Workhouse Whistleblower

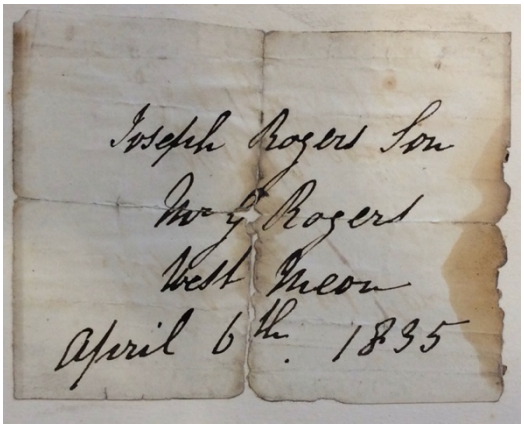
Doctor Joseph Rogers (1820-1889)

Child of the 'New Poor Law'

Joseph Rogers was born on August 6th1820 to **Mary Ann Blyth and George Vining Rogers** of West Meon, Hampshire. He was the 13th of their 16 children and like several of his brothers, followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps to study medicine. After a basic education at Buller's school in Southampton, at the age of 14 Joseph was required to work in his father's dispensary, thus beginning his medical education. Significantly, that year 1834, was the year when the recently enacted New Poor Law (The Poor Law Amendment Act) came into effect, a law whose administration and execution Joseph would later rally against, at great personal cost. He remembered his father's 'deep disappointment and dissatisfaction' with the Act's 'harsh and bitter spirit.'[1]

Joseph Rogers, an early portrait. Source: *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers*

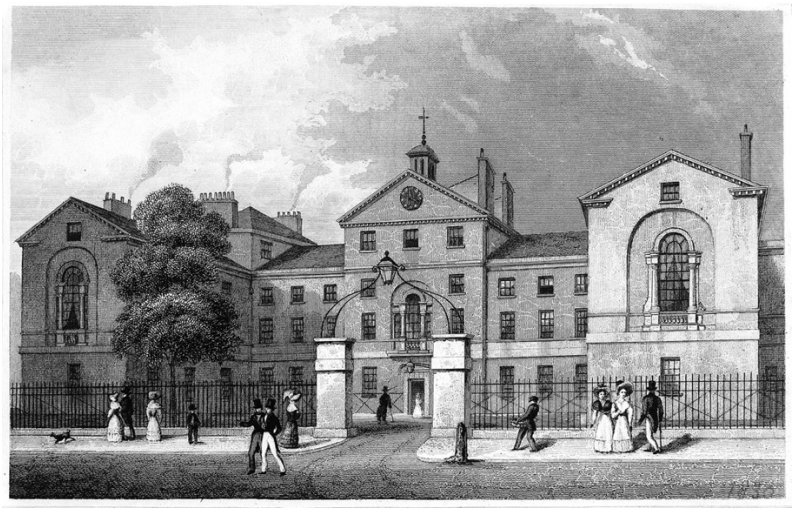
Other than that, little is known about Joseph's childhood. In 1901 during alterations to the front entrance of the old family home, *The Cedars* in West Meon, a bottle containing a small note was found lodged in the brickwork. The note read 'Joseph Rogers Son Mr G Rogers West Meon April 6th 1835'. Who knows how or why this came to be there, but it may suggest the playfulness of the 14-year-old Joseph - maybe a nineteenth century version of 'Joe woz 'ere.'



Note found in 1901 in a bottle lodged in the brickwork of *The Cedars* at West Meon. Source*: Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers*

Apothecary and surgeon

After serving an apprenticeship with his father, Joseph was then sent to London, firstly to a general practitioner in Westminster Road, and then to one in York Street, Bryanston Square. This last doctor was very impressed with Joseph's work so much so that he strongly recommended Joseph study medicine at the Middlesex Hospital. This advice was followed, and Joseph entered the Middlesex Hospital in 1838 where he soon excelled, winning prizes for his work. By December 1841 Joseph had qualified as an apothecary, and on October 28th 1842 he qualified as an MRCSE (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, England). He was only 22 years of age.

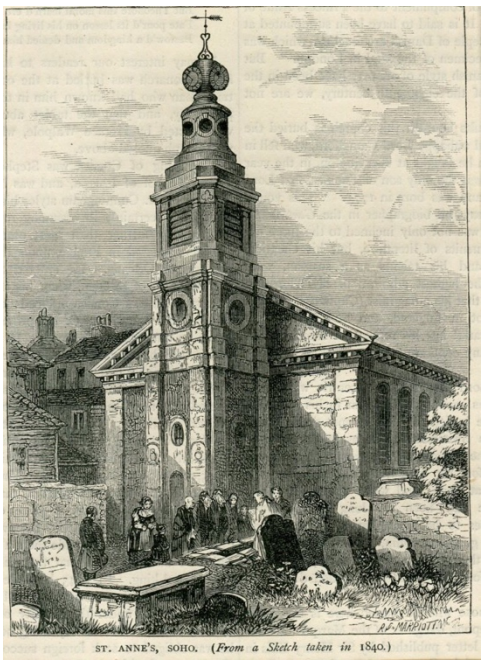


The Middlesex Hospital: seen from the south. Engraving by J. Rodgers, 1830, after T. H. Shepherd. Source: Wellcome Collection.

Joseph returned to West Meon for a about a year but by 1844 he had returned to London to assist in his brother Alexander's medical practice. Alexander, only four years older than Joseph, had just recently qualified as a doctor, but he was gravely ill with tuberculosis and died at the early age of 28 years. Joseph took over the practice at 79 Wardour Street Soho, a district where he was to find plenty of challenges both medical and administrative.

Overcrowded burial grounds

Soho one hundred years earlier had been a fashionable district of Westminster but over the years the wealthy gradually moved out as new suburbs in the west were being developed. Soho soon became the home of poverty, overcrowding, and the lack of proper sanitation caused many health problems. Overcrowding extended to the church burial grounds and that of St. Anne's in Wardour Street near Joseph, was bulging. A report from an overseer of St. Anne's, Joseph George, in 1847[2] noted that over the previous 150 years 95,000 bodies had been deposited in the churchyard which was only seven-eighths of an acre in area and meant to only accommodate 110 bodies each year but was now burying 1,062 in a year.



St Anne's Soho 1840. Artist: Richard Samuel Marriott. Source: stannes-soho.org

Living too close to the dead

Joseph's first challenge was to advocate for closing metropolitan church burial grounds. He was made acutely aware of this need when visiting one of his local patients who was suffering from blood poisoning. This man's house shared its wall with the graveyard of St. Anne's churchyard and Joseph had noticed that 'the wall of the room was saturated with and even exuding a highly putrid fluid'[3]. The cause was decomposing bodies next door! Joseph then set out to research the condition of other graveyards in London and in 1847 set up the Anti-Interments in Towns Association. Their object was to conduct public lectures and meetings on this issue and lobby parliamentarians to legislate to abolish the practice of intramural interments (burials within the church grounds) and provide public cemeteries away from densely populated towns. There was of course opposition from the church which would stand to lose burial fees, and perhaps their authority over life and all-important death.

