

A Tale of Two Doctors

We are used to GP practices with several doctors and nurses, plus other clinical staff, but it hasn't always been so. Before the advent of the NHS in July 1948 we had "family doctors" and here is the tale of two of them that follow on from each other but also overlap in time. They had several roles as you will see and were clearly busy men. No out of hours on call cover for these two. They truly worked 365 days a year and 24 hours of each of those days.

The two doctors in question are:

- Dr Herbert Skipworth MRCS Eng., LRCP Irel., JP
- Dr James Simpson Strachan MRCS Eng., LRCP Lond.

Dr Herbert Skipworth

Dr Skipworth was born in January 1851 in Glanford Brigg, which is in North Lincolnshire near Scunthorpe and Flixborough. His parents were John and Mary Skipworth. John was a farmer of 520 acres and employed 15 farm hands in 1861.

Herbert was one of 11 children, 6 boys and 5 girls. Herbert started his medical career in the late 1860s and in 1871 he was living in Frodingham near Scunthorpe. He was lodging with Edwin and Ann Witham and, according to census information, he was a surgeon's assistant.¹ By 1881 he was living in Main Street in the South End of Mountsorrel and is now recorded as a physician, surgeon and "accoucheur" (sic). An accoucheur is an early medical term which refers to "A person (originally only a man) who assists a woman in childbirth, esp. one who is trained professionally; a midwife. Cf. man-midwife".²

In the years between the two censuses Herbert had completed his surgical training in 1875 and registered as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons for England (MRCS Eng.) and is noted in his General Medical Register entry for 1876 as living in Howsham, near Brigg in Lincolnshire.³ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was accepted practice to dual train as both a physician and a surgeon which is in contrast to today's medical training where specialisation happens after full registration. He trained as a physician in Dublin and gained his Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP Irel.) and also gained his accoucheur qualification. When he arrived in Mountsorrel his qualifications were Member of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS Eng.), Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP Irel.) and Licence in Midwifery (LM) and these can all be seen in varying combinations within the various trade directories. The full set can be seen in Kelly's Directory of 1895.⁴

¹ All information gleaned from the UK censuses (1841 – 1921) was obtained through Ancestry (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>) accessed at various time between mid-December 2024 and mid-January 2025

² Oxford University Press, Oxford English Dictionary, "accoucheur", 2025

³ All references to entries in the General Medical Register are sourced from the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, *The Medical Register*, 1859 – 1943, accessed via Ancestry between mid-December 2024 and mid-January 2025

⁴ Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland, 1895, pp299-300 (Courtesy of the University of Leicester "Special Collections Online")

In the summer of 1878, he married Florence Hadley of Birmingham in West Bromwich⁵, Florence being the daughter of the surgeon J. J. Hadley MRCS of Handsworth, Birmingham. Their marriage produced three children, three daughters, two of whom survived to adulthood; Annie and Madeline. Herbert and Florence continued living on Main Street (today's Leicester Road) in Mountsorrel up to the early 1920s when they moved to Stoneygate in Leicester.



1901 OS Map extract of Main Street, Mountsorrel. Dr Skipworth's house arrowed.

Dr Skipworth passed away on 22 December 1924 with Florence surviving him by six years, herself dying on 13 May 1930.

After moving to Mountsorrel Dr Skipworth had a varied medical career. He practiced as a physician, surgeon and accoucheur until moving to Stoneygate. When the Mountsorrel Granite Company converted the former schoolhouse into a cottage hospital in 1877 to treat men injured in the quarry, mostly at the behest of Dr Paulson, Dr Strachan's predecessor at Number 4 Loughborough Road, due to the need to transport injured men to the Leicester Infirmary, Dr Skipworth became the surgeon for the hospital and is listed as such in 1891⁷. For undertaking this role he was paid the

⁵ *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 923 (Sep. 7, 1878), pp. 379-380

⁶ Ordnance Survey, *Leicestershire Sheet XXV.NW*, Revised 1901 to 1902 (1904)

⁷ Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland, 1891, pp764-765 (Courtesy of the University of Leicester "Special Collections Online")

princely sum of £25 per year (£2,725 in today's money).⁸ In addition to this he was also the Medical Officer for Health for the Quorn Urban Sanitary District, a role introduced with the Public Health Act, 1875. The role had its roots in the Victorian drive to improve public health through improvements in living conditions. He also held the role of Certifying Factory Surgeon for Mountsorrel. This role was one defined in the Factories Act, 1833, as the person who is responsible for assessing the fitness of workers to undertake roles in factories and also report on factory accidents.

