Linstead, Advertising Manager, Burroughs Wellcome, to L W G Malcolm, Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, 17 December 1928 in Wellcome Institute Archives (WA/HMM/EX/B.4).

<sup>5</sup> *Lancet*, 1847, i: 345. Thomas Andrew Knight, FRS (1759–1838) was a distinguished horticulturist.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Arthur Victor Amoruso, a relative of Dr Louis Sambon (see note 8), was an assistant in the Wellcome Museum from 1910 to 1915. He was commissioned into the Italian army in World War I and stayed on in Italy. In 1911 his father was manager of the Western Union Telegraph office in Paris.



*Figure 1:* Henry Hill Hickman (1800–1830). Oil on canvas. By an unknown artist. (Now in private hands.) (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

The British Consulate were not open until 11 a.m. They searched through the lists of British [*sic*] subjects . . . from 1828 to 1833 with no satisfactory result, they further addressed me to the Palace of Justice to verify the Acts of deceased. There appears to be no one called Hickman who died in 1828 but I shall have another try . . . as . . . the employees were having lunch there and I don't think they troubled themselves much.

At 2 p.m. I was at the Ministry; Mr Bayet was very kind but could not promise that I might get the permit of photographing Hickman's account, as he had no authority on the Academy of Medicine . . . and so addressed me to the Secretary of that Institution. This gentleman was very unsatisfactory . . . He said it was impossible to grant any permission to photograph any document . . . when I asked him that I might procure a formal document from some scientific or governmental body, he stated that if even the King were to make the demand, the Council would refuse. I don't think his assertions are to be taken as strict as all that, and a formal letter or the introduction by a Member might help . . . I am very disappointed in this very unfruitful day.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson, after consultation with Louis Sambon,<sup>8</sup> on 16 November drafted a formal letter to the Secretary of the Académie de Médecine and also letters enlisting the help of the medical historians and members of the Académie, Raphaël Blanchard and Édouard Nicaise, all three letters avoiding reference to anaesthesia or ether. As Thompson explained in his covering letter to Amoruso, "I only want them to think that I am interested in him because he was an English surgeon, who lived in Paris in 1828, and I want to gather materials incident to his life".<sup>9</sup> However, before the letters were sent he was able to add a postscript stating that (evidently thanks to Amoruso's *Medical Times* citation) he had traced at the British Museum a reference to Hickman in the *Archives Générales de Médecine*, vol. 18, which could be photographed at the Bibliothèque Nationale. However, Amoruso was ahead of him, having found that the Faculté de Médecine was willing to let him photograph the article "with not the least trouble".<sup>10</sup>

Thompson by now was sure enough of himself to contemplate going public with his discovery. He reported to Wellcome that:

. . . we have now got together indisputable evidence to establish [Hickman's] claim as being the first to suggest anaesthesia by inhalation of vapour or gas for surgical operations. With this, from time to time, I will feed up the *British Medical Journal* as you suggested, but retaining the best points for *Anaesthetics ancient [sic] and modern*.<sup>11</sup>

This idea of gradually releasing information is in strong contrast to Wellcome's later policy of enforcing strict secrecy until he judged the time to be fully ripe for disclosure, a policy which in later life gave him the reputation of a dog-in-the-manger.<sup>12</sup>

Amoruso, meanwhile, was able to report that he had photographed the 1828 paragraph and had located and copied the various letters in the *Lancet* and *Medical Times* for 1847. He had also found Hickman referred to in the reports of the meetings of the Académie de Médecine in 1847:

<sup>7</sup> Letters 14 and 15 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1)

<sup>8</sup> Dr Louis Westenra Sambon (1865–1931), lecturer at the London School of Tropical Medicine, was intermittently associated with the Wellcome Museum at this period.

<sup>9</sup> Letter 16 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>10</sup> Letter 17 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>11</sup> Report 18 November 1911 (WA/HMM/RP/Tho/5).

<sup>12</sup> "There was in him . . . something of the spirit of a miser", Sir D'Arcy Power, *Lives of the fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England 1930–1951*, London, Royal College of Surgeons of England, 1953, p. 833.

