

Robert Liston's surgery before anaesthetic

Robert Liston (1794–1847) was a Scottish surgeon. He was famous for the speed at which he performed his surgeries before anaesthetic was used. This is a fictional account of one of his operations.

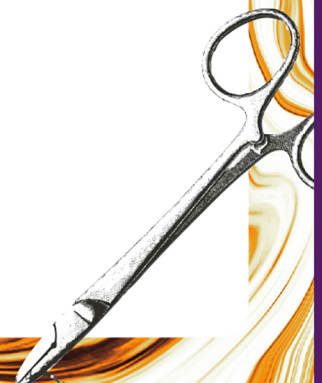


'Time me, gentlemen!' a voice commands. It's 1842. University College, London is full with people, but they are not here to read books or even write essays. No, they are here to observe Sir Robert Liston, the best surgeon of his time.

The nervous medical students are holding pocket watches and are poised to start timing. Liston's assistant, the 'dresser', takes a sympathetic but strong hold of the patient's shoulders. The patient is petrified – wriggling and struggling to get away. He has a very badly broken leg and is already in an incredible amount of pain. His facial expression reveals a look of sheer horror as he catches sight of the knives, saws and needles that lie alongside him.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Liston grabs the patient's thigh, picks up his favourite knife and in one swift movement, makes a cut in the man's broken leg. The piercing scream of the poor man fills the galleries, echoing all around. Some students scrunch up their noses, some open their eyes in amazement, some show no emotion. Liston puts the knife away... and grabs the saw.

The nervous student who is holding the broken leg to keep it still, notices the leg suddenly feels very heavy – it has been completely cut off from the body! The operation is over and it has taken just 30 seconds. Totally shocked, he drops the detached leg into a box of sawdust that is waiting underneath.



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