

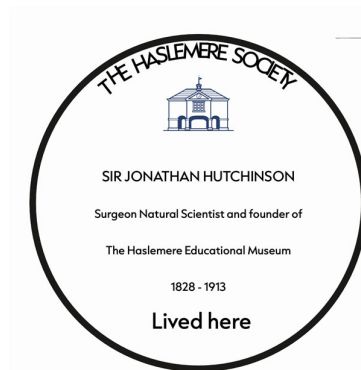


## **Sir Jonathan Hutchinson F.R.S.**

**Surgeon, Natural Scientist, and founder of The Haslemere  
Educational Museum**

**Blue Plaque at Inval House**

By Kind permission of Steven & Victoria Vaughan, Andrew and Jane Clayton



## Introduction

Jonathan Hutchinson was a prominent 19th-century figure whose work advanced understanding across many branches of medicine. He was deeply committed to helping the poorest in society and to spreading the ideals of a Christian scientific education through lectures and the creation of museums in Haslemere and Selby.

His contribution to Haslemere's culture and streetscape was profound. In addition to founding the museum, he purchased extensive local land—both to protect the setting of his home and for future development. The architectural style of his son, Herbert, remains a defining feature of Haslemere.

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## Family roots and early life

Originally from Lincolnshire, the Hutchinson family traces its Quaker roots to the time of George Fox in the 1650s. In 1811, Jonathan's father moved to live with relatives in Selby, Yorkshire, after the early death of his mother. As an adult he became a middleman in the flax trade and a devout member of the local Quaker community.

Jonathan was born in 1828, the second of twelve children, and grew up in Selby. The family home, shown below, still stands and is currently used as a reception area by a food manufacturer.



Educated first by female relatives and later at a local school, Jonathan grew into an austere yet confident young man. Following Quaker social norms, he spoke at temperance rallies and taught Sunday school. His beliefs led him early to consider missionary work, which brought him into conflict with his father, who preferred that he join the family business. Nevertheless, at the age of 17 he was allowed to study medicine, which his father judged a valuable asset for any missionary.

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## Early medical life

In January 1845, Jonathan was apprenticed to Caleb Williams of York to learn “the art, profession and mystery of a surgeon and apothecary.” Williams, also a Quaker, ran a large practice in York. Jonathan attended lectures at the York School of Medicine and undertook clinical work at York County Hospital.

That same year he travelled to London to study at St Bartholomew’s Medical School under James Paget, soon to be Surgeon Extraordinary to Queen Victoria. He became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and gained other qualifications. His experience broadened rapidly. From 1853 he wrote weekly hospital reports for the *Medical Times and Gazette*. He was appointed clinical assistant to the Liverpool Street Chest Hospital and assistant surgeon to the Metropolitan Free Hospital, later joining the staffs of the Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital and the Blackfriars Hospital for Skin Diseases. He also held a position at Moorfields Eye Hospital.



*Leaders in Medicine and Surgery by London Stereoscopic & Photographic Company, 1870s. Hutchinson (circled) amongst his medical contemporaries.*  
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

Beyond medicine, Jonathan was a voracious reader. While in York, he read in French, Latin, German and Greek. In London, he maintained his scriptural interests while enjoying “frivolous authors” such as Byron, Tennyson and Shakespeare. Austere in his habits, he tried to economise on his father’s allowance by living on a diet of bread and figs.

When the Crimean War broke out, his pacifist Quaker beliefs meant he declined opportunities to treat battlefield injuries. During this period he established a medical practice in Finsbury Circus. His meticulous note-taking became legendary, and his anatomical drawings were exceptional.

In 1852 he joined the Pathological Society, whose mission was to “understand disease.” Over the next decade he contributed more than seventy articles to its journal. In the ensuing forty years his activity in the medical world was extraordinary. Alongside his general practice, surgical work, drawings and publications, he played

active roles in six prominent academic societies, with interests spanning ophthalmology, neurology, dermatology and surgery.

In 1856, Jonathan married Jane Pynsent West at the Friends Meeting House in Stoke Newington. A fellow Quaker, Jane was a talented painter and musician. The family first lived in Reigate while Jonathan commuted to London, but in 1859, after he gained the post of assistant surgeon at The London Hospital, they moved to Finsbury Circus. He remained in post for 25 years. Their marriage was happy and produced ten children before Jane's untimely death in 1887.