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Mr Gérardin remembered having himself communicating [*sic*] . . . 19 years previously the discovery made by Hickman . . . and remembers the “protoxyde d’azote” being one of the vapours employed . . . After 1847 the matter was probably dropped altogether to Morton’s advantage. Now it’s Hickman’s turn to reappear!<sup>13</sup>

Thompson was now striking out in various directions. He had somehow discovered a reference to Hickman’s having read a paper before the Birmingham Medical Society and had already written for information to the current Secretary on 3 November.<sup>14</sup> He also wrote on 17 November to Dr G J Dudley of Stourbridge in the hope that he might have been related to Thomas Dudley (whom he erroneously believed to have been a medical man). No reply to either letter is recorded. He was also attempting to contact the Knight family: a letter to the postmaster at Downton, Wiltshire, drew the response that the Downton Castle in question was in Shropshire, near Ludlow. The Ludlow postmaster supplied the name of the current owner as A R [*sic*] Boughton-Knight<sup>15</sup> and on 23 November Thompson was able to write to him. He had already written to Louis Taylor, assistant-editor of the *British Medical Journal*:

From further investigations during the last fortnight in Paris and in the Midlands, I have been able to piece together a short life story of Henry Hill Hickman the forgotten English pioneer in the history of anaesthesia . . . referred to in the record I found among the Archives in France, which I communicated to you last week. I am still pursuing my investigations, and hope to find still more exact details of Hickman’s experiments and work, which I think will prove of considerable interest . . .<sup>16</sup>

His report to Wellcome was even more optimistic:

Mr Amoroso returned from Paris on Thursday last, after gathering all the available evidence on Hickman’s discovery . . . Through his search, we have found out that Hickman first used carbonic acid gas and nitrous oxide gas as an anaesthetic in experimenting on animals . . . Hickman’s demonstration before the Academy of Medicine in Paris never came off, as his method was received with derision by the members, and he died in Paris, practically of a broken heart, shortly afterwards. I have had a photograph taken from the official record of the *Bulletin of the Academy of Medicine*, but up to date the authorities have been unable to discover the actual document, which Hickman wrote to the King. They think this was destroyed at the fall of the Royalists in Paris, but the search is still being made. I am now on the track of the pamphlet . . . and hope to track it down by next week. I have sent the Editor of the *British Medical Journal* a further short report this week . . . From the evidence we have it proves conclusively that Hickman employed nitrous oxide gas as an anaesthetic sixteen years before Horace Wells . . . in America.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the references so far located were almost all from published sources and the only evidence for Hickman’s use of nitrous oxide was Gérardin’s unsupported recollection. Nevertheless, Thompson submitted a typescript which formed the basis for

<sup>13</sup> Letter 19 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1). Nicolas Vincent Auguste Gérardin (1790–1868); his recollection is quoted from *Bulletin de l’Académie de Médecine*, 1847, 12: 396.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson’s manuscript note quotes his source as “article ‘Ether’ in Penny Encyclopaedia 2nd edition” (WA/HMM/EX/B.11). This has so far resisted identification. It does not appear to be in the *Penny cyclopaedia* of the Society for the Diffusion

of Useful Knowledge, London, 1833–58.

<sup>15</sup> C A (Rouse-)Boughton-Knight (1859–1947) was the great-grandson of T A Knight and had inherited Downton Castle in 1909. (*Who was who*, vol. 4, London, 1950, p. 1002; *Burke’s landed gentry*, 1914, p. 1095.)

<sup>16</sup> Letter 22 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>17</sup> Report 24 November 1911 (WA/HMM/RP/Tho/5).

an article by Taylor in the *British Medical Journal* of 25 November. The first draft mentioned Hickman's alleged Birmingham paper but this was dropped before publication.<sup>18</sup> Taylor's tone was less sensationalist. After pointing out that Hickman was not totally unknown, that he had been mentioned in print as recently as 1905, and that published sources indicated that his anaesthetic agent had been carbon dioxide, he continued:

We are indebted to . . . Mr C J S Thompson for some additional information as to Hickman. In the course of researches made on behalf of Mr Henry S Wellcome for the Historical Medical Exhibition which he is organizing . . . an authentic record of Mr Hickman's method has recently been found in France. He called the anaesthetic agent which he employed carbonic ether . . . In 1828 he went to live in Paris, and . . . obtained permission to demonstrate his method before a committee appointed by the Académie de Médecine . . . Whether he had the opportunity of doing so, and with what result, we have yet to learn . . . further details will be published when the collection of evidence is completed . . .<sup>19</sup>