Later in his career he became a Justice of the Peace for the County of Leicestershire. He also worked as an examiner for the St John Ambulance Association.⁹ At the outbreak of the Great War he, along with Dr Strachan, examined new recruits at the Drill Hall in Mountsorrel as to their fitness to serve. The Drill Hall was situated on Loughborough Road and was the recruiting base for elements of the 5th Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment.¹⁰



Mountsorrel Drill Hall today (photo from *The Drill Hall Project* – Credit: GMR)



Mountsorrel Drill Hall, early 20th Century (Credit: MHG, 2025)

From rural Lincolnshire to Mountsorrel via Birmingham and Dublin Dr Skipworth's journey ends in Stoneygate in Leicester in 1924. A brief obituary was published in the Nottingham Evening Post.¹¹ However, Dr and Mrs Skipworth's memory lives on as

⁸ Bank of England, *Inflation Calculator*, 2025 [Accessed 21 January 2025]

⁹ General Medical Register entry, 1925

¹⁰ "Mountsorrel", *The Drill Hall Project*

<https://www.drillhalls.org/Counties/Leicestershire/TownMountsorrel.htm>), [Accessed 22 January 2025]

¹¹ Nottingham Evening Post, *Herbert Skipworth JP*, Obituaries, 23 December 1924

the clock and bell on the side of Church House (the library) facing the Memorial Centre. The cost of the clock and bell were met by the daughters of Dr and Mrs Skipworth in their memory and the hourly chime reminds us of Dr Skipworth's service to the village as his daughters wished.¹² Colloquially, the bell is referred to as "Skippy". The clock can be seen in the image below with the bell situated behind the clock. The bell can be heard clearly within the library.



Church House (the Library) with the clock visible on the front. The bell sits behind and can be heard clearly inside the library. (Credit: John Doyle/MHG, 2024)



The Library Bell ("Skippy"), donated in memory of Dr Skipworth (Credit: John Doyle/MHG, 1998)

¹² Leicester Daily Mercury, *Gift of Public Clock*, 21 April 1936

Dr James Simpson Strachan

Dr Strachan was born in July 1884 in Llanishen, Glamorgan, which is now a suburb of Cardiff south of the M4 motorway. Dr Strachan's parents were John and Catherine Strachan, John being a contractor and employee of men who hailed from Scotland. Some say that Dr Strachan's surname is pronounced "strawn" and, if so, this would reflect his Scottish heritage. James was one of ten children having four sisters and five brothers.

In 1891 and 1901 the census gives him living in Cardiff and is a schoolboy.¹³ In 1911 he is in lodgings in Clerkenwell in London and is listed as a medical student studying at the University of London Medical School. In December 1912 he marries Edith Edmunds in Cardiff and they go on to have three children, Michael, Betty and Tony. Michael followed his father into the medical profession and more of that later. Dr Strachan passed away on 23 February 1940 with Edith outliving him by some 34 years dying in 1974.

Dr Strachan qualified as doctor and was entered on the Medical Register on 11 May 1912. His qualifications were listed as "Mem R Coll Surg Eng., 1912 Lic R Coll Phys Lond., 1912" (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians).¹⁴ As with Dr Skipworth James was dual qualified from the start and lists himself in trade directories as Physician and Surgeon. He took up practice in Mountsorrel on the retirement of Dr Paulson and moved into Number 4 Loughborough Road which also served as his practice until his untimely, early death in 1940 at the age of 55.

Soon after taking on the practice the Great War broke out in August 1914. As with Dr Skipworth, Dr Strachan was involved with vetting recruits at the Drill Hall on Loughborough Road.¹⁵ He himself joined up and was posted as a Lieutenant to the Salonika theatre as part of the Royal Army Medical Corps attached to the Royal Engineers. He was invalided home the following year.¹⁶¹⁷

From his arrival in Mountsorrel Dr Strachan appears in the local Trade Directories with his first entry in 1916 where he is the "Workhouse and District Medical Officer and Public Vaccinator" for the Barrow-on-Soar Union.¹⁸ His roles remain broadly similar in the Trade Directories through to 1936 where he has "Northern Area Guardians Committee" and "surgeon to the Post Office" added.¹⁹ His telephone number throughout was "Rothley 16".