### Pinnacle of his career

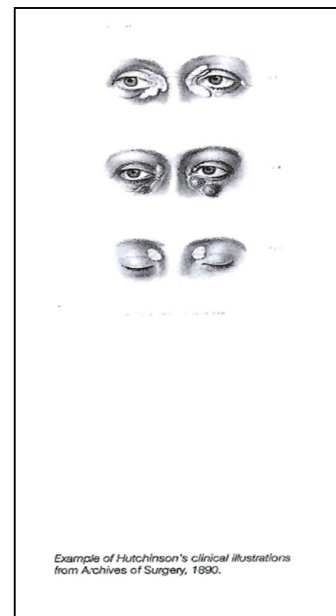
“One of the great  
figureheads of  
Victorian medicine”

*Lancet Magazine*

From 1860, Jonathan's career flourished as he gained senior positions across London. He became a leading authority on ophthalmology, dermatology, neurology and, in particular, syphilis, on which he published his first book. “Hutchinson's triad”—inflammation of the eyes, partial deafness and malformed teeth—remains a key means of recognising congenital syphilis.

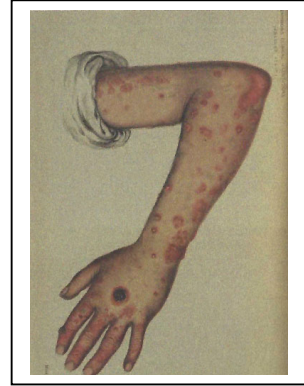


Hutchinson's teeth illustrations: A sign of congenital syphilis. Courtesy of Marquette University School of Dentistry.



His decision to focus on sexually transmitted diseases may have stemmed from missionary work among the poor in East London, inspired by his Quaker ideals.

Over the next quarter-century he became one of London's foremost medical experts. Among his many achievements, he edited the *British Medical Journal*, served as President of the Surgery Section of the BMA, sat on the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons (becoming President in 1889), held the Hunterian Professorship of Surgery and Pathology, served on the Royal Commission on Smallpox and Fever Hospitals in London, and was a member of the Royal Commission on Vaccination. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.



The Hutchinson Triennial Prize Essay was established in his honour. His *Quarterly Archives of Surgery* was widely read by general practitioners, surgeons and physicians. A lifelong collector, in 1889 he donated a large number of books and periodicals to the Medical Graduates' College, which he founded in 1899. There, he and others gave lectures and demonstrations and offered free consultations for impoverished patients. These public sessions were popular and well attended. He also became editor of the College's journal, *The Polyclinic*.

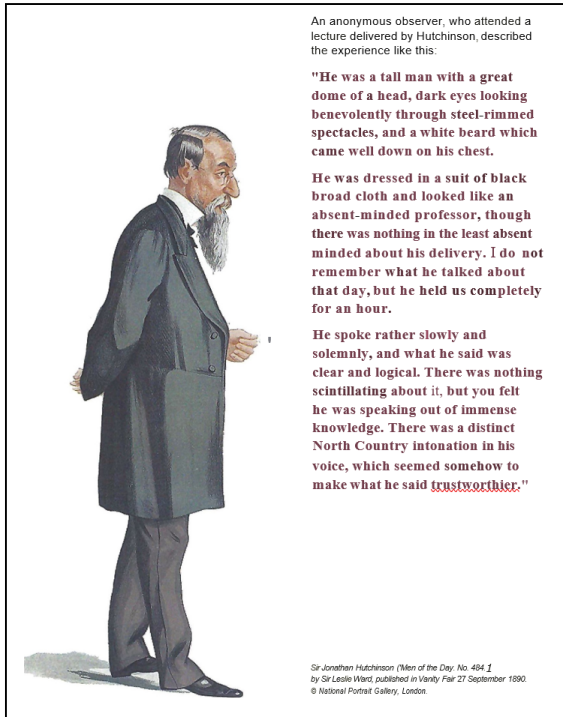
The 1927 *Dictionary of National Biography* described him as “the greatest general practitioner of his time in Europe.” Sir William Osler—often called the “father of modern medicine”—wrote:

“Hutchinson is the only generalised specialist which the profession has produced, and his works a storehouse upon which the surgeon, the physician, the neurologist, the dermatologist and other specialists freely draw.”

## Later life

Although his final years saw a gradual reduction in medical work, Jonathan's interests remained wide-ranging. In 1897 he published *The Centuries*, an ambitious attempt at a universal history from 10,000 BC. Each opening paired a page of facts with a blank page for personal observation.

Equally ambitious, in the same year he published *The Life Register*, a system for recording the minute details of a human life. Parents were encouraged to record a child's early years, after which the individual would maintain monthly entries through adulthood, ending at age seventy—at which point, as Jonathan wrote, “the subject may rest his pen.” It is not known how many people kept the record to the end. The practice of recording life details, of course, continues today in baby books and increasingly via NHS and wellness apps.