Boughton-Knight wrote on 26 November that he had been unable to locate a copy of Hickman's pamphlet. However, on 28 November the post brought a letter sent from the Archives Nationales on 25 November to Amoruso at his Paris address, reporting the discovery in the archives of the Ministère de l'Intérieur of the record of receipt on 7 August 1828 of Hickman's petition, which had been duly passed to the Académie de Médecine. Accordingly Thompson commissioned Sambon to pursue this lead, while Amoruso wrote to the Archives Nationales to request a photograph of the newly discovered record. The *British Medical Journal* was occupied with the more momentous topic of Lloyd George's National Insurance Bill, so that there was no immediate urgency for the follow-up article. Thompson wrote to Taylor on 30 November: "I can quite understand the pressure you must have had over the National Insurance Bill; I trust we have heard the last of it altogether . . . I have no objection whatever to letting the paper stand over till your issue of December 9th."<sup>20</sup> On the same day he wrote to Boughton-Knight, emphasizing that the pamphlet, if found, "will still a long controversy as to whether nitrous oxide gas was first used by an Englishman or an American".<sup>21</sup>

On the following day he reported progress to Wellcome and received a reprimand for allowing his name to appear in print:

The editorial is excellent but it is contrary to our policy to indicate the individual who carries out these researches. It opens up many difficulties. Sambon and others might follow suit and Southerbys [sic], Stevens and others may get on to it and thus prejudice purchases. I have expressed intention of giving credit at right time re H[istorical] M[edical] E[xhibition].<sup>22</sup>

Thompson did not take this warning sufficiently to heart. It was his disregard of Wellcome's sensitivities in this direction which, fourteen years later, would lead to his downfall. He now turned the thrust of his investigations to the Midlands. On 9 December, under his alias of Epworth & Co., Booksellers, he wrote to the Birmingham bookseller Edward Baker in search of "a pamphlet entitled *Unconscious or painless operations*, or

<sup>18</sup> Typescript draft in WA/HMM/EX/B.11.

<sup>19</sup> [C L Taylor], 'An unfinished chapter in the history of anaesthesia', *Br. med. J.*, 1911, ii: 1434–5.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 30 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>21</sup> Letter 30 November 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>22</sup> Marginal note to Report of 1 December 1911 (not in Wellcome's hand) (WA/HMM/RP/Tho/5).