At a large public meeting on November 15th 1847 at the *Crown and Anchor Tavern* in the Strand, attended by over 500 individuals including several public associations concerned with sanitation in towns generally, Joseph spoke against one of the groups present, the Health of Towns Association, for not being concerned enough with burial ground issues because of the number of clergy in their Association. Over the following decade, legislation was enacted step by step to gradually restrict burials in churchyards and develop public cemeteries and relevant authorities. In 1854 Joseph was appointed to the first Burial Board in London and through this organisation he was able to eventually establish the first metropolitan mortuary, in St. Anne's Soho.

Arundel Street entrance of the Crown and Anchor tavern Artist: Thomas H. Shepherd, 1852. Source: ANU and Trustees of the British Museum.

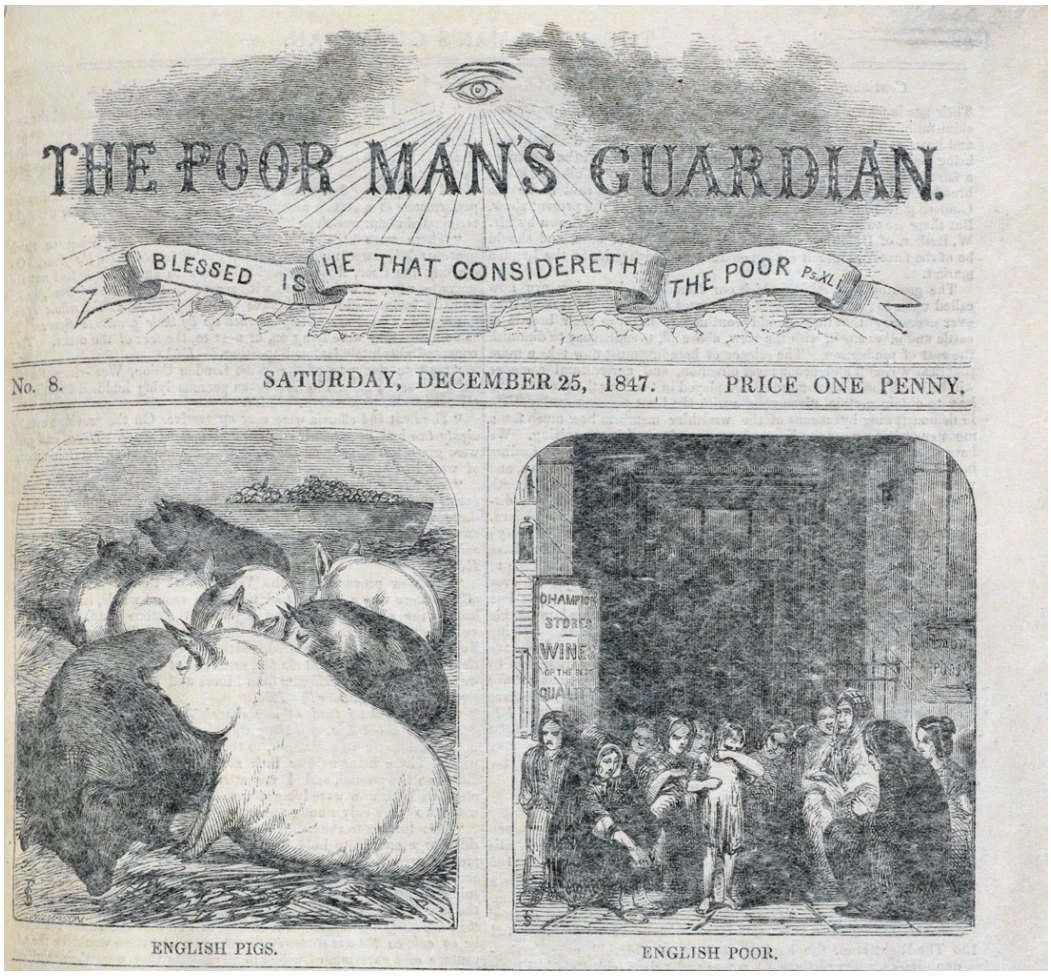
Window tax protest

In 1847 Joseph was also a member of the Anti-Window Tax Association whose objective was to have the window tax removed on health grounds. Landlords not wanting to pay the tax on their city tenements where the poor mostly lived, would brick up the windows depriving their tenants of light and fresh air. On October 6th 1847 a meeting was called at Caldwell's Assembly Rooms in Dean Street Soho to

discuss strategies to pressure the government to repeal the legislation. The resolution of the meeting to abolish the window tax was seconded by Joseph who said 'the free passage of light and air'[4] was an important sanatory principle. After a few years of the Association's campaigning, the tax was finally repealed in 1851.

The Poor Man's Guardian Society

These and other important health issues were discussed broadly amongst doctors, philanthropists and many citizens concerned with public health. Joseph was on the committee of The Poor Man's Guardian Society which was 'instituted for the purpose of aiding the destitute in their approach for parochial relief, and for securing them the legal and humane dispensation of the Poor-law'. They published a regular newspaper to discuss these issues and garner support. Joseph was also a member of the National Philanthropic Association that contributed to this paper. The famous author Charles Dickens was involved with these two organisations and his popularity at the time would have no doubt aided their causes.


THE POOR MAN'S GUARDIAN.

BLESSED IS HE THAT CONSIDERETH THE POOR Ps. XL

No. 8. SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1847. PRICE ONE PENNY.

ENGLISH PIGS.

ENGLISH POOR.

English Pigs and *English Poor* from *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 25/12/1847. The illustrations accompanied an article using the advent of Christmas to compare the living conditions of prize English pigs with those of the English poor. Source: British Library

Family life

These were eventful years in Joseph's personal life as well. In 1850 he married his first wife Ellen Parsons at Petersfield near his home village of West Meon. Family responsibilities played an important role in the early years of Joseph and Ellen's marriage as the census of the following year shows: their address was 33 Dean Street Soho[5] where Joseph lived most of his professional life. He was 30 years old, Ellen was 26, and with them was a medical assistant and a maid, as well as their 14-year old niece Marion, daughter of his eldest brother George (1800-1856), a general practitioner now living in Winchester. George was married with three children, Marion, Charles and Julian, but he had problems with alcoholism and insolvency and in 1851 his wife was in a 'lunatic' asylum. Joseph's father had died in 1846 and his ageing mother no longer had the means nor energy to look after George's children. Therefore, siblings stepped in to help: Joseph took in Marion, his sister Elizabeth had Charles boarding at her school in Alton and Julian was boarding at the Winchester Cathedral school.

Left: Ellen Parsons, Joseph's first wife. Right: Marion Rogers, Joseph's niece. Source: *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers*

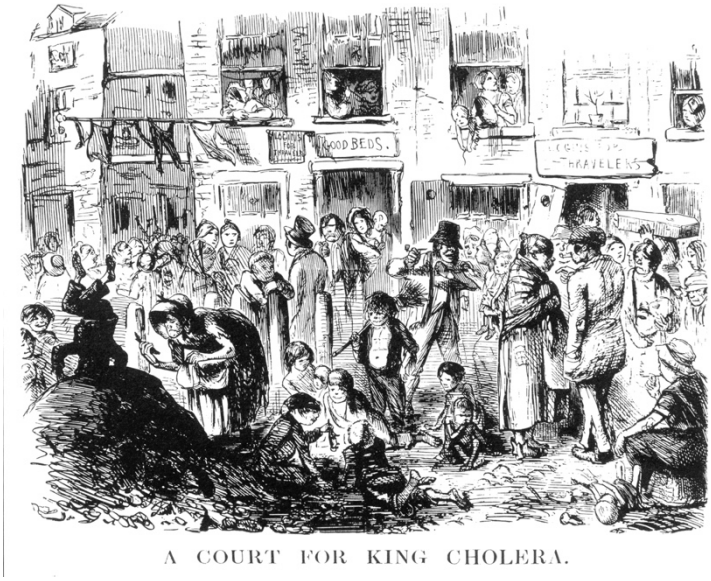
Deaths and disappearance

Coming from a family of sixteen children, it is no surprise that in those times when premature death was not uncommon, Joseph was to lose several siblings to various diseases and misfortune: after his brother Alexander's early death in 1844, in 1849 his brother Charles aged 48 died of a heart attack and in the same year his youngest brother Edmund died of 'brain fever' at age 22. A particularly tragic event occurred in 1851 when another brother, Alfred, a sea captain, was murdered at sea with his family in a mutiny. Alfred was 33.