An anonymous observer, who attended a lecture delivered by Hutchinson, described the experience like this:

"He was a tall man with a great dome of a head, dark eyes looking benevolently through steel-rimmed spectacles, and a white beard which came well down on his chest.

He was dressed in a suit of black broad cloth and looked like an absent-minded professor, though there was nothing in the least absent minded about his delivery. I do not remember what he talked about that day, but he held us completely for an hour.

He spoke rather slowly and solemnly, and what he said was clear and logical. There was nothing scintillating about it, but you felt he was speaking out of immense knowledge. There was a distinct North Country intonation in his voice, which seemed somehow to make what he said trustworthy."

Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (Men of the Day, No. 494 I  
by Sir Leslie Ward, published in Vanity Fair 27 September 1890.  
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

Jonathan's approach reflected his belief in carefully recording and marshalling well-ascertained facts—linking a scientific mind with the orderliness of Quaker faith. He was knighted in 1908 for distinguished services to medicine, having earlier declined a peerage and reportedly needing persuasion from friends to accept a knighthood. He received honorary degrees from the Universities of Glasgow, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Oxford, Dublin and Leeds.

Jonathan's great strengths were observation and the accumulation and collation of clinical facts. His conclusions, however, were not always correct. He famously argued that

leprosy was caused by eating decaying fish; even after the bacterium responsible was discovered, he did not change his view. His final book in the first decade of the 20th century revisited this theory. Likewise, he believed **alopecia areata**—now known to be an autoimmune condition—was a modified ringworm or a sequela of it. He continued to seek parasitic evidence despite repeatedly negative microscopic examinations.

His last book, published in the first decade of the 20th century was a further attempt to link leprosy to rotting fish. This stubborn adherence to his principles, although valuable in some senses was also a weakness in a discipline where understanding changes with experience.

This adherence to what today seem like somewhat bizarre theories was undoubtedly a recurring problem. Another example of his incorrect conclusions was his belief that alopecia areata -in fact, an auto-immune disease- was a modified ring worm, or at any rate a sequela of that disease. He kept looking for evidence of its parasitic origin, despite the fact that his microscopic examination for fungal products were negative.

It is easy to focus on these superseded conclusions, but Jonathan's contributions to medical thinking were immense. His work on syphilis and several dermatological diseases advanced understanding significantly.

## **Some observations on the man**

Jonathan was often described as prim and humourless. Neither his extensive writings nor accounts from contemporaries suggest much of a sense of humour. His lectures and writings were fascinating, dramatic and informative, but never comic. He did, however, enjoy the unusual and the bizarre.

An anonymous observer who attended one of his lectures wrote:

“He was dressed in a suit of black broadcloth and looked like an absent-minded professor, though there was nothing in the least absent-minded about his delivery. I do not remember what he talked about that day, but he held us completely for an hour. He spoke rather slowly and solemnly, and what he said was clear and logical. There was nothing scintillating about it, but you felt he was speaking from an immense knowledge. There was a distinct North Country intonation in his voice, which seems somehow to make what he said trustworthier.”

Jonathan’s Quaker roots remained central to his worldview. Yet his growing understanding of the natural world—particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution—increasingly conflicted with traditional Quaker doctrine. He coined the term “Terralism” for his belief that those with knowledge had a duty to share it for the betterment of humanity, helping future generations to evolve into more intelligent beings. To conservative Victorian audiences—particularly in Selby—such ideas were controversial. A Selby Times leader remarked:

“When the very foundations of our faith are called into question, a very grave responsibility faces us. We have therefore abstained from noticing Mr Hutchinson’s lectures at length.”

Reactions among the intelligentsia of Hindhead and Haslemere, however, were likely more open-minded.

## **Hutchinson and Haslemere**

The railway line between Haslemere and London Waterloo opened in 1859, giving ready access to the town and its countryside. Over subsequent decades many eminent people built substantial country homes in the area. Among the first was Edward Nettleship—one of Jonathan’s former students and later renowned for work on hereditary eye disorders—whose friendship with Jonathan brought him regularly to Haslemere as a summer guest at Nettleship’s house on the Hindhead Road.

Jonathan rented Weydown Farm for holidays from 1866 before purchasing it in 1872. He quickly extended what is now known to have been a 15th-century open-hall farmhouse, building the substantial Victorian residence called Inval House, named after the area (now demolished). The house served as a summer home, and the family may have visited at other times of year.