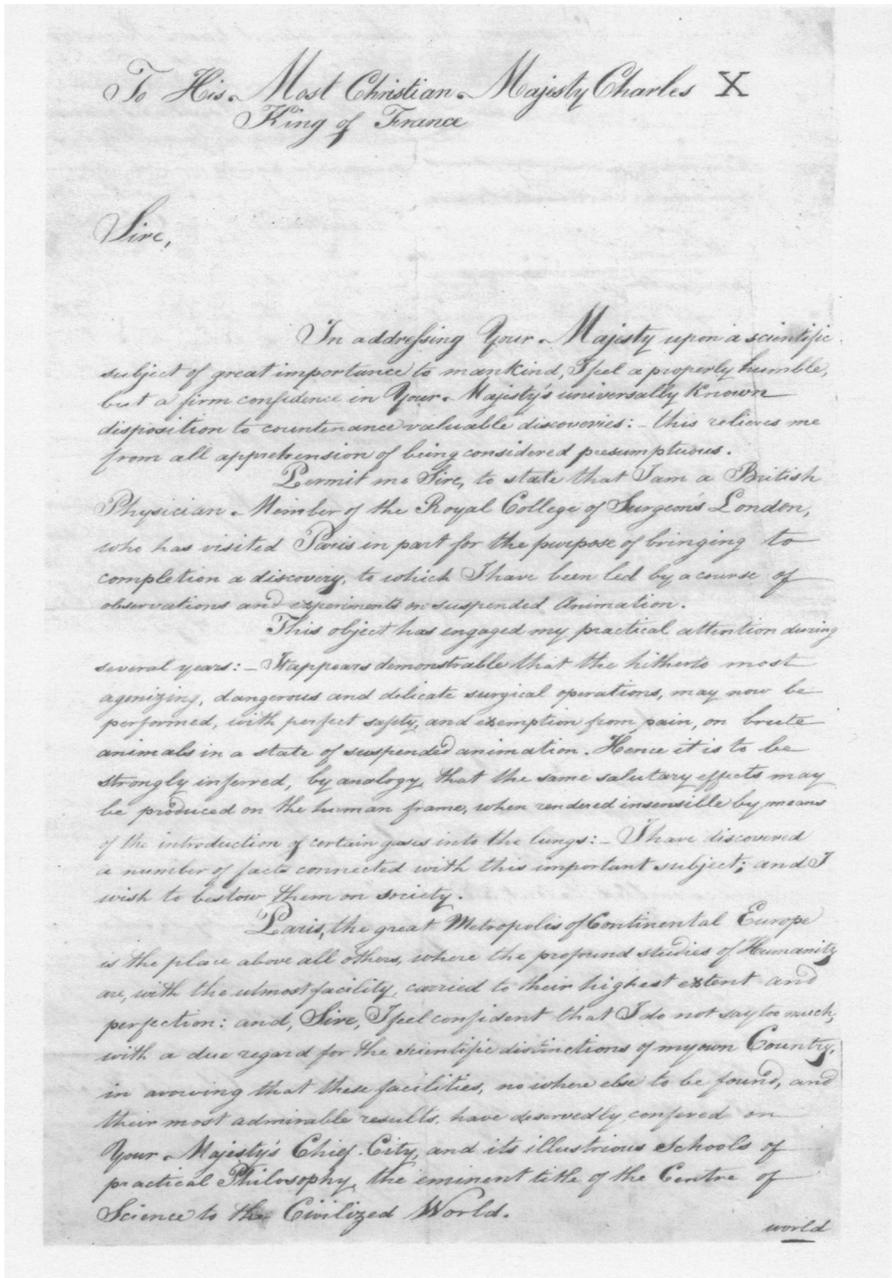


Figure 2: Opening page of Hickman's memorial to King Charles X of France, 1828 (Western MS. 7625/3). (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

some similar title, by Henry H Hickman . . . published . . . between 1820 and 1828 . . . It is wanted rather urgently by a customer of ours".<sup>23</sup>

On 11 December he was able to send Taylor a print of the paragraph from the *Archives Générales de Médecine* of 1828, with the assurance that further documentary evidence was expected from the French archives. In fact the breakthrough was to come from advertisements placed in various Midlands newspapers. Mrs H C Bettridge, of Edgbaston, was the first to respond on 13 December: "Mrs Bettridge wishes to say, in answer to an advertisement in the *Tenbury Wells Advertiser*, that Dr Henry Hill Hickman was her grandfather . . . She will be pleased to give any other information that she can . . . but until Saturday next the 16th she will be in Nottingham."<sup>24</sup> On the following day, the same advertisement drew a similar letter from her cousin, Francis Henry Thompson, surgeon, of Hereford. Thompson's reply to Mrs Bettridge on 16 December introduced a new note of *pietas*:

The fact that Dr Hickman discovered this method . . . in 1826 . . . is of the greatest importance scientifically, as up to the present the honour . . . has always been given to Horace Wells . . . in 1844. It is therefore my earnest desire that honour should now be done to Dr Hickman's memory . . .

I have ascertained that Dr Hickman published a pamphlet about 1826 . . . May I ask if you have a copy of it, or could inform me who would be likely to have one? I should also like to find a portrait . . . Could you also give me any details concerning his life and the place of his death, and where he was buried? . . . I am sure you will sympathise with my object, namely, to secure recognition for Dr Hickman as one of the foremost pioneers in the history of anaesthetics . . .<sup>25</sup>

The third response to the advertisement came from Francis Thompson's sister Blanche, Superintendent of the Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women:

. . . I have had in my possession for many years a pamphlet re Dr Hickman's discovery of an anaesthetic of carbon monoxide or dioxide . . . as I was a dispenser I took great interest in it, and showed the same pamphlet to the late Lawson Tate [*sic*] and Dr Savage and others. Unfortunately I have mislaid the book . . . having been moving house, but I am looking for it, and shall then have pleasure in letting you see it, if it will help you to make any mention of his name. I have always thought it should have had honour . . .<sup>26</sup>

She wrote again, the following day, 18 December, to report that she had a visiting card used by Hickman in Paris. This, however, was overshadowed by Mrs Bettridge's letter of the same date:

. . . I write to say that *in the family* we all knew that my grandfather had been the first to discover the use of anaesthetics—though he never got the credit for it—we are so glad that this will now be rectified. I *ought* to have a copy of the pamphlet . . . and will do my best to find it. I have in my possession a large oil painting of him . . . it is much too large to send to you, but I should think it might be photographed . . . With regard to his life . . . he was born 27th January 1800, and he died before he was quite 30 years of age; he practised in Ludlow, Shifnal and Tenbury, dying at Tenbury, and was buried at Bromfield, Salop, three miles from Ludlow . . .<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Letter 9 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>24</sup> Letter 13 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>25</sup> Letter 16 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>26</sup> Letter 17 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>27</sup> Letter 18 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

Hickman's age at death is wrongly quoted, as he died on 2 April 1830. This error later led Thompson to state that he died in 1829.