An elder brother **John**, died in 1860, and like their brother George, was an alcoholic doctor. One Sunday night in 1849 one of John's sons, Willoughby, who worked in London, had been visiting his uncle Joseph in Dean Street and left at about 10.30pm. When he did not show up at his work the next day, Joseph and his brother-in-law Richard Cobden, now an MP, reported the missing 19-year-old to the London police commissioner. But despite the report being circulated to various police branches, Willoughby was never seen or heard of again.

Cholera comes to Soho

In 1854 cases of cholera were appearing in Soho and Joseph was one of several medical men in the district (including another Dr Rogers, William, no relation) who gave information to Dr John Snow (physician, anaesthetist and epidemiologist) in his investigation into the source of Soho's cholera outbreak.



A Court for King Cholera Illustration by John Leech from *Punch* (1852). Source: Wikimedia Commons

Until John Snow had proved that cholera was a water borne disease, the thinking at the time was that it was caused by 'miasma' - foul smells emanating from the drains, cesspits and polluted air. In a letter to *The Times* of September 18th Joseph describes visiting cholera patients in Berwick Street on Saturday September 2nd and noticing 'On that fateful Saturday morning ..... at about half past five.....I was almost overpowered by one of the most sickening and nauseous odours .....I was standing immediately over a gully hole.' He also noticed that a colleague, Dr Harrison a local surgeon, lived at no. 6 in front of this open drain. Later that day he was told Dr Harrison had died after only a few hours' illness. On being informed Joseph remarked 'That gully hole has destroyed him!' What had really caused the cholera in Soho, as John Snow was to prove, was contaminated water from the Broad Street pump. However, lack of proper sewerage was part of the problem, seeping into sources of the city's water supply.

In Joseph's letter he exposed the reluctance of the authorities to take responsibility for public sanitation. He described how a later occupant of 6 Berwick Street had asked the Sewerage Commission to trap this gully, only to be told he had to pay for it himself!

The Strand Union

The cholera epidemic was taking a heavy toll on the local population and initially on the workload of doctors. Joseph's experience in dealing with sanitary health issues was well regarded and in 1855 Joseph was requested by St. Anne's parish in Soho, part of the Strand Poor Law Union of Parishes, to become a Supernumerary Medical Officer. But as the year went on, due to the increasing death rate and subsequent exodus of those who could afford to leave, Joseph realised that his private medical practice would eventually suffer from lack of patients. He therefore decided to apply for the position of Workhouse Medical Officer at the Strand Union Workhouse in nearby Cleveland Street and in January 1856 was successful.

Abuses in the workhouse system

The New Poor Law of 1834 determined that workhouses should be as discouraging as possible, so the physical environment and the treatment of inmates was deliberately grim and harsh even in the workhouse infirmaries. But without proper supervision from the governing authorities, the Poor Law Board and the Boards of Guardians and inspectors, workhouses could become extremely neglected and inmates open to abuse. This is what happened at many London workhouses and the Strand Cleveland Street Workhouse was one of the worst examples. Joseph was destined to spend most of his professional life battling the authorities for the most basic rights and necessities of patients and doctors and exposing corruption and ineptitude wherever he saw it.

Masters and matrons

Each workhouse was managed by a master and matron under the supervision of the Board of Guardians. Joseph had the misfortune to work under two of the worst masters in the system - George Catch at Cleveland Street and later John Bliss at the Poland Street Workhouse. Each time Joseph made a complaint or suggested improvements, he was met with strong resistance from the master, the matron or the Guardians, either on grounds of cost, or that he was being too soft, or by denial the problem existed. Eventually, due to testimony from Joseph and others, both Catch and Bliss were subject to inquiries and sacked[6]. But this took many years. What the authorities were to find out was that Joseph was not going to be deterred in exposing abuses and inadequacies, even when the Guardians deliberately tried by various means to provoke him into resigning, and on two occasions, to have him dismissed.

Outdoor Relief (poor people coming to a workhouse for food) 1840 by Hablot Knight Browne aka 'Phiz' - He illustrated many of Dickens's books. Source: Wellcome Collection

Joseph described his experiences in his *Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer,* a frank and detailed account written in his retirement published in 1889 the year he died. The following are some of the challenges Joseph wrote about, that occurred under the jurisdiction of the Poor Law Board in the Strand Workhouse and were also common in other London workhouses:

Inadequate and inappropriate building

The Cleveland Street Workhouse was a bleak and austere 1780s Georgian building[7], four storeys high with some rough and dingey extensions made in the 1830s. The whole building was generally badly ventilated and many areas damp and

ill-lit. The various functions of the workhouse were inappropriately situated. For example, a fever ward was next to a tinker's workshop and forge, and only separated by a lathe and plaster partition that did not extend to the ceiling, as there was no ceiling. The 'dead-house' was also poorly sealed and its odours seeped into the wards. Carpet beating, a lucrative income source for the Board of Guardians, was conducted in close proximity to the wards and created much dust and noise. Much of the building included narrow staircases, difficult to navigate and lavatories were few and inconveniently located for the inmates.

The Strand Union Workhouse Cleveland Street, later part of the Middlesex Hospital Photo: 1926.Source: workhouses.org.uk

The backyard was paved over a recently closed pauper burial ground, as Joseph discovered when he ordered a new laundry to be built. Digging for the foundations revealed many skeletons from the disused graveyard[8]. The original laundry was in a cellar beneath the entrance hall and dining room. Four days a week these rooms would fill with the laundry's steam and odours from the paupers' soiled linen.

Overcrowding

The workhouse system was designed for able-bodied unemployed paupers, with a lesser emphasis on providing an infirmary. But from about 1862-65 poverty and unemployment had rapidly increased in London which put much pressure on the workhouses. As a result, the Cleveland Street workhouse had become mostly a paupers' hospital. At least 90% of the inmates were ill, feeble or pregnant and it was extremely overcrowded - Joseph noted there were never less than 500 inmates sharing around 300 beds the whole time of his employment there. By the 1860s beds were jammed so close together that patients could only exit them at the ends.

The infirmary comprised of separate male and female wards (adults and children), insane wards (which included 'lunatics', epileptics and 'imbeciles' all in together), lying-in wards for pregnant women, and a nursery, described by Joseph as damp and depressing. Here the death of the baby followed by the mother was common. Joseph recorded he dreaded going into the lying-in and nursery wards more than any others. The so-called able-bodied inmates, of whom many were elderly, were jammed in with the ill and disabled.

