

William Henry Thistlethwaite was 32 and he was dying. The doctors had diagnosed inflammation of the bowels. It was incurable, they said, gravely shaking their heads. It would rapidly cause his death.

William Henry didn't want to die. He had a loving wife, two small children, his own Great Ayton grocery business-and the photography he'd come to love once more.

A second opinion was sought, that of Dr John Dixon, a relation of William Henry's wife, Allie. John Dixon gave the stricken young man hope. He explained that in London was a man specialising in the surgical treatment of a newly discovered illness. The man was Mr Frederick Treeves.(sic) The illness was appendicitis. And John Dixon urged William Henry to go for treatment. Without delay, William Henry was prepared for the 180 mile journey to the surgeons knife.

He couldn't leave his bed-so he was carried on his mattress to a carriage waiting outside and the long journey began. Villagers had lain straw beneath the carriage wheels to cushion the sick man from the ruts in the road to the station. A special railway carriage had been set aside for him and was shunted from train to train during the long hours of travel, so he need not be moved again. William Henry must have arrived in London exhausted.

Mr Treeves operated immediately. Then he gave his shattering verdict: It was too late to save William Henry. Peritonitis had already set in. Over the next few weeks, William Henry fought for his life in London.

But one of his last requests was that he wanted to die among his friends and relations. It was granted. There was no more the doctors could do. William Henry was allowed home and a nurse was engaged to care for him. A short time later, Allie herself took over the nursing for what she thought were her husband's last days. A year later her nursing days were over. Somehow, against all the odds, William Henry had pulled through.

About five years later, Frederick Treeves performed the same operation on Edward VII and was knighted. Even then the operation was considered exceptional. In 1895, it was miraculous.

Slowly, William Henry's life returned to normal. He had to remain in a wheelchair for weeks as he mustered his strength. But eventually he got back into the routine of running the grocery and drapery business at Eagle House, serving, ordering new stock, putting up orders for outlying Yorkshire farms and hamlets-and taking photographs.

Extract from 'Evening Gazette' supplement on Great Ayton.

Sir Frederick Treves (1853-1925)

The surgeon who operated on William Henry in 1895 was Frederick Treves. He was born in Dorchester in 1853, the youngest son of an upholsterer and furniture maker. After attending the Merchant Taylors School in London he studied medicine at University College, London and became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1875.

In 1879 he was appointed assistant surgeon at the London Hospital and became demonstrator of anatomy to the Medical School where his teaching attracted many students to his demonstrations. He taught anatomy from 1881-1884 and it was in 1884 that he met Joseph Merrick who became known as the 'Elephant Man' (about whom a film was made featuring Anthony Hopkins as Treves and John Hurt as Merrick in 1980). Treves rescued Merrick and provided a home for him in the attic of the London Hospital until his death in 1890.

Treves was the author of many surgical textbooks and was one of the first surgeons to devote special attention to diseases of the appendix. He advanced English surgery by advocating the operative treatment for appendicitis.

In 1901 he was appointed surgeon extraordinary to Queen Victoria and made CB and KCVO in 1901. In the summer of 1902 Treves became world famous when on the 24 June, two days before his coronation, King Edward VII became acutely ill with appendicitis. Treves operated and the king made a good recovery and was crowned on August 9th. Treves was created baronet that year.

He retired from professional work in 1908 but busied himself as advisor to a number of medical organisations. He

also served as an examiner in anatomy and surgery to the Royal College of Surgeons and at Durham, Aberdeen and Cambridge universities. After serving as President of the Medical Board at the War Office during the First World War he was obliged to live abroad on account of his health

Treves died in December 1923 at his home in Vevey, Switzerland after a short illness. Ironically he died of peritonitis, the very disease in which he was the expert. His funeral service was arranged by his lifelong friend, author and poet, Thomas Hardy and his ashes were buried in Dorchester.

Source; Royal College of Physicians