*Figure 3:* Blanche Thompson (1856–1941), with Hickman's pestle and mortar (Wellcome Institute archives: WA/HMM/EX/B.10.) (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

Although the pamphlet remained elusive, Mrs Bettridge more than made up for it by enclosing, unsolicited, an autograph letter from Hickman to T A Knight of 21 February 1824, describing his experiments, a draft of his petition to Charles X, and letters written by Thomas Dudley to Mrs Hickman in 1847. Thompson was at last furnished with abundant original evidence, even though there was still nothing to show that Hickman had used nitrous oxide. He replied to Mrs Bettridge on 20 December, stressing the crucial importance of the pamphlet and asking if it might be possible to borrow the painting for reproduction. On the following day he promised Taylor a fresh article: "From the further details just to hand, I have now no doubt that Hickman was the foremost pioneer in the production of anaesthesia by inhalation in this country or in America".<sup>28</sup>

Next, on 22 December, he reported to Wellcome on his progress (with some embellishment of the depth and efficiency of his research). After describing Sambon's fruitless search at the Académie de Médecine, and the inconclusive correspondence with

<sup>28</sup> Letter 21 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

Boughton-Knight, he recounted his discovery of Mrs Bettridge “the only living descendant of Dr Hickman” and the material which she had lent (Wellcome noted “Follow up and at right time try to acquire for my permanent museum”), while admitting that Hickman’s pamphlet was still outstanding.<sup>29</sup>

Mrs Bettridge’s papers were duly returned with thanks and with the hope expressed that “after the rush of Christmas . . . you have discovered a copy of Dr Hickman’s book”.<sup>30</sup> On 3 January of the new year Thompson wrote again to open negotiations for borrowing the portrait or for having it photographed in Birmingham. Mrs Bettridge replied on 4 January:

I write to say how sorry I am that I cannot find or hear of any one who has a pamphlet or book published by my grandfather. I went on Tuesday to Worcester to see some old cousins of my mother’s hoping they might have one, but no, they have not. I have today spent the whole day looking through old books and papers . . . With regard to sending the oil painting . . . my brothers do not like the idea . . . but I will see what I can do and will either send the picture . . . or get it photographed here.<sup>31</sup>

Thompson had already realized that it was time to look elsewhere and on the same day wrote to Blanche Thompson to ask for the loan of her copy of the pamphlet and the visiting card. Also on the same day he sent his revised text to Taylor. The article, with ample quotations, had more than enough material to establish Hickman’s claim as “a forgotten pioneer of anaesthesia”, though it still retained the suggestion that he had used nitrous oxide gas as well as carbon dioxide, contrary to the evidence of the letter to Knight, and skated over the absence of Hickman’s pamphlet by implying that its text was identical to that letter. The article concluded with the peroration:

Although eighty-four years have passed away since Hickman placed his methods of producing anaesthesia by inhalation before the Royal Academy of Medicine of Paris, it is not too late to do honour to the memory of this young English surgeon, now forgotten, who practically sacrificed his career and gave his life in his attempts to gain recognition for his discovery of a method of producing anaesthesia by inhalation, and so rendering patients unconscious to pain during severe surgical operations.<sup>32</sup>

Mrs Bettridge sent the portrait off on 5 January, apologising that because of her grandfather’s sudden death it had never been fully finished. Thompson had it photographed and also arranged for a copy to be made by an artist. On 18 January he went up to Birmingham and visited the Bettridges. On the following day his incoming post included a letter from Blanche Thompson, but it did not, alas, contain the long-awaited pamphlet.

I am sorry I have not been able to write before . . . but I have been laid up with a cold. I enclose you a relic of grandfather’s. My mother gave me some of these old bank notes . . . telling me that her father . . . used to give her mother occasionally these pound notes being fees he had . . . and she put them by until she had one hundred of them. Then the Bank broke and they were no good. So my mother gave them to me for a sale of work I got up for my Hospital in 1896.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Report 22 December 1911 with marginal notes by Wellcome (WA/HMM/RP/Tho/5).