A Workhouse Dinner 1840 by Hablot Knight Browne aka 'Phiz' - He illustrated many of Dickens's books. Source: Wellcome Collection

Diets

Single women about to give birth were kept on a starvation diet - gruel for 9 days (as a deterrent) until they were transferred to the nursery when the usual workhouse diet would be given. He also discovered that the regular diet was not only monotonous but also inadequate for all inmates and particularly the elderly who often had problems chewing and digesting the coarse food (pea soup, suet pudding and boiled beef). Joseph was able to improve the diet, particularly for the aged inmates[9], but was criticised by the Strand Guardians for making the workhouse too attractive to paupers and therefore causing the overcrowding himself!

Provision of medicines

Workhouse doctors were expected to pay for patients' medicines out of their own salaries (when Joseph started was a meagre £50 annually). One previous doctor's method of providing medicines was to administer different coloured waters to save himself money! After an Inquiry in 1861, to which Joseph gave evidence, the Guardians were directed to provide the more expensive medicines (cod liver oil, quinine etc.) but doctors still had to pay for all other medicines.

'Nursing' and alcohol

The task of administering medical aid by one doctor to 500 patients was overwhelming. However, to assist the doctor there were no paid or trained nurses provided, so pauper inmates were used in this role. A normal practice was to provide alcoholic 'stimulants' to patients in the mornings[10]. Early on Joseph discovered that usually beer, wine or brandy and sometimes gin, was also given to the pauper nurses in the early morning as payment. The nurses were consequently drunk most of the time when performing their duties, if they bothered to perform them at all. Requests to dismiss incompetent nurses were ignored. Many nurses were illiterate and elderly, and some were untrustworthy and stole alcohol from the patients. Some stole milk from patients to sell outside the workhouse. Generally, the nurses ignored directions from the master or matron who were often intimidated by them, and they certainly did not like Joseph directing them.

The begrudging Guardians

Each time Joseph made a request to improve conditions, he was met with hostility and delay by most of the Guardians who in their effort to win favour from the parishioners who elected them, did not want to spend any more money than they thought necessary[11]. However, Joseph was determined to faithfully carry out his duties, and so with dogged persistence, he gradually achieved some important changes for the workhouse patients.

He sought to improve the ventilation of the wards by raising the ceiling heights and even managed to have an extra storey built on one wing and the cellars enlarged to alleviate the constant overcrowding. The Guardians delayed increasing has salary for two years in response to his renovations. But generally, the poor ventilation and dampness of the workhouse was a constant problem that Joseph believed would only be rectified by moving to a completely new purpose-built infirmary. This wouldn't happen for many years.

Against often fierce opposition from the miserly Guardians, Joseph would send severe illness cases to more appropriate facilities, for example a lunatic asylum or a 'voluntary' hospital. This would incur costs to the Guardians who on one occasion suggested deducting the cab fare from Joseph's pay for transporting the patient. They granted him a short leave in 1857 to sit for his MD examination at St Andrews University in Scotland and then on his return accused him of neglecting his duties! Amazingly however, over his 12 years at the Strand workhouse Joseph was gradually able to have his salary increased to £75 then £100. This greatly helped him provide adequate medicines for his patients, and enabled him to pay for his own medical assistant.

Inquiry into the Strand Workhouse

In 1865 *The Lancet*, the journal (still in existence today) representing the medical profession, led by Dr Francis Anstie, commissioned a report on the metropolitan workhouse infirmaries. The report was published over many months in the newspapers and brought the conditions of workhouses to the attention of the public and most importantly to the Poor Law Board itself. Substandard workhouse conditions had been the subject of complaints and half-hearted enquiries before, but *The Lancet's* findings were so alarming that the Board was forced to conduct an immediate inquiry. *The Lancet's* report on the Strand workhouse was particularly damming and exposed how the Guardians' obstructed any improvements that Joseph had attempted. This made Joseph even more unpopular with his employers.

Workhouse Infirmaries Association

In December that year Joseph gave a dinner party at his Dean Street home to honour the work of Dr Anstie, *The Lancet* Commissioner, and to bring together likeminded medical officers and others concerned with public health. This meeting led to the forming of the Workhouse Infirmaries Association in March the following year. They aimed to not only improve infirmary conditions, but also to promote separating infirmaries from workhouses. The workhouse had become a hospital by default but was not administered as a hospital. Their recommendations included new buildings with proper ventilation, qualified nurses, resident doctors, a standard diet across all infirmaries, and medicines and specialised equipment paid for out of the

rates. Also joining the association were Florence Nightingale (who was leading nursing reform), Charles Dickens, and also importantly, Louisa Twining.

Louisa Twining and Matilda Beeton

Distant cousin Louisa Twining who started the Workhouse Visiting Society. Photo: Dawsons. Source: *Recollections of Life and Work being the Autobiography of Louisa Twining* 1893

Louisa Twining (1820-1912), a member of the well-known tea merchant family, became aware of the neglectful conditions at the Strand workhouse when visiting a friend there. She had to seek special permission to visit from the reluctant Guardians. She was so appalled by the miserable environment and the demeanour of the paupers that she decided to create the Workhouse Visiting Society to provide for inmates' comfort and some relief from the degrading atmosphere. The Society's members, usually other wealthy and influential women, would read to the inmates, teach reading and sewing, bring fresh flowers, decorate the walls with pictures and help inmates with prayer if needed.

Like Joseph, Louisa was a determined and tireless campaigner for justice for the poor. Probably unbeknown to both of them, they were distantly related, albeit as fifth cousins, descendants from the Vining family. Joseph had long been agitating for trained nurses to be employed in the workhouse, but was constantly ignored by the Guardians. In 1865 he was finally allowed to employ the Strand's first paid nurse, Matilda Beeton. He attributed this achievement to the work of Louisa and the evidence she gave to the House of Commons Select Committee Inquiry of 1861 as well as *The Lancet's* report. Louisa, along with Florence Nightingale were the leading agitators for public nursing reform. In 1879 Louisa set up the Workhouse Infirmary Nursing Association[12].

The Poor Law Medical Officers' Association (PLMOA)

Shamed into action, the Poor Law Board set up an Inquiry in 1866. To begin, they sent a questionnaire to individual workhouse medical officers, but so to ensure a united front, Joseph convened a meeting at the *Freemasons Tavern* in Great Queen Street to create an Association of Metropolitan Workhouse Medical Officers and was elected their first president. By 1867 this organisation had grown to encompass provincial associations and was now the Poor Law Medical Officers' Association (PLMOA). It focused on exposing the maladministration by the Poor Law Board and Boards of Guardians and proposed the necessary reforms.

The Freemason's Tavern watercolour by John Nixon c1800. Source: Wikipedia

At the 1866 Inquiry, Matilda Beeton's frank and fearless testimony about infirmary conditions, supported by Joseph's testimony, was reported in detail in the newspapers and helped gain much public support, something earlier medical associations were unable to achieve. In 1867 the agitation of the Workhouse Infirmaries Association and the PLMOA, led by Joseph, brought about the Metropolitan Poor Law Act, the beginning of several years of gradual reforms, one of the first being the building of new hospitals and asylums independent of workhouses. Other important reforms such as providing dispensaries, the cost of all medicines and appliances to be met by the Guardians, the reorganisation of Poor Law funding, as well as greater power for the Poor Law Board to sack and replace Guardians, were to take much longer to put into practice. One reform Joseph did not succeed in having included in the Bill was the use of workhouse infirmaries for training medical students. This proposal was met with resistance from doctors at the general hospitals, who did not want to lose their control over medical training.