By 1872 Jonathan was already a wealthy man, and his inheritance from his father increased his means considerably. Shortly afterwards, he purchased 200 acres around Inval, beginning a notable accumulation of local land, including Half Moon Farm on the hill above the High Street (today the Half Moon Estate), a larger tract near Kingsley Green, and land at Moses Hill. This wealth also enabled the move of the main family home from Finsbury Avenue to Cavendish Square in 1874.

That same year, Jonathan's brother Edward purchased Great Stotley Farm—which included land now known as Stotley Rise—and converted the medieval farmhouse into a fine Victorian residence.

There is evidence that Jane, Jonathan's wife, entertained extensively at Inval while raising their ten children. Sadly, she became ill in 1885 and died in 1887, aged just 52. Needing help with the younger children (the youngest was only twelve), Jonathan invited his widowed sister-in-law, as well as his widowed sister and her children, to live in Haslemere. Over the following years the town became increasingly important to the wider family. With the skills of his architect son, Herbert, Jonathan built four fine houses further up Inval Hill for family use. In retirement he moved to The Library—now known as White Riggs—which Herbert had designed for him.

Meanwhile, Herbert developed the Half Moon Estate—no doubt yielding substantial profits—and accepted many commissions from wealthy incomers elsewhere in



Haslemere. His redesign of the High Street terrace that includes Marley Flowers, and the distinctive Tudor-framed terrace on the right of the Hindhead approach up to the Punchbowl car park, are defining features of Haslemere's townscape. The Heights in Hill Road, sadly now demolished, was typical of Herbert's style.

Today, Sir Jonathan Hutchinson is best remembered in Haslemere as the founder of the Haslemere Educational Museum. The original museum building still stands just up the hill at Inval, on the right beyond what was Weydown Farm. The earliest exhibits focused on botany, geology and social history, later expanding to include an aviary and vivarium, alongside space to display his extensive natural-history collections gathered on travels across Europe and Africa.



*Inside view of the original museum*

He established a groundbreaking role for museums by emphasising education for all. Haslemere Museum was among the first to welcome children. Jonathan encouraged the open display of artefacts, believing that people learn as much through touch as through sight. A visit to the Pathological Museum in Paris convinced him that a well-organised museum is a vital tool for learning, with a teacher at its heart to use objects to stimulate and inspire.

From 1894 he gave weekend lectures and demonstrations to the local community on scientific, literary and religious subjects, typically weaving four topics into a single talk. For example, on 19 August 1894 he covered shells, geological time, historic time and Wordsworth—an unexpected combination that he nonetheless made coherent. According to his son Herbert, these lectures were never written out; only rough notes and newspaper reports survive. Delivered slowly and deliberately, they were widely praised for clarity. The Sunday lectures became so popular that in 1895 the museum moved to larger premises on what is now Museum Hill.

Jonathan's passion for museums as engines of education extended to his endowing a museum at Selby in 1898. Unlike the thriving Haslemere Educational Museum—which in 2025 celebrates the 100th anniversary of its move to its current High Street location—the Selby Museum is no more.

### **Final reflections**

Although much of Hutchinson's work has been superseded—and some ideas ridiculed—he was undoubtedly a towering figure in medicine from about 1860 to 1910. Sir Rickman Godlee, writing an appreciation in 1925, put it perfectly:

“Few have worked so hard and so long in his profession. He had no thought of personal advancement. Whatever cause he believed in he gave unstintingly both time and money.”

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#### References

A recent book on Hutchinson is "Remembering Sir Jonathan Hutchinson" by Nadeem Toodyan, published in Brisbane in 2013. ISBN number 9780987579006

Two other, but detailed articles are:

1. "Sir Jonathan Hutchinson" by Sir Rickman Godlee in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, 1926
2. "Sir Jonathan Hutchinson" by A.E. Wales in the British Journal of Venereal Disease, 1963

Both articles can be found online.

The website of the Haslemere Museum is an excellent resource, and their archivists are always willing to help. They are at [www.haslemere-museum.co.uk](http://www.haslemere-museum.co.uk)

Wikipedia has the usual succinct article with further references.

The work of Inchpunch Design in creating this booklet and Eleanor Cooper and all those behind the Selby Heritage Action Zone in funding it are gratefully acknowledged. Any errors are entirely my responsibility.

David Lewis, Selby, August 2022

All images have been credited where known and any errors or omissions will be corrected in subsequent editions.

*Thanks also to Jane Clayton, Sir Jonathan's Great granddaughter*