<sup>30</sup> Letter 23 December 1911 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>31</sup> Letter 4 January 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>32</sup> Typescript draft (WA/HMM/EX/B.11).

<sup>33</sup> Letter 18 January 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

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Thompson, who must surely have been seething with frustration, did not show it in his reply:

I desire to thank you for your letter . . . enclosing me the old one pound note, a relic of your grandfather . . . I was in Birmingham for a few hours yesterday, and saw Mrs Bettridge . . . I had hoped also to have called upon you . . . but the weather was so bad, and transit was difficult, that it was impossible . . .

The evidence that is now in my hands . . . is practically complete; the only thing I am lacking is a copy of that pamphlet . . . This is the last link in the chain of evidence . . . I had hoped . . . that it would have been possible to have obtained a sight of it, but Mrs Bettridge told me yesterday . . . that you had not been able to find your copy. Unfortunately she is in the same position . . .

Do you remember reading the pamphlet yourself, and have you a distinct knowledge or recollection that he mentions using nitrous oxide gas, which was, in those days, known as protoxide of azote, or protoxide of nitrogen, or laughing gas? Because that is the great point I wish to prove. I have evidence of the other gases that he used . . . but it is the nitrous oxide that is the one of the greatest importance.<sup>34</sup>

On the following day, 20 January, he returned Mrs Bettridge's letters, expressing the hope that she might find her copy of the pamphlet before his article was published. Blanche wrote briefly on the same day, sending a visiting card of her grandfather's belonging to her brother, but leaving Thompson's queries unanswered. Then, after a fortnight's silence, she sent off a hurried postcard: "I am sending the pamphlet and visiting card by registered letter tomorrow Feb. 6th. I was too late for post tonight for package. Sorry I have not sent it before but thought there was no hurry. Please insure it against fire."<sup>35</sup>

The quest for Hickman was over. Thompson had the last link in his chain, but it had failed to prove that Hickman had used nitrous oxide gas. No doubt also the fourteen-page pamphlet in its blue wrappers was physically disappointing.<sup>36</sup> His letter to Blanche Thompson of 9 February was deflated in tone, with a rather desperate clutching at straws: "I suppose you never heard if Dr Hickman wrote any book other than this pamphlet, concerning his experiments . . . as it seems curious that in the Memorial he presented to King Charles X he alludes to a book which he states he would like to present to him. This can hardly be the pamphlet which we now have."<sup>37</sup>

Thompson made no attempt to modify his article after receipt of the pamphlet, not even to record its discovery. (It does in fact differ significantly in several points from Hickman's earlier letter to Knight and includes a justification of vivisection.) Possibly he did not wish to lose face by retracting his earlier claims; perhaps he had simply lost enthusiasm and had moved on to other topics. He wrote to Taylor on 9 March:

I am sorry to trouble you, but the matter is now very urgent, as I am being pressed by some of the relatives of the Hickman family . . . to publish the article as early as possible. I should therefore be grateful if you could strain a point to insert it within the next week or two. You will notice that the *Lancet* prints a paper on Crawford Long, the American pioneer of anaesthesia, by Dr Buxton, and it is very important that the story of Hickman should be published as early as possible.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Letter 19 January 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>35</sup> Postcard 5 February 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>36</sup> H Hickman, *A letter on suspended animation containing experiments shewing that it may be safely employed during operations on animals, with the view of ascertaining its probable utility in surgical*

*operations on the human subject*, Ironbridge, W Smith, 1824. Now in the Wellcome Library. No other copy has since come to light.

<sup>37</sup> Letter 9 February 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

<sup>38</sup> Letter 9 March 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