Joseph gets the sack

By early 1868 Joseph was regarded as more than a nuisance by the Guardians. He had continuously exposed to the public the ineptitude and abuses of the Strand Board and showed that he could not be intimidated by them. After a vote by a slim majority, the Guardians and the Poor Law Board finally suspended him, not because he had failed in his duties but, they declared, it was because he could not get along with the Guardians!

From *The Standard* of March 9th 1868:

'Whilst compelled to admit that they could not impeach his zeal and ability in the performance of his professional duties, they assert that for a long period he had placed himself in a position of antagonism to the Guardians, and had not evinced towards them that deference and courtesy they were entitled to expect from their officers.'

and from the *Durham County Advertiser* April 24th 1868:

'The Guardians of the Strand Union have been kicking Dr Rogers for a serious [*sic*] of years, getting, it must be confessed, some tolerably vigorous returns of the compliment, and finally, with the help of the Poor Law Board, have kicked him out....'

Joseph had a great amount of public and professional support and wanted an inquiry to answer his critics, but the Poor Law Board refused. At this time the Poor Law Unions were being reorganised and the Strand Union and their Guardians were to be broken up to reform into new unions. In creating a new Board of Guardians, the parishioners of St Anne's voted out all the Guardians who had sacked Joseph.

Keeping up the pressure

Anyone else may have left quietly and retreated into a quieter life of private practice. Joseph's health was constantly weakened by bronchial and heart ailments, and there were more deaths in the family: two sisters, Louisa and Elizabeth, and another brother, William. But the reforms Joseph and others had sought through the 1867 Act were only beginning and he was critical of the way the reforms were being carried out. For example, he said hospital architects, surveyors and builders were gobbling up money meant for the poor. Constantly in the ear of Members of Parliament, writing letters and giving public addresses, he continued to campaign for the appropriate changes and to try to prevent reforms being put on the back-burner. In the next few years he travelled to many parts of Britain to connect with other Poor Law doctors and collect information to keep pressure on the reform progress. He made several trips to Ireland to observe their Poor Relief system and was particularly impressed with their provision of medical dispensaries - something the Workhouse Infirmaries Association had advocated in England. He could prove through statistical analysis that where the poor relief medical system was properly administered, pauperism decreased and therefore the cost to ratepayers was reduced.

The Westminster Union

In 1872 Joseph successfully competed for the position of Medical Officer for the Westminster Union workhouse in Poland Street Soho, but he found that not much had changed since the 1867 Metropolitan Poor Law Act. Fake 'medicines' were being given to patients, poor nursing and drunkenness of inmates were evident, there were abuses over diets, and sanitation was lacking. He had little respect for the workhouse inspectors who overlooked this. Joseph had to start from scratch again, supplying proper medicines, designing appropriate diets, introducing bed pulleys, ordering shawls and jackets for the aged and generally ensuring the infirmary was clean and hygienic and the inmates given some dignity.

But the same old problems with obstructionist Guardians reoccurred. He was again reprimanded for sending patients to specialist facilities, and had great difficulty dismissing incompetent 'nurses'. However, the final straw for the Guardians was in 1883 during an inquiry into the master of this workhouse, Mr John Bliss, when Joseph and others gave evidence. Incredibly, testimony as to Bliss's corrupt, cruel and abusive behaviour towards inmates and towards Joseph, was dismissed by the Local Government Board (this replaced the Poor Law Board in 1871) and Joseph was suspended for the second time in his career. This time the Board said he had interfered in the workhouse master's job! But after much protest from the public and his colleagues, the Board reinstated Joseph within the year. While he was under

suspension the Medical Society of London planned a testimonial for Joseph and his wife and in the following June, they presented him with £150, a portrait photograph and a 'presentation of plate' at the Medical Society's Rooms in Chandos Street.

Eventide – A Scene at the Westminster Union. 1878 Oil painting by Hubert von Herkomer. An idealized view, or was it painted after Joseph's improvements? Collection Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Source: Google Art Project

Stimulants in the workhouse

The suspension didn't seem to bother Joseph, who had his eye firmly on ridding the infirmaries of poor practice. Whilst his suspension was hanging over his head, he mounted an attack on the use of alcoholic stimulants in workhouse infirmaries by stating that he would no longer be certifying the supply of alcohol to able-bodied pauper helpers (now 120 of them at Poland Street) as 'payment' for work, and that he would strictly follow the Local Government Board's regulations that 'beer and stimulants should only be given on special grounds'. He noted how alcoholism was one of the causes of pauperism in the metropolis and drunken behaviour from some inmates caused much distress for other inmates. Some Guardians objected and said his proposal would cause a revolt from the inmates. However, they had to agree with Joseph on this one.

Battling for the profession

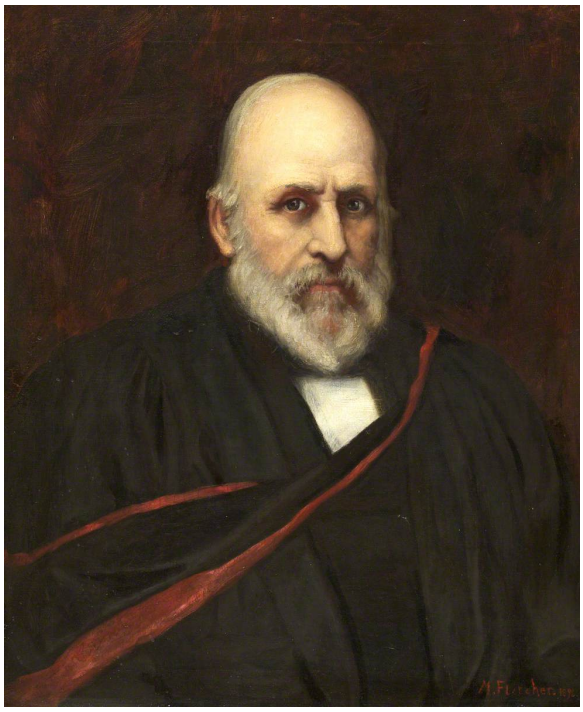
Joseph had no time for reactionary Guardians, careless Poor Law Inspectors nor weak Local Government Board members. None were medically trained and there were so few inspectors across the country that they were totally ineffective. He believed that the whole administration of public health and the Poor Law needed to be controlled by a central authority and have medical officers in positions of key responsibilities, such as inspectors and Chief Health Officer roles. To address this back in 1870, the PLMOA submitted a list of nine proposals partly suggesting greater public health roles for their members. These were incorporated into the Public Health Act of 1872 which allowed Poor Law Medical Officers more public health involvement

(e.g. vaccinators, disease registrars, preventative duties etc.) but were added to their Poor Law Infirmary duties. How effective could the Medical Officers be if they were still primarily responsible for reporting to the local Board of Guardians, some of whom were the landowners of unsanitary slums or polluting factories causing poor public health?

Not wanting to enshrine excessive work into the legislation, the PLMOA decided to withdraw most of the nine proposals before the enactment of the Public Health Bill of 1875. However, many of these extra public responsibilities continued to be carried out unofficially by Medical Officers. Joseph decided therefore to argue for improving employment conditions including pushing for salary increases and compulsory superannuation. (He had been a driving force behind the Medical Officers' Superannuation Bill of 1870 but it was not made compulsory).

Chaos .....