¹³ As with Dr Skipworth, all information gleaned from the UK censuses (1841 – 1921) was obtained through Ancestry (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>) accessed at various time between mid-December 2024 and mid-January 2025

¹⁴ General Medical Register entry, 1912

¹⁵ "Mountsorrel", *The Drill Hall Project*

<https://www.drillhalls.org/Counties/Leicestershire/TownMountsorrel.htm>), [Accessed 22 January 2025]

¹⁶ Loughborough Echo, *Death of Dr J S Strachan: Well known Mountsorrel doctor: Many tributes*, Obituaries, 1 March 1940

¹⁷ Forces War Records, *Strachan, James Simpson*, <https://uk.forceswarrecords.com/search>, [Accessed 23 January 2025]

¹⁸ Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland, 1916, pp589-590 (Courtesy of the University of Leicester "Special Collections Online")

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1936, pp905-907

He was called as a witness to the inquest of a patient who passed away with complications of diabetes mellitus (most likely diabetic ketoacidosis). He had apparently attended the patient and referred them to The Leicester Royal Infirmary who then, following discharge, failed to adhere to her treatment plan and appears to have eaten whatever she wanted. This was before the widespread introduction of insulin so diabetes was largely controlled with diet. The non-compliant patient expired despite the best efforts of all concerned.²⁰



Number 4 Loughborough Road, the home and surgery of Dr Paulson, Dr Strachan and Dr Walton (Credit: Noel Wakeling/MHG, 1969)

In 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War a national register was taken. This gave a snapshot of the population of around 40 million individuals as of 29 September 1939. Dr Strachan is recorded at Number 4 Loughborough Road with his family. Also living at Number 4 was Dr Paul Savage, presumably working with Dr Strachan in his practice.²¹ Dr Savage himself served in North Africa with the Royal Army Medical Corps and was wounded in action in September 1942.

Dr James Strachan sadly passed away at the young age of 55 in early 1940. His son, Dr Michael Strachan qualified and was entered onto the General Medical Register on 3 May 1940. Michael took on the practice from his father with Dr Savage having held the fort in the interim.²² As with his father and Dr Skipworth before him Michael was dual trained from the start. Medical Register entries up to 1943 have Michael resident and practicing in Mountsorrel from Number 4.²³ Michael was superseded by Dr Walton who took on the practice from 1946 until his own retirement in 1979.

Dr Strachan's main obituary was in the Loughborough Echo in March 1940 but obituaries appeared in the Cardiff Western Mail and Leicester Chronicle. Like Dr Skipworth James Strachan is remembered in the village through the naming of a residential street in his honour (Strachan Close).

²⁰ Loughborough Echo, 28 November 1930

²¹ National Register, 29 September 1939, accessed via Ancestry (see note 13)

²² Loughborough Echo, *Death of Dr Strachan*, 1 March 1940

²³ General Medical Register entries, 1941 - 1943

Post script on the title “Doctor”

Use of the phrase “Doctor” by doctors or physicians has changed over time. Prior to the Medical Act, 1858, those obtaining a qualification recognised by one of the certifying bodies (e.g. Royal College of Physicians) could use the title “Doctor” but the above legislation changed this state of affairs so that only those who possessed the “Degree of Doctor of Medicine” could use the title.²⁴ This, excluded Herbert Skipworth and is noted that he is never referred to as “Doctor”. However, in 1905 the Royal College of Surgeons resolved to allow surgeons who passed “the conjoint exams” to be able to refer to themselves as “Doctor”.²⁵ The Royal College of Physicians followed suit in 1912 paving the way for the current system. Herbert Skipworth could, therefore, refer to himself as “Doctor” from 1912 onwards but this is not reflected in the directories. This is why some medical doctors refer to those with a PhD as “real doctors” and why a lot of medical doctors go on to take PhDs validating their medical research.

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²⁴ Legislation.gov.uk, *Medical Act, 1858*, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/21-22/90/enacted> [Accessed 20 January 2025]

²⁵ Rhodes JM. PAUPER NURSES (IRELAND). Br Med J. 1905 Nov 11;2(2341):1320. PMCID: PMC2322613.