

Professor John Goodsir, 20.03.1814 – 06.03.1867



John Goodsir was the eldest of five sons and one daughter born to Dr John Goodsir, medical practitioner of Anstruther, and his wife Elizabeth Dunbar Taylor. His grandfather was Dr John Goodsir of Largo. The family lived in the Hermitage, next to Melville Manse.

John Goodsir attended school in Anstruther where he developed an interest in natural history. From the age of twelve, he studied the arts curriculum at St Andrews University. In 1830, he continued his studies at the University of Edinburgh and was apprenticed to John Naysmith, a well-known Edinburgh dental surgeon. During this time he acquired a medical education by attending University lectures and with individual tuition from teachers such as Robert Knox and surgeon James Syme. As a youth, Goodsir demonstrated an aptitude for anatomical research.

He began studying at The Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh and obtained a license in 1835. Goodsir returned to Anstruther to assist his father in a general medical practice. During this period, he collected and prepared a pathological museum of specimens "of great extent and value to the field of anatomy".

In 1839, Goodsir published his first essay in the Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal, on "The Origin and Development of the Pulps and Sacs of the Human Teeth". The work received international recognition and established his scientific reputation.

In 1841, John Goodsir was appointed Conservator to the Royal College of Surgeons and returned to Edinburgh where he lived with his younger brothers Joseph, Henry (Harry) and Robert. Harry and Robert were also doctors, Joseph was a clergyman. During his time at the Royal College, Goodsir introduced improved methods for cataloging specimens, gave popular lectures featuring the College's specimens and made plaster casts of some of his dissections.

John Goodsir resigned as conservator and his younger brother Harry was appointed to the post some months later, in October 1843. In 1845, Harry accompanied Captain Sir John Franklin as assistant surgeon and naturalist on his expedition to the Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage. There he perished, along with all those aboard the ships 'Erebus' and 'Terror'.

John Goodsir lectured on his knowledge about the cell. He advanced new concepts in the field of cytology based on his own microscopic observations. The lectures were published in 1845. Appointed as Professor of Anatomy in 1846, John Goodsir restored Edinburgh's reputation as a centre of anatomical teaching and research. He was made Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1848.

Around 1854, Goodsir's health began to deteriorate, he developed a wasting condition of the spine which eventually led to paralysis of the lower limbs. He continued lecturing until 1866 and died at Wardie, Edinburgh on March 6th, 1867. Professor John Goodsir is buried in the Dean Cemetery, Edinburgh, alongside his friend the naturalist, Edward Forbes.