In 1876, he travelled around the country collecting statistics and reports from fellow Medical Officers on their working conditions and local Poor Law administration. In August that year he gave a speech at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association at Sheffield, entitled *Chaos - as Exemplified in Central and Local Sanitary Administration*. In it he described with evidence from his research, the muddled and inconsistent system of Poor Law and public health administration across England and Wales. He deplored the fact that the reforms as outlined in the Health Acts were being applied inconsistently across the country and Medical Officers' employment conditions were left to the arbitrary discretion of their local Boards of Guardians.



Joseph's brother *James Edwin Thorold Rogers (1823–1890), Drummond Professor of Political Economy, MP for Southwark* 1891 oil painting by Margaret Fletcher. Collection of Worcester College, University of Oxford. Source: artuk.org.

In 1880 Joseph asked his brother Thorold (who was then MP for Southwark) to gather statistics on how many Poor Law Unions had granted superannuation to their Medical Officers. It turned out that only about half the unions did so! With no provision for retirement, and working long hours for low pay, many aged Medical Officers continued working years after they could adequately manage their job, some even dying whilst still employed. It took until 1896 for superannuation for PLMOs to

be made compulsory. Fortunately, when Joseph retired in 1886, he was granted a very generous pension by a favourable Board of Guardians who wanted to show their appreciation - not all the Guardians were his enemy.

Lunacy

Another area where Joseph saw PLMOs undervalued and undermined was in the classification of 'lunatics'. Workhouse infirmaries had provision for Insane wards, but when it was deemed necessary to admit a mentally ill patient to an Asylum for the Insane, because he or she was a danger to other inmates for example, a police magistrate or judge could override the Medical Officer's decision, even though he had no medical qualification nor responsibility towards the patient thereafter. The magistrate could also have another doctor reclassify a patient based on only one examination. In 1885 Joseph protested about the misclassification of the mentally ill, noting that such a patient may not behave the same way every day and therefore could not be judged on the basis of one examination. Only the workhouse doctor could reasonably judge the patient's condition and if the patient could be satisfactorily accommodated in their workhouse. Changes to the classification process for psychiatric pauper patients would not come in Joseph's lifetime.

Grim and temperamental

The 1871 census shows he and Ellen were still living at 33 Dean Street in Soho with three servants, a medical student and his 15-year old grandniece Emma Cooper, the granddaughter of his late brother John. His nephew Bertram Rogers (son of his brother Thorold) wrote in his memoirs that he and his elder brother Henry, when pupils at the Westminster School, visited Joseph on a Sunday:

'The house was in a most unsalubrious [*sic*] neighbourhood in fact the street was then little better than a slum full of French booksellers of questionable character. He had a regular chemist shop with a parlour behind in which he practicably lived for the drawing room was a dismal dark place and though well-furnished was uninhabitable ..... I was often taken to visit the place (the workhouse) on my visits to him. He was a grim person of rather quick temper, but must have had a great deal of character to carry out the reforms he did.'[13]

33 Dean Street, Soho. Joseph's home for 30 years. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

Well, his work gave him much to be grim and temperamental about. As to his personal life, his mother died in 1873 in her 90th year in his home town of West Meon, but very tragically in 1876 his nephew Henry, who had visited him with Bertram, committed suicide at the age of 18 whilst at home in Oxford. Joseph's brother Thorold had a great deal of trouble accepting this verdict of his son's death and shock waves must have gone through the whole family.

A second marriage

In 1879 Joseph's first wife Ellen died and he remarried the following year to Anna Maria Adriana Dewindt Mills at Charmouth, West Dorset. This notice appeared in the *Bridport News* 13th February 1880:

We have much pleasure in recording the marriage of Miss Anne Maria Adrienne De Windt Mills, of Charmouth. The wedding, which was of a very quiet character, took place on Thursday morning, the 5th inst., at St. Andrew's Church, Charmouth. At 11.30 the bride, attended by H. E. Norris, Esq., followed by the bridegroom, Joseph Rogers, Esq., M.D., of Soho-square, London, and Mr. Norris, Mrs. J. S. Stewart, Mrs. Tucker, and the youthful Master Stewart, approached the altar from the vestry, Mrs. G. Pavey played Mendelssohn's "O Rest in the Lord." The officiating clergymen were the Rev. F. J. Copeman, of the Castle, Durham, assisted by the Rev. J. S. Stewart, Rector of Charmouth. At the conclusion of the service, Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" was very effectively rendered by Mrs. Pavey.

St Andrew's Charmouth, Dorset, date unknown. Source: Charmouth Local History Society

Bertram recalls meeting Adriana and wrote she was a 'good-hearted eccentric character' and after Joseph died, she was 'adoring the memory of her husband with whom she was always squabbling.'[14]

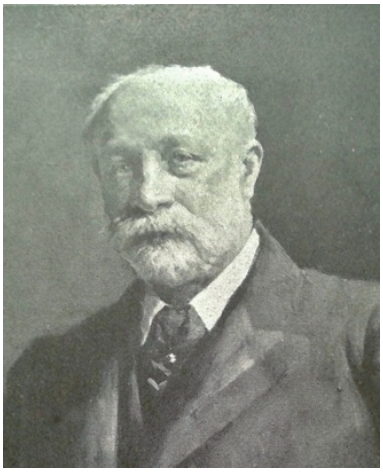
Joseph's temper (or was it just him being forthright?) got him into trouble with the law according to this article that appeared in *Reynold's Newspaper* on Sunday October 24th 1880:

A DOCTOR FINED FOR ABUSIVE LANGUAGE.—Dr. Joseph Rogers, of 33, Dean-street, Soho, was summoned before Mr. Mansfield, at Marlborough-street, on Friday, for using abusive language towards Walter Donovan. Walter Donovan, Horseferry-road, Westminster, stated that he was in employ in Dean-street, Soho, and that on October 15, the defendant, pointing his umbrella down the street, said, "All these men employed at Burroughs and Watts's are blackguards," and then again pointing his umbrella said, "Look at them, they are all scoundrels." He told the defendant that he had no occasion to use such words, and the defendant said he would find a means of reaching them. He had seen the defendant since walking in a very excited manner. At the time he (complainant) apprehended violence, as the defendant was in possession of a large umbrella. Other evidence having been heard, a solicitor who appeared for Dr. Rogers said that in consequence of steps he had taken to abate certain nuisances he had been made a mark, and but for the fact that a steam whistle had been stopped the present proceedings would not have been taken. The defendant was fined 5s., and told that if he had been abused by Donovan he should have summoned him.

(Burroughs and Watts were billiard table manufacturers)

Kindness and entertainment

But there is another side to Joseph's character. His *Reminiscences* reveal how observant he was, taking a keen interest in his patients' lives. He recalls various individuals' stories, how they came to be in the workhouse and, if he was able to find out, what happened to them afterwards. There are instances of him 'crowd-funding' in the local papers to help a patient[15]. When requested by the workhouse chaplain at Poland Street, Joseph gave up his own time on several occasions to entertain the inmates with music and recitations, helped by his nephew Julian Rogers[16], Julian's wife Marguerite, and other vocalists they would bring along. Even some Board members and local residents came to listen. Joseph would also provide some lectures on biology, such as 'The Ear and Hearing' and 'Sight and the Eye' complete with diagrams he made himself. One time he included a joke about the albino Chancellor of the Exchequer who wanted to put a tax on matches (albinos being sensitive to light). It 'was followed by a positive scream of delight from visitors and inmates'[17], according to Joseph.