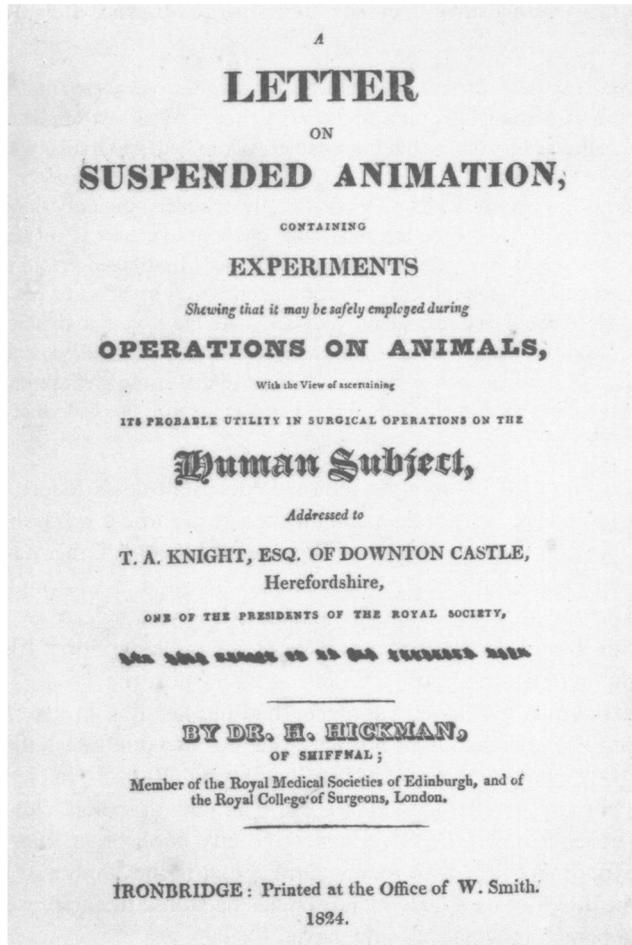


Figure 4: Title-page of Hickman's pamphlet on suspended animation. (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

The surviving correspondence contains no evidence of the alleged pressure from the family; the impatience seems to have been purely on Thompson's part. The article duly appeared on 13 April, captioned as "Communicated from the Wellcome Historical Medical Exhibition Research" and signed with Thompson's initials.<sup>39</sup> He forwarded copies to both Blanche Thompson and Mrs Bettridge, expressing the hope that "I think you will agree with me . . . that the proofs are now so strong that there is little doubt that Dr Hickman's name will be always included among the foremost pioneers of anaesthesia".<sup>40</sup> Sending a copy to Wellcome, he responded to his earlier criticism:

. . . I specially requested the Editor that my name should not appear, but he held that, in claiming for Hickman the discovery of the use of nitrous oxide gas as an anaesthetic . . . he must have

<sup>39</sup> 'Henry Hill Hickman: a forgotten pioneer of anaesthesia', *Br. med. J.*, 1912, i: 843–5.

<sup>40</sup> Letter 15 April 1912 (WA/HMM/EX/B.1).

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authentication. I stipulated also that he should insert . . . that it was communicated from research work done for the Wellcome Historical Medical Exhibition . . . and he accepted initials as authentication.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of its inaccuracies and misrepresentations, Thompson's article had now secured Hickman his place in the public consciousness. The documents describing his work were borrowed for display when Wellcome's Museum was opened temporarily from June to October 1913 and were secured on indefinite loan when the Museum was reopened on a permanent basis in 1914.<sup>42</sup> Thompson never returned to this research. His *British Medical Journal* article was submitted unchanged as a chapter for the revised edition of *Anaesthetics, antient and modern* (which never appeared)<sup>43</sup> and was also reprinted as a pamphlet. The record was not in fact set straight until 1930, when the Hickman Centenary book was published, containing the full text of the various documents, including the pamphlet. Thompson had left Wellcome's employment in 1925 in acrimonious circumstances, so that the book suppressed all reference to his contribution to Hickman's rediscovery. (Even the coincidence of Blanche Thompson's surname was a matter of some embarrassment!) J D Comrie's preface stated: "In the preparation of [his] Museum, Dr Wellcome made special researches for evidences of agents employed . . . throughout the ages . . . to alleviate pain and suffering. These investigations . . . revealed amongst other things, certain unrecorded documents relating to Hickman's part in the History of Anaesthesia . . .".<sup>44</sup> Thompson was fully justified in scribbling in the margin of his copy "The documents were not revealed in investigation. They were discovered accidentally by me".<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Report 19 April 1912 (WA/HMM/RP/Tho/6).

<sup>42</sup> The Hickman manuscripts are now Western MS 7625. The pamphlet is in the department of Early Printed Books.

<sup>43</sup> The typescript draft is in WA/HMM/EX/B.4.

<sup>44</sup> *Souvenir Henry Hill Hickman centenary exhibition*, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Now in the Wellcome Institute Library. Another marginal note on the same page, on nitrous oxide, reads "There is little doubt that he did use it".