Julian Clarke Rogers (1840-1917), Joseph's nephew. Source: Kathy Johnston

Eradicating fever in union schools

Due to his thoroughness and attention to detail, Joseph was able to improve the health of children at local Poor Law Union schools and refuges such as Newport Market in the 1860s or Wandsworth Common in the 1880s. Rather than just accepting fever outbreaks amongst the children as inevitable, as previous Medical Officers had, he sought to ascertain the causes of the diseases. At Wandsworth, by climbing onto the roof to check the contents of a cistern to discover the cause of the infections, or at Newport by helping establish an hygienic and sanitary environment, making improvements to the diet and advising on physical exercise for the children, he was able to eradicate fever and disease (including serious cases of opthalmia at Wandsworth) even though these schools were situated in unsanitary suburbs.

Inquests and post-mortems

Throughout the 1860s, '70s and early '80s Joseph also had the role of conducting post-mortems and giving his evidence at inquiries and murder trials. There were many tragic cases of severe infant and child neglect, involving child abuse, or diseases such as whooping cough, bronchitis or measles, also sometimes the result of neglect. Parents charged in the courts were often single women, usually alcoholics. There were several murder trials in which Joseph had to testify to either the cause of death of the victim or the accused's state of mind. Another involved a post-mortem on a man who died of starvation. I can excuse Joseph's 'grimness'.

Retirement and illness

By 1880 Joseph and Adriana had moved to 33 Soho Square, maybe a more upmarket address. The census of 1881 shows they were 60 and 43 years old respectively and also there were Joseph's assistant, William Pardoe, a registered chemist, and three servants. A couple of years later they moved to 31 Montague Place, Russell Square[18] described by his nephew Bertram Rogers as a 'very fine old-fashioned house'. Bertram stayed there for a few weeks when beginning his medical studies.[19]

33 Soho Square, Joseph's address in 1881. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

By this time, after over 30 years of hard challenging work and increasingly poor health, Joseph realised he had to retire. Perhaps the death of another brother, Dr Francis (Frank) Slaughter Rogers, in August 1886, was a warning. Frank, a tireless worker, had carried on the medical practice of their father at West Meon and he died at the age of 75 years in the family home *The Cedars* after suffering from dementia for two years. Joseph formerly

retired on September 26th 1886, and as mentioned before, he was granted a generous well-deserved pension.

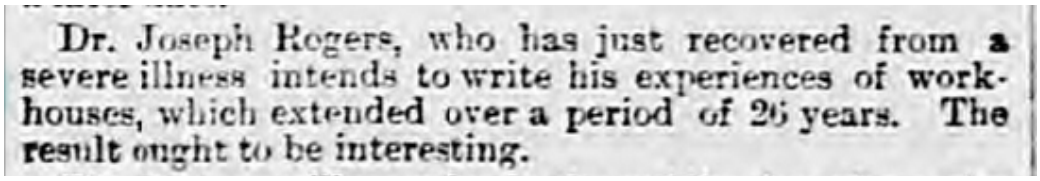
Bertram writes of his uncle at this time:

'He was then more or less of an invalid, his heart was very bad, and dropsy had appeared. It was a very depressing household, he was always ill, always melancholy and asking one for an opinion of his own condition.'[20]

His treatment was described in his obituary in the *British Medical Journal*:

'But, like so many of our noblest workers, he had suffered long from heart disease, associated with chronic bronchitis, and on December 5th, 1886, the right pleura being full of fluid, it was decided to tap the chest. Two days later this was done, and three pints of serum were withdrawn. But it collected again, and the day before Christmas Day four pints were taken away, leaving him very prostrate. But he rallied and three weeks later having had no fresh effusion, he was well enough to write a short letter.'[21]

When he was able, he took a short holiday to the coast in Kent where he proposed to write his *Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer*. Perhaps it was to Herne Bay or Whitstable, as in the *Whitstable and Herne Bay Herald* of October 22nd 1887 this brief note appeared:



Dr. Joseph Rogers, who has just recovered from a severe illness intends to write his experiences of workhouses, which extended over a period of 26 years. The result ought to be interesting.

..... and it was!

Herne Bay, Kent, South Parade, the likely place where Joseph holidayed in 1887. Source: oldukphotos.com

Whilst he was away, a new home was being set up for him in Hampstead, for better air - *Guyon House* in Heath Street, his final address.

The *BMJ* obituary continues:

'There, in patient suffering he awaited the end. On the morning of Wednesday, April 3rd, his mind unclouded, his thoughts still active about his life's work, but never unmindful of his friends, he passed away.'[22]

Guyon House, Heath Street, Hampstead, Joseph's final home. Photo: 2011 Source: Wikimedia Commons

The *Reminiscences* was edited and published by his brother Thorold, not long after Joseph's death in 1889. It was a direct 'no holds barred' account of his battles and his achievements. In it he acknowledged the support he received from other Medical Officers, health officials and Members of Parliament, and also paid tribute to women like Matilda Beeton, Louisa Twining, Augusta Clifford, Lady and Miss Louisa Alderson and others who worked hard to bring about health reform in the workhouses. Through their support, the PLMOA and their allies at *The Lancet,* he was able to achieve improved conditions for his colleagues as well as improved care for the poor. In addition to his advocacy for his profession, Joseph was always ready to speak up for a fellow Medical Officer who was unjustly treated and he would appear at inquiries and trials to give testimony to colleagues' professional ability and good character[23].

Thorold wrote the preface to the *Reminiscences* and concluded:

'.... my brother's life was one of incessant devotion to a noble object. They for whom he laboured were the poor and helpless who could make him no recompense..... he was met by obstacles which would have daunted a less resolute man but he was sustained by the rectitude of his aims and by a firm belief in their wisdom..... Thousands of our fellow countrymen have been saved from suffering and misery by the life work of Joseph Rogers.'[24]

In his Will he left a legacy of £150 for a Rogers Essay Prize to be invested to provide an award given by the Trustees, the Royal College of Physicians and the Society of the Apothecaries of London to the best essay on the treatment of the sick poor.

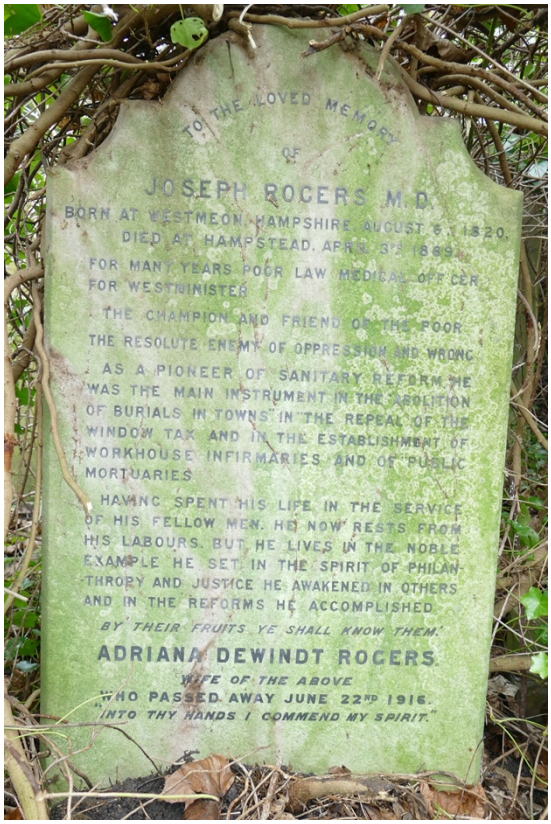
Discovery at the cemetery

Back in 2018 my partner and I decided to locate, not for the first time, Joseph's grave at Hampstead Cemetery (in Section J4 No.134 Interment no. 3861). This time I had a map and so was quite hopeful of success. We had the right area but unfortunately the graves and pathways were so covered in brambles and vines that we had almost given up hope. Just as we were about to turn away and stumble back, the distinctive name 'Dewindt' caught my eye peeping out on a headstone through the thick tangles of ivy. I then remembered that was part of the name of Joseph's second wife. Suddenly reinvigorated, we carefully worked our way towards the stone lettering stepping over broken graves and thick springy vine branches. Sure enough here was Joseph and Adriana's grave! Armed with only my partner's Swiss Army knife, we

hacked away at the vines (not easy, some were quite thick) to reveal this amazing and justly deserved tribute to Joseph - an essay on a tombstone:

'TO THE LOVED MEMORY
OF
JOSEPH ROGERS M.D.
BORN AT WESTMEON HAMPSHIRE AUGUST 6TH 1820
DIED AT HAMPSTEAD APRIL 3RD 1889
FOR MANY YEARS POOR LAW MEDICAL OFFICER
FOR WESTMINSTER
THE CHAMPION AND FRIEND OF THE POOR
THE RESOLUTE ENEMY OF OPPRESSION AND WRONG
AS A PIONEER OF SANITARY REFORM HE
WAS THE MAIN INSTRUMENT IN THE ABOLITION
OF BURIALS IN TOWNS IN THE REPEAL OF THE
WINDOW TAX AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
WORKHOUSE INFIRMARIES AND OF PUBLIC
MORTUARIES
HAVING SPENT HIS LIFE IN THE SERVICE
OF HIS FELLOW MEN HE NOW RESTS FROM
HIS LABOURS BUT HE LIVES IN THE NOBLE
EXAMPLE HE SET IN THE SPIRIT OF PHILAN-
THROPY AND JUSTICE HE AWAKENED IN OTHERS
AND IN THE REFORMS HE ACCOMPLISHED
BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM

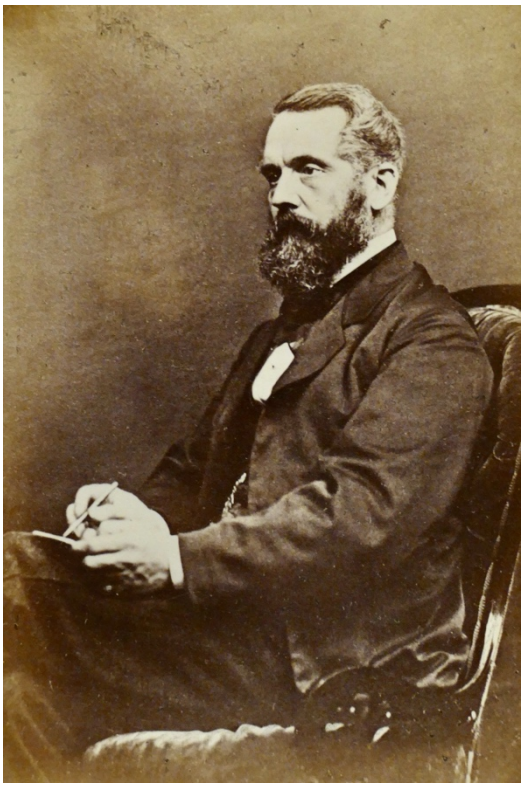
ADRIANA DEWINDT ROGERS
WIFE OF THE ABOVE
WHO PASSED AWAY JUNE 22ND 1916
"INTO THEY HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT"



Left: Joseph Rogers' tombstone at Hampstead Cemetery.

Below: Joseph's tombstone at the back after the vines had been removed.

Photos: Euan McGillivray 2018



Left: Joseph in later life. May be the portrait presented to him by the PLMOA in 1884. Photo: J Hubbard, Oxford Street London. Source: The Family papers of J.E.T. Rogers

Below: Blue Plaque at 33 Dean Street Soho. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

Ann Hurley

2020

hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au

Notes

[1] Rogers, Joseph - *Joseph Rogers. M.D.: Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer* (1889) p288

[2] Reported in *The Daily News*, Nov. 16 1847

[3] Ruth Richardson, Brian Hurwitz - *Joseph Rogers and the reform of workhouse medicine* BMJ 16/12/1989

[4] '*Removal of Oppressive Burdens on the Dwellings of the Poor' - The Poor Man's Guardian Society* publication 1847

[5] Today this building has a 'blue plaque' commemorating Joseph's work. The 1851 census shows Joseph at 33a but could be an error as a medical directory of 1850 records him at 33, where he was for many years. Also, from 1851 Joseph was the ratepayer for No.33. From 1813-1849 33 and 33A were together as Walker's Hotel. English Heritage gives the building a Grade II classification

[6] Catch was able to secure two further positions at other workhouses but he was dismissed after a proven case of neglect causing a woman's death thanks to Joseph and others testimony. Catch later committed suicide.

[7] The building has a Grade II listing from English Heritage and state: 'Historic interest: for associations with renowned figures in mid-C19 workhouse reform, most notably Dr Joseph Rogers, whose direct experience here as Chief Medical Officer launched him into the vanguard of the movement to reform Poor Law healthcare provision, a significant step towards the socialisation of medical care in Britain.' It is also believed this workhouse may have been one of Dickens's main inspirations for 'Oliver Twist' as the young Dickens lived in this street when his family first came to London and would have been familiar with it. From 2011 Save the Cleveland Street Workhouse Campaign was launched to prevent the workhouse from demolition. The campaign was partially successful and much of the building has been incorporated into a development including residential, affordable housing, commercial and new public spaces.

[8] including the murder victim known as the 'Italian Boy'.

[9] Potatoes, rice, beef soup, beef or mutton, bread and tea (aged diet).

[10] 'Medicinal' alcohol was often given in the form of brandy, rum, wine, porter or beer.

[11] The workhouse was funded partly out of the poor rates charged to the local parishioners.

[12] Pauper nursing was not completely eradicated until 1897. Louisa was also the author of at least 13 books on topics including workhouse management, nursing, the Poor Law, and interpreting medieval Christian symbols

[13] Notes by Bertram M. H. Rogers - *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers* (Bodleian Library Oxford)

[14] Notes by Bertram M. H. Rogers - *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers* (Bodleian Library Oxford)

[15] Fundraised for burial of Frenchman who died in the workhouse: Dr Edmund Gaudin in 1879.

[16] Julian Rogers, youngest son of George Vining Rogers jnr. had trained at Winchester Cathedral Boys' Choir.

[17] Rogers, Joseph - *Joseph Rogers. M.D.: Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer* (1889) p129

[18] As is shown in a Medical Directory of 1885. This building pulled down in the 20th century for the British Museum extensions.

[19] Notes by Bertram M. H. Rogers - *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers* (Bodleian Library Oxford)

[20] Notes by Bertram M. H. Rogers - *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers* (Bodleian Library Oxford)

[21] BMJ April 13 1889

[22] BMJ April 13 1889

[23] Some examples are colleagues Mr Adams in 1863, Mr Millerchip in 1879 and Dr Farr in 1880

[24] James E Thorold Rogers preface p xxv - Rogers, Joseph - *Joseph Rogers. M.D.: Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer* (1889